

## THE COCK AND THE CHAMELEON

### - Divination, Platonism and Postmodernism –

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This study takes up themes raised by Patrick Curry in his lecture *Divination, Enchantment and Platonism*, given at *The Imaginal Cosmos* conference at the University of Kent, and questions Curry's conclusion that Platonism has an impoverishing effect on divination. In this questioning, I demonstrate what may be termed the **symbolic instantiation** of the material presented in the lecture, and consider its implications for our understanding of divination.<sup>1</sup>

In his conference paper, Patrick Curry challenges us to rethink the nature of divination in relation to Platonism by looking at conditions which are favourable to divination, and those which hinder it. He suggests that divination is *pluralist (animistic), local and sensuous*, and, following John Heaton, that it is essentially *metic*, having the *cunning intelligence* of the goddess Metis. As Heaton remarks, Metis is 'the goddess who is most important in divination and philosophy, for it is she who relates the two most deeply.'<sup>2</sup>

For Curry, divination becomes impoverished the more a culture moves away from these four qualities, and this impoverishment has occurred particularly in western culture influenced by Platonism. Platonism is *monist, universalist, abstract and hierarchical*, and these qualities contrast with those which favour divination:

pluralist - monist  
local - universal  
sensuous – abstract  
metic - hierarchical

Of particular relevance is the hierarchical nature of Platonism, in which the mind is superior to the body and earthy, physical reality. Following Max Weber, Curry sees Platonism as opening the door to the dominance of reason, culminating eventually in the scientific revolution and a foreclosure on the Metis-like nature of reality, so that 'the fate of our times is characterised by rationalisation and intellectualisation and, above all, by the "disenchantment of the world"'.<sup>3</sup>

For Curry, the intellectual grip which Platonism has held on western thought is an enemy of enchantment: 'Platonism has been a disaster not only for divination and oracles, including astrology *qua* divination, but for our understanding of them.'<sup>4</sup> The 'wild and multiplicitous otherness' of divination,<sup>5</sup> with its pluralist nature, its numerous local spirits and its metic, cunning intelligence, finds an affinity with postmodernism, where truths are relative and

context determines truth. In line with his previous pioneering and illuminating work in this area, he sees in divination, especially in some modern forms of astrology, 'a meeting of contemporary postmodernism and ancient paganism' (Curry 1994).<sup>6</sup>

In this brief study I hope to show that, whilst divination does have this Metis-like quality, insights from Platonism also help us to understand the divinatory act. But first, it is necessary to call into question the anthropological basis of Curry's definition of divination.

### **Divination as Instinct**

Curry views divination from an anthropological perspective, citing Peek and Tedlock<sup>7</sup> in relation to aboriginal or indigenous divination, and he associates it with natural instincts: 'I would venture to assert that divination is a *natural human faculty*, however unevenly distributed, which will appear spontaneously in the right circumstances.'<sup>8</sup> By 'natural human faculty' he means a type of intuition or prescience, and he suggests that divination thrives best in primitive societies when it has an accepted place in the social order, often as a shamanic practice:

Of course, the ideal conditions for divination surely remain an indigenous/aboriginal animistic society which includes shamans or their equivalents - a society of the very kind that is disappearing, or being disappeared, everywhere in the contemporary world.<sup>9</sup>

To the extent that divination in primitive societies involves gods, spirits and ancestors, it is debatable whether it is 'natural' or 'supernatural',<sup>10</sup> but leaving that debate aside, this approach to divination roots it in the aboriginal and does not address its manifestation in contemporary western culture, thus limiting the scope of the debate. Consider western divination, after centuries of Weber's disenchantment. The Londoner who uses Tarot cards from Renaissance Italy, or the west coast New Ager who throws I Ching coins and checks out Confucius on the fifth line changing, are worlds apart from the indigenous aboriginal shaman. For modern man, divination does not appear to be either animistic or local, but are contemporary divinatory forms thereby impoverished?

Not **all** authentic divination either originates in, or comes to fruition through, indigenous, aboriginal practices. This is especially so with astrology, the Tarot and above all, the sophisticated metaphysics of the I Ching. These suggest that divination arises and flourishes in its own specific forms **within** monist and hierarchical cultures, and therefore, locating a supposed impoverishment of divination as culture moves from animism and pluralism to monism is not as simple a matter as Curry suggests.

