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## Introduction

21 March. Arrived at Delphi. I first saw the best part of the ancient ruins, as well as the most noble and varied walls, the skill of whose architects is quite striking. Then the round Temple of Apollo, collapsed on all sides, and beside it a wondrous amphitheatre of great stones, with thirty-three steps, and, in the highest citadel of the exalted city below the cliffs, richly adorned with marble steps, the hippodrome six hundred paces long. Then I saw the smashed statues. And most noble inscriptions in Greek and Latin letters, and, both inside and out through the fields, huge marbles and ornate tombs, and rocks graven with marvellous skill. . . . All this I have seen at Delphi, today called ‘Castri’ by the foolish Greek rabble, utterly ignorant about where Delphi had been.<sup>1</sup>

So leaps ancient Delphi into the mind of modern Europe—a grand and forgotten ruin. This diary passage dates from 1432, when the antiquary Ciriaco of Ancona, picking his way among the ruins of Greece, arrived under the shadow of Parnassus. For four centuries, nothing changed. In late January 1676, the antiquary Jacob Spon, picking his way among the ruins of Greece with his companion, George Wheler, arrived, under the shadow of Parnassus, at the village of Castri. ‘No sooner had we approached the village’, he later wrote, ‘than we recognised it as the

<sup>1</sup> Ciriaco of Ancona, *Epigrammata reperta per Illyricum apud Liburniam* (Rome, 1654), pp. 27, 31:

Ad XII. K. April. Delphos adveni. Ubi nam primum diruta magna ex parte vetusta, atque nobilissima moenia conspexi diversaque architectorum ope conspicua. Exinde collapsum undique rotundum Apollinis Templum, et Amphitheatrum juxta admirandum magnorum lapidum gradibus XXXIII. et in sublimi Civitatis arce altissimis sub rupibus ornatissimum gradibus marmoreis hippodrom. DC. p. longitudinis. Vidi que confractas hinc inde statuas. Epigrammataque tam Graecis quam Latinis litteris nobilissima, ac intus, et extra per agros marmorea ingentia, atque ornatissima sepulchra, rupesque incisas arte mirabili. . . . Haec omnia apud Delphos vidi, quae hodie Castri ab innepto Graecorum vulgo nuncupatur, et ubinam Delphi fuissent, penitus ignorant.

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remains of the famous town of Delphi'.<sup>2</sup> None of the locals except one knew of its past. The scene prompted Spon, a philosophical man, to reflect on the vicissitudes of fate:

What I find most bizarre is that the most famous place in the world suffered such a reversal of fortune that we have been obliged to seek Delphi in Delphi itself, and to ask the whereabouts of its temple when we were standing on its very foundations.<sup>3</sup>

The town had been famous, of course, for its oracle, long defunct. As Wheler remarked of the oracle in his own account of their travels, 'Its ancient glory is now vanished; and it remains great, at present, only in the writings of the ancients'.<sup>4</sup> His words were absolutely *à point*. The many inscriptions catalogued throughout the nineteenth century told scholars much about the site's history; but before excavation began in 1892, the heap of rocks at the foot of Parnassus could tell them nothing about the oracle itself. Even when they came in person, they relied more on their memory than on their eyes. Ciriaco claimed to find oracular verses delivered to Croesus—perhaps the most celebrated of those recorded by Herodotus—carved on a stone at the site.<sup>5</sup> In hindsight his observation, likely spurious, reads more as a gesture, an anchoring of physical experience in the *more authentic* world of the written word.

In the early nineteenth century, Western tourists began pouring into Greece, and into Delphi. But still it was the same as before: all one could do was lament the disappearance of the temple, and there was little to see but the magnificent landscape, the huts of Castri, and scattered late

<sup>2</sup>Jacob Spon, *Voyage d'Italie, de Dalmatie, de Grece et du Levant, fait aux années 1675 et 1676*, 2 vols. (The Hague, 1724), II, p. 31: 'Ils nous menerent en quatre ou cinq heures de chemin, côtoyant le pied du Parnasse au village de Castri, et nous ne l'eûmes pas plutôt approché, que nous le reconnûmes pour être les restes de la celebre ville de Delphes.' The seventeenth century also witnessed visitors to the island of Delos, where lay the broken marble columns of the oracular temple of Apollo; see, e.g., George Sandys, *A Relation of a Journey begun An. Dom. 1610* (London, 1615), p. 11, or Ignatius von Rheinfelden, *Neue Jerosolomytanische Bilger-Fahrt, Oder kurtze Beschreibung deß gelobten Heyligen Landts* (Constantz am Bodensee, 1664), pp. 20–21. The sites of other oracles remained unvisited.

<sup>3</sup>Spon, *Voyage*, II, pp. 33–34:

c'est ce que je trouvois de plus bizarre, que le lieu le plus celebre du monde eût eu un tel revers de fortune, que nous fussions obligez de chercher Delphes dans Delphes même, et de demander où étoit donc ce Temple, lorsque nous étions sur les fondemens.

<sup>4</sup>George Wheler, *A Journey into Greece* (London, 1682), p. 314.

<sup>5</sup>Jean Colin, *Cyriaque d'Ancone: Le voyageur, le marchand, l'humaniste* (Paris, 1967), pp. 531–541. On the tortoise oracle of Croesus, see the discussion in chapter one below, p. 18.

remains of the ancient town. To the frustration of English and German classicists, eager for the real Delphi and its pagan secrets, the locals wanted instead to tell them Christian folk stories, and sell them fake antiques.<sup>6</sup> Visiting the site in December 1809, Lord Byron and his companion, the scholar John Cam Hobhouse, found no Herodotean oracle, but only the names of other tourists scratched on a column, in a chapel dedicated not to Apollo but to the Panagia, the Virgin Mary. In a gesture of communication among peers, they added theirs.<sup>7</sup> A cicerone showed the pair a cave where the Delphic priestess supposedly had inhaled the sacred fumes of the earth, but Hobhouse would have none of it, and Byron, while awestruck at Parnassus, registered his own ambivalence toward the oracular site in a well-known verse:

Shall I unmoved behold the hallowed scene,  
Which others rave of, though they know it not?  
Though here no more Apollo haunts his grot,  
And thou, the Muses' seat, art now their grave,  
Some gentle spirit still pervades the spot,  
Sighs in the gale, keeps silence in the cave,  
And glides with glassy foot o'er yon melodious wave.<sup>8</sup>

The irony is that Byron's verse, composed at the foot of the mountain, could easily have been penned at home—it required nothing of the site except the stamp of poetic authenticity. Although the verse is *about* a personal experience of Delphi, measured against the perceptions of those who 'know it not', in reality it is a participation in textual—literary, historical—tradition. It was this tradition, embodied in William Mitford's *History of Greece*, brought by Hobhouse for a guide, that spoke of Apollo, his oracle, the Muses, even of Delphi itself: it was on account of this tradition that Byron knew what 'spirit' to seek at Parnassus in the

<sup>6</sup>On the Christian stories, see Edward Dodwell, *A Classical and Topographical Tour through Greece*, 2 vols. (London, 1819), I, p. 195, and Heinrich Niclas Ulrichs, *Reisen und Forschungen in Griechenland*, 2 vols. (Bremen, 1840), I, p. 44. These are discussed further in my Conclusion, pp. 286–289. On the fake antiques, see Jean-Alexandre Buchon, *La Grèce continentale et la Morée* (Paris, 1843), p. 252.

<sup>7</sup>John Cam Hobhouse, *A Journey through Albania and Other Provinces of Turkey in Europe and Asia to Constantinople*, 2 vols. (London, 1813), I, p. 247. William Mure, *Journal of a Tour in Greece and the Ionian Islands*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh and London, 1842), I, p. 187, would note Byron's name.

<sup>8</sup>Lord Byron, 'Childe Harold's Pilgrimage', I.62, in *Major Works*, ed. Jerome McGann (Oxford, 2000), pp. 42–43. On the responses of Byron and Hobhouse to Delphi, see also Stephen Cheeke, *Byron and Place: History, Translation, Nostalgia* (Basingstoke, 2003), pp. 42–56.

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first place. The poet had read his classics, and now scribbled his lines; the stones themselves remained silent.

Archaeological insights into the oracle before 1892 were granted elsewhere, tangled in errors and misconceptions. The celebrated scholar Nicolas Peiresc thought he had found a remnant of Delphi in an ancient tripod dug up in Provence in 1629, and for several years he communicated on the subject with his learned friends throughout Europe. The object, now lost, but preserved in a careful drawing, turned out to be Roman, with no connection to the oracular rites of Greece.<sup>9</sup> Over the next two centuries, other *objets trouvés* provoked speculation about Delphi: a marble relief discovered at Marino, a relief on a candelabrum held at Dresden, a hand mirror and the base of a cup unearthed by Lucien Bonaparte around Canino. Most were false leads, and even the cup, which contained a genuine image of the oracle, was taken by Bonaparte for Etruscan.<sup>10</sup> Again and again, the oracle wrongfooted its material investigators.

Lacking its own archaeology, Delphi remained for fifteen hundred years an entirely textual construct, passing from the histories, fables, epics, satires, treatises, and apologetics of the ancient world to those of the new.<sup>11</sup> For most readers, it served to represent the oracles of pagan Greece as a whole. Of course, there were others—Dodona, Trophonius, Jupiter Ammon, and so on—but, as one Dutch professor remarked in 1838, ‘their history is darker than night’, and they had little to feed the imagination.<sup>12</sup> As a result, when Westerners thought of the oracles, they usually thought of the Pythia at Delphi, the raving priestess among her laurels, perched on her tripod above a chasm of rising fumes, babbling out the future to those who had come to consult her. However unrealistic, it was an arresting image, and when the archaeologists arrived in 1892, they fully expected to find some geological confirmation of the chasm around which, presumably, the rest of the story had been embroidered.

<sup>9</sup> See Anthony Ossa-Richardson, ‘Nicolas Peiresc and the Delphic Tripod in the Republic of Letters’, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 74 (2011), 263–279.

<sup>10</sup> On the relief, see [Johann Carl] Schott, *Explication nouvelle de l’Apotheose d’Homere, représentée sur un marbre ancien* (Amsterdam, 1714); on the candelabrum, see Wilhelm Gottlieb Becker, *Augusteum: Dresden’s antike Denkmäler enthaltend*, 2 vols. (Leipzig, 1804), I, pp. 42–54 (plate on p. 153), and Karl Otfried Müller, *De tripode Delphico dissertatio* (Göttingen, 1820); on the hand mirror, see Peter Wilhelm Forchhammer, *L’occupation de l’oracle de Delphes par Apollon: Explication d’un miroir Étrusque* (Rome, 1839); on the cup, see Lucien Bonaparte, *Museum Étrusque* (Viterbo, 1829), no. 591, pp. 81–85.

<sup>11</sup> Marie Delcourt, *L’Oracle de Delphes* (Paris, 1955), p. 7: ‘Delphes est le seul centre divinatoire qui ait une existence littéraire. C’est même une des raisons pour quoi il est si difficile d’en écrire l’histoire.’

<sup>12</sup> Jacob Geel, *Onderzoek en phantasie* (Leiden, 1838), p. 331: ‘Hun geschiedenis is duister als de nacht’.

They did not. The whole picture, concluded the team with some regret, must have been pure fiction.<sup>13</sup>

The recent discovery of subterranean fissures under the site has prompted a renewal of scientific interest in Delphi; for this and other reasons, the past decade has seen a flurry of popular and scholarly books on the oracle, and on Greek prophecy more broadly.<sup>14</sup> It has been discussed on the radio, and has even received the historical thriller treatment.<sup>15</sup> The present book has another subject, dealing not with the stones of Delphi but with its textual existence, and that of the pagan oracles in general, so much more influential in the shaping of Western thought about antiquity. As Steven Connor has observed, ‘The story that remains untold is that of the power of the oracle-myth itself, and of the cultural and imaginative work that it has been able to do in post-classical times’.<sup>16</sup> That story, left still untold by Connor, will be attempted here. To do it justice, we cannot restrict ourselves to books written specifically on the subject, for the theme appears in all manner of contexts and genres, many unpredictable. We shall glance, for example, at the humanist reconstruction of pagan religion, the witchcraft debates of the later Renaissance, the tropes of Christian poetry, the controversies about *natura* among Aristotelian philosophers in early modern Italy, the elaborate analogies put forward in confessional and sectarian polemics, the supposed heterodoxies of free-thinkers and Deists, Cartesian epistemology and its historical

<sup>13</sup>William Broad, *The Oracle: The Lost Secrets and Hidden Message of Ancient Delphi* (New York, 2006), pp. 85–98, offers a readable account of the French excavation and its disappointing conclusions. The most important work to come out of these labours was Pierre Amandry, *La mantique apollinienne à Delphes* (Paris, 1950), staunchly denying the possibility of terrestrial vapours under Delphi. See also, above all, H. W. Parke and D. E. W. Wormell, *The Delphic Oracle*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1956), and Joseph Fontenrose, *Python: A Study of Delphