

PATRICK CURRY and ANGELA VOSS (eds). *Seeing with Different Eyes. Essays in Astrology and Divination*, Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007, pp. xiv+350. ISBN 1-84718-361-1 (Hardback), £ 39.99, US\$ 59.99

The essays in this collection originated at a conference held at the University of Kent, Canterbury, in April 2006 and entitled ‘Seeing with Different Eyes: a Conference on Astrology and Divination’. It was the second conference of its kind and the present volume is also a second in the rank (The first publication being Voss and Lall 2007). The reason why these two conferences were held at University of Kent is the new interdisciplinary MA program in the Cultural Study of Cosmology and Divination sponsored by the Sophia Trust and focused on the epistemology and hermeneutics of divination and symbolic interpretation as a field of enquiry in its own right.

The title of this volume was inspired by the sentence of Plotinus (*Enneades* I.6.8)—‘Shut your eyes and change to and wake another way of seeing, which everyone has but few use’,—pointing to the central thread that divinatory knowledge involves a mode of insight of quite a different order than normal everyday consciousness. Understanding the working of astrology and divination requires a shift in perception,

exploring ‘another way of seeing’ posed by the experiences of diviners themselves, and becomes a new challenge for academic research.

As expressed by the editors in the Preface of the book, they did not seek ‘to explain divination, or to relegate it to the product of a “primitive” mentality, but to understand its many manifestations as a rich testimony to the power and creativity of the human soul as it seeks to make sense of the unseen forces that surround it, and act accordingly’ (p. viii).

All thirteen authors of the present volume are teachers or researchers in the area of divination and symbolism, combining a truly interdisciplinary approach as the papers demonstrate. Ranging from ancient Chaldean theurgy (Algis Uždavinys) and divination in ancient Stoicism (Peter T. Stuck) through the oracles, dreams and astrology of Iamblichus (Crystal Addey), and Ben Jonson’s *Masque of Augurs* (Anthony W. Johnson) to Enochian Chess in the Order of the Golden Dawn (Johann Friedrich Wolfgang Hasler), not to mention a wholly original treatment of Buddhist theurgy (Garry Phillipson) and a precise description of contemporary Mayan divination (Dennis Tedlock), all papers reflect the currently renaissance of divination studies within humanities and social sciences and will undoubtedly further stimulate this development. All thirteen papers are arranged into five groups or parts with the titles Ancient Eyes, Religious Eyes, Musical Eyes, Astrological Eyes, and Cultural Eyes.

In his short but remarkable Introduction, Patrick Curry emphasizes the overall context for the book as a whole. He points out the contrast between divination and oracles as a universal human phenomenon and their remarkable neglect within the academic community. According to him, the reasons for that neglect are, to begin with, the diminishing of any human whole that results from its being dismembered and distributed between various effectively exclusive disciplines: history, classics, religious studies, and anthropology (Campion, Curry, York 2004). Another reason is ‘the foundational dominance within the academy as a whole of rationalism, and its consequences for subject perceived as largely irrational’ (p. x). Studies in divination and astrology forces the academy to take the opportunity to become self-aware and self-critical, with an attitude of respect for non-rational human experience in general, recognizing at the same time the limits of discursive-analytical thinking and to ‘relearn the ancient yet completely contemporary modes of intuition, erotics, and relationships with more-than-human worlds which are fundamental to divination’ (p. xi).

Anthropologists have shown the most interest in divination, yet there are particular distortions here, too. The pioneering work of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl fell victim to institutional politics and became tainted with the charge of ethnocentrism, and the

studies of Evans-Pritchard were mistakenly assumed to have exhausted most of the subject's possibilities. As a result, the anthropological study of divination is still largely struggling to move in from the academic margins.

An excellent example of this kind of struggle is a recent study *Divination and Healing: Potent Vision*, edited by Michael Winkelman and Philip M. Peek (Winkelman and Peek 2004). The paradigm shift from a positivistic view to interpretivist frameworks requires a re-conceptualization of divination from a false or mistaken epistemology or even outright subterfuge by diviners to cultural systems for decision making and therapeutic processes. Traditional views of the healing processes as social entertainment in medical anthropology have shifted to the recognition that ethno-medical practices produce therapeutic effects. Divination is not merely an epistemological system reflecting a different set of assumptions regarding agency, knowledge, and communication. Divinatory practice is also a form of behaviour and social interaction. A communal context is a central feature of divinatory practice that is understood as a fundamentally 'religious' experience.

Still, serious philosophical studies of astrology are almost non-existent, except probably the works of Patrice Guinard (Guinard 1993). Thus a very inspiring philosophical paper in this book is that of Marilyn Lawrence 'A Phenomenological Approach to Astrology: Thinking of Astrology at the End of Metaphysics', in which she brings up methodological questions regarding the epistemological background of contemporary astrology. She argues that the phenomenological approach leads to a dismantling of certain astrological thinking when confronted with the conception of essentialised personhood formed since the time of the classical metaphysics (p. 222).

Divination is emphatically a process of humans receiving signs. Making reference to the semiotic theory of Umberto Eco, Peter Struck, in his paper 'A World full of Signs: Understanding Divination in Ancient Stoicism', uses the conception of a 'lower threshold' of semiotic activity that takes place around natural 'things' whose status as 'signs' is liminal, and which provides the missing link between the universe of signals and the universe of signs. According to him, the history of attempts to explain divination takes place precisely at this threshold which at the same time sets it on the line between information and language, between data and knowledge, and between nature and culture (p. 17). Curry rightly emphasizes the necessity to apply for divination studies double hermeneutics because the work of the diviner is interpretation, and so is that of the scholar of divination, the later being meta-interpretation involving a responsible, reflective, critical dimension.<sup>4</sup> Thus, divination being possible only

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<sup>4</sup> Similar methodological issues are extensively discussed in another groundbreaking work by Roy Willis and Patrick Curry (2004).

within a certain worldview or cosmology can become a cornerstone of renewed and reinvigorated scholarship.

Certainly, probably the single drawback of the present volume is the geographical and cultural limitation of its scope. The single exception is a paper by Garry Phillipson 'Theurgy, Divination and Theravada Buddhism'. I am sure that including the extremely rich divinatory material from the Asian cultures (Indian, Persian, Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, and others) would broaden our cross-cultural understanding of the important role and implications that astrology and divinatory practices had throughout the centuries and still play in intellectual, social and religious life.

### References

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