### **Out of Africa**

As an illustration of his theme, Curry introduces two stories about divination. The first is from Karen Blixen's *Out of Africa*, in which she describes an incident following the sudden death of her lover at the same time as she is being forced, by bankruptcy, to leave her beloved coffee farm in Kenya. At this tragic turning-point in her life, she recalls:

All this could not be, I thought, just a coincidence of circumstances, what people call a run of bad luck, but there must be some central principle within it. If I could find it, it would save

me. If I looked in the right place, I reflected, the coherence of things might become clear to me. I must, I thought, get up and look for a sign.

Many people think it an unreasonable thing, to be looking for a sign. This is because of the fact that it takes a particular state of mind to be able to do so, and not many people have ever found themselves in such a state. If in this mood, you ask for a sign, the answer cannot fail you; it follows as the natural consequence of the demand...<sup>11</sup>

Leaving her house, looking for a sign, she notices that the chickens have been let out and are running around. A big white cock struts up to her but stops suddenly, catching sight of a little grey chameleon coming in the opposite direction. Seeing the cock, the chameleon

planted his feet on the ground, opened his mouth as wide as he possibly could, and, to scare his enemy, in a flash he shot out his club-shaped tongue at the cock. The cock stood for a second as if taken aback, then swiftly and determinately he struck down his beak like a hammer and plucked out the Chameleon's tongue ... The whole meeting between the two had taken ten seconds. Now I chased off Fathima's cock, took up a big stone and killed the Chameleon, for he could not live without his tongue; the chameleons catch the insects that they feed on with their tongue.<sup>12</sup>

Distraught by this gruesome incident, Blixen comes to realise that she has been given her sign, and understands there is no sympathy to be had:

The powers to which I had cried had stood on my dignity more than I had done myself, and what other answer could they then give? This was clearly not the hour for coddling, and they had chosen to connive at my invocation of it.<sup>13</sup>

Curry suggests that the message from the gods to her is that they cannot tell her anything to save her, and they have no false comfort. But what does Blixen's sign tell us about the nature of divination?

### **Symbolic Instantiation**

It is characteristic of the metis-like nature of divination that its showings are not wholly contained within a preconceived frame of reference. This applies not only to the interpretation of the original sign by the diviner, but it may also manifest in subsequent encounters with the material. Jung describes this as the 'synchronicity trickster', the way in which the subjective psychic state of the observer or commentator is often uncannily and unpredictably reflected in the material he or she is studying, apparently objectively.<sup>14</sup> So we find that when Patrick Curry discusses Blixen's story, its content refuses to stay confined within the preconceived parameters he wishes to establish for it. In choosing it to illustrate the characteristics of divination, he evokes images which in themselves play out the themes he is putting forward, independent of his conscious choice. This unintended play of images is part of the same *metis* and contextual features for which Curry argues, bringing about a **symbolic instantiation**, whereby the material laid out in a narrative or discursive move mysteriously mirrors the very context in which it emerges.<sup>15</sup> Like the synchronicity trickster, such instantiation is the essence of divination, however we may name it.

## The Cock and the Chameleon

A contextual interpretation of what 'comes up' with an image or symbol allows us to move Blixen's story *Out of Africa* out of Africa. In the same way, I seek to liberate the definition of divination from the aboriginal and the primitive. Blixen's story, as re-told by Patrick Curry, can also be re-taken in the context in which it arises for us, the debate about divination and Platonism.<sup>16</sup>

Our first question must be, where is Plato? He can be no other than the big white cock. Plato is cock of the philosophic walk, heralding the dawn of western philosophy, and as the father of philosophy, the phallogocentric nature of the cock fits well with the feminist critique which sees the history of western thought as 'dead white males'. Centred in an ultimate truth, 'without 'the One', and the unity it supplies, Platonism is unimaginable.'<sup>17</sup> The big white cock is a perfect image of the monist, universalist, hierarchical nature of Platonism. As herald of the dawn, it is a solar symbol, evoking the divine life-force of the cosmos. Like the sun, it brings centrality, order, continuity, fertility and resurrection.

By contrast, the chameleon is neither white nor black, and however brave, it is small and powerless. It camouflages itself in relation to the background in which it finds itself, and this dappled, shape-shifting quality typifies the goddess Metis.<sup>18</sup> This is the chameleon of postmodernism, with its reflection in divination - multiple, pluralist and local. It cannot function without its tongue, the interpretation and the discourse, and it is easily overcome.

Let us look again at Karen Blixen's omen in the light of these two metaphorical animals. In a state of mourning because she has lost her 'cock' - her lover, her farm, her creative powers - she tells us:

It seemed to me that I must have, in some way, got out of the normal course of human existence, into a maelstrom where I ought never to have been. Wherever I walked, the ground fell away under me, and the stars fell from the sky. I thought of the poem about Ragnarok, in which this fall of the stars is described, and of the verses about the dwarfs who sigh deeply in their caves in the mountains, and die from fear.<sup>19</sup>

In her maelstrom, Blixen is in a state of alienation - out of the normal course of human existence - and searching for a central principle which will restore her cosmos: 'If I could find it, it would save me. If I looked in the right place, I reflected, the coherence of things might become clear to me.'<sup>20</sup> Blixen's situation is mirrored in the omen given to her. The cock reflects her desire to be saved and points to cosmic order and the promise of new life. But for this to happen, she must, with cunning intelligence, like the changeable chameleon, be able to thread her way through the chaotic world of chance and the arbitrary coincidence of circumstances.

This brings us to consider the kind of 'truth' arrived at through divination. Is this truth ultimate and universal, or is it relative? Is the diviner unveiling a true and meaningful cosmic order which is 'out there', or is he or she a participatory creator of it? Blixen's experience of moving from maelstrom to meaning, through the sign given her, is precisely the movement intended by the divinatory act. The sense of the *unus mundus*, the one-world, is common in

divination. That Blixen gets *any sign at all* is what allows her to find meaning because she feels that something exists which **can** give her a sign. Divination both requires and sustains the sense of coherence and unity this implies, since the diviner cannot divine without a prior belief that there is some source of truth to be called on in the situation.

This source of truth overcomes all relativistic interpretation, in the same way as the cock disempowers the chameleon. It can do no other, given that Platonism epitomises the Greek love of cosmic order and harmony with its consequent distrust of the contingent, the arbitrary and the random. Divination emerges within contingency, and although the subtle shifts of symbolism give it affinity with the multiple, contextual interpretations of a postmodern approach, it fulfils its purpose when a truth of interpretation is *realised*, as distinct to being *speculated*. By this realisation, all other possible truths fall away so that a truth is secured, and it becomes **the** truth.<sup>21</sup> This is why the chameleon must be sacrificed.

A paradox of the goddess Metis is that she lives **within** the belly of Zeus. It is not divination in itself which is primary, but man's relation with a greater and sacred order, which divination serves. The return to the supremacy of the cock restores the soul and lifts us to a new birth. This brings our discussion to the theurgy of the neo-Platonist, Iamblichus.

### **Divinisation**

Patrick Curry acknowledges that in his critique of Platonism, Iamblichus may be an exceptional case, but ultimately, he is at variance with Iamblichus. The latter does not see divination as a human faculty or a human invention. It is not 'a human work, but is divine and supernatural, and is supernally sent to us from the heavens.'<sup>22</sup>

For Iamblichus, the prescience which Curry defines as divination is of a second, lower order, and if there is a certain natural presentiment of the future in us, 'this presentiment does not in reality possess anything which is most blessed.'<sup>23</sup> As Gregory Shaw has made clear, for Iamblichus, divination proper entails *divinisation*, and its purpose is to bring about the 'deification of the soul': 'Divine mantike alone *unites us with the Gods*, for it genuinely gives us a share of the divine life, has a share in prognosis and divine intuitions, and *makes us truly divine*.'<sup>24</sup>

Curry acknowledges that divination may bring about transformation, but he sees this as part of a natural process inherent in the unity and equality of mind and matter, rather than an expression of the transcendent realm of Platonism. To demonstrate divination as a human faculty and show where he would question Iamblichus, he introduces a second divinatory experience, Val Plumwood's description of her near-death experience in the Australian wetlands.<sup>25</sup>

### **Crocodile Magic**

Unlike Blixen, Plumwood does not seek for a sign or put a question to the gods, but as she sets out along the river in her canoe, hoping to recapture the delight of a previous journey, the weather worsens: 'the drizzle turned to rain within a few hours, and *the magic was lost*.'<sup>26</sup> (my italics). She is given a warning of the trouble to come in the form of a striking

rock formation: 'a single large rock balanced precariously on a much smaller one held my gaze. As I looked, my whispering sense of unease turned into a shout of danger.'<sup>27</sup>

She hurries homeward but almost immediately is attacked by a crocodile. In the terrible struggle which follows she is swirled underwater in the crocodile's grip three times, but miraculously survives. This experience of **being prey** gives her 'a glimpse "from the outside" of the alien, incomprehensible world in which the narrative of the self has ended.'<sup>28</sup>

Like Blixen, she is in an alienated world, and her subjective identity which viewed the world 'from the inside' falls away:

In that flash, when my consciousness had to know the bitter certainty of its end, I glimpsed the world for the first time "from the outside", as a world no longer my own, an unrecognizably bleak landscape composed of raw necessity, that would go on without me, indifferent to my will and struggle, to my life or death.<sup>29</sup>

She discusses the crocodile as a 'boundary inhabitant' because it moves between land and water, and because 'edges are one of the crocodile's food-capturing places'. In the crocodile's death roll, when inside turns to outside, when subject becomes object and she is on the edge between life and death, she understands how vital the narrative sense is, and how much the bleak landscape of the world is vested with meaning 'from the inside', from her own subjectivity.

Plumwood goes on to discuss how the crocodile is seen in some primitive cultures as a magician, 'stealing away the Other, the creature of the land, away into its own world of water where it has complete mastery over it.'<sup>30</sup> Her association of the crocodile with theft and magic is well illustrated in Egyptian cosmology. Jeremy Naydler discusses the three crocodiles which the underworld traveller, Nakht, must meet on his path and which threaten to steal his magic and destroy his soul: 'The crocodile's main desire is to consume the magic that is the soul's principal possession.'<sup>31</sup> Plumwood's encounter with the crocodile has marked similarities to Nakht's. She tries to protect herself from attack: 'Perhaps I could bluff it, drive it away, as I had read of British tiger hunters doing. I waved my arms and shouted, "Go away!" (We're British here).'<sup>32</sup>

Nakht has a similar tactic, involving words of power:

Get back! Give way!  
Get back you crocodile fiend!  
You shall not come against me  
for my magic lives in me!<sup>33</sup>

Note the way in which, by her invocation of being British, Plumwood reveals to us that her magic is a narrative of identity, just as for Nakht, his magic lives in him. However, Plumwood only realises that the magic lives in her when she becomes prey and sees the world from the outside. In that moment, the crocodile succeeds in its act of theft and her magic is lost.

Whatever this magic is - her soul, her narrative sense, her ability to animate an enchanted cosmos - we must now turn our attention to the thief. Who, or what, is this crocodile which steals the magic and in so doing, disenchant the world?

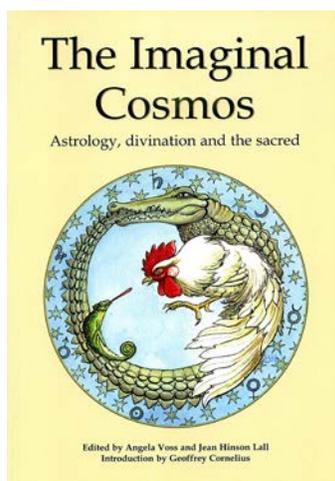
### **Wild, Multiplicitous Otherness**

As with any metaphor, it can stretch too far. The images of the cock and the chameleon in the first story appear strikingly apt for monist Platonism and Curry's conception of the postmodern qualities inherent in divination. The image of the crocodile proves more uncertain and negotiable. In my view, in the context in which it shows, the appearance of a third animal stands in a compensatory relation to our other two creatures. The crocodile is no friend to humanity but instead, a predator working against us. As a reptile it can be identified with the chameleon, but the difference in scale is vast. In the powerful, predatory crocodile, do we see the chameleon empowered and enlarged, inflated and unchecked? The crocodile is contingency and haphazardness run rampant, 'wild multiplicitous otherness' that has no order or meaning for us. The crocodile grips us in a death roll, in a bleak landscape in which magic, meaning and the soul are lost. In this sense, pluralism and relativism are of no value to divination unless they become free of the barrenness created by the deconstruction of all narratives.

By seeing Platonism as an enemy of divination, we may over-value *metis* and obscure the unifying and transcendent principle at work within divination. This is not to deny divination's wild, multiplicitous otherness, but to acknowledge that if, like Blixen, we want to find our way through the maelstrom, divination must become divinisation and embrace a sacred, unifying truth. This sense of unity is a function of the divinatory experience, paradoxically revealed in the gift of *metis*. Blixen understands it this way:

In the same way, an inspired card-player collects thirteen chance cards on the table, and takes up what is called a hand of cards - a unity. Where others see no call at all, he sees a grand slam staring him in the face. Is there a grand slam in the cards? Yes, to the right player.<sup>34</sup>

I hope that this brief discussion of the images and creatures brought to our attention by Patrick Curry has contributed further to the narrative of *The Imaginal Cosmos*.



## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> *The Imaginal Cosmos* conference, 2-3 October 2004, University of Kent, Canterbury. Convened by Angela Voss in support of the MA in the Study of Mysticism and Religious Experience.

Issues concerning Platonism and divination raised here also bear on a previous exchange of papers between Patrick Curry and Joseph Milne. See Milne's Providence, Time and Destiny and subsequent website discussion.

<sup>2</sup> Heaton, Metis. Note Heaton's remark that divination may pertain to both Metis and Themis, the goddess of 'themes' who brings the seasons, mathematics and science: "Themis is the patron of oracles of the earth, in contrast to Metis who is patron of the oracles of water". He suggests there may be "two different ways in which astrologers work, perhaps sometimes they follow Themis and perhaps at other times they follow Metis".(p.9). See also Detienne and Vernant (1978).

<sup>3</sup> Curry and Willis (2004), p.77, quoting Weber.

<sup>4</sup> Curry, Divination, Enchantment and Platonism, p.40.

<sup>5</sup> Curry, *ibid*, p.6, quoting Abram (1996). Abram refers to the earth's wild, multiplicitous otherness, but Curry takes this to refer also to divination and astrology, particularly horary astrology.

<sup>6</sup> Curry, Foreword to Geoffrey Cornelius' The Moment of Astrology. (1994) p.xii, (2003) p.xvii.

<sup>7</sup> Curry, Divination, Enchantment and Platonism, p.44 n1, referring to Peek, P.(ed), African Divination Systems: Ways of Knowing (Bloomington IN:Indiana University Press, 1991) and Tedlock, B., *Divination as a Way of Knowing: Embodiment, Visualisation, Narrative, and Interpretation*, Folklore 112 p.189-197.

<sup>8</sup> Curry, *ibid.*, p.43.

<sup>9</sup> Curry, *ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Curry has argued elsewhere (Curry and Willis, 2004, p81) that the term 'supernatural' is a creation of science in a monist culture. I use it here to distinguish between two realms or dimensions, that of the gods and that of man. However it is named, this distinction is common to primitive cultures. (Curry and Willis 2004, p.81)

<sup>11</sup> Blixen, Out of Africa p.368.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p.369.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p.370.

<sup>14</sup> Jung identifies the 'synchronicity trickster' with the god Hermes (see Jung Synchronicity and Von Franz, p.238). Of all the gods, as interpreter of signs, Hermes is said to possess the most *metis*, or cunning intelligence.

<sup>15</sup> The word 'instantiation' was first brought to my attention by Peter Moore, MA tutor, University of Kent. Applied to divination, Geoffrey Cornelius has suggested the term 'symbolic instantiation'.

<sup>16</sup> Following discussion with Patrick Curry after the conference, he has generously acknowledged this re-take on the material he presented.

<sup>17</sup> Curry, Divination, Enchantment and Platonism, p.37.

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<sup>18</sup> John Heaton discusses the difference between the octopus and the chameleon in Greek thinking, both being possible aspects of Metis. The octopus was admired for its mastery over change, whereas the chameleon was not, because it is considered to be like 'an ephemeris man', like the ever-changing planets in the ephemeris. Heaton comments: "There's a big difference between being a chameleon in which you don't stand for anything but just change different colours, according to the background in which you're in, and the octopus who reaches in all directions." (Metis, p.7). In this sense, the chameleon can be seen as a superficial relativism.

<sup>19</sup> Blixen, p.368.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Lewin, Speculation and Realisation, developing a theme from Cornelius.

<sup>22</sup> Iamblichus, p.64, para 100.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p.150, para 288.

<sup>24</sup> Shaw, p.233, quoting Iamblichus, para.289.

<sup>25</sup> Plumwood, p.32-44.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p.33.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p.34.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p.38.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p.35.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p.39.

<sup>31</sup> Naydler, p.30.

<sup>32</sup> Plumwood, p.35.

<sup>33</sup> Naydler, p.245.

<sup>34</sup> Blixen, p.368.

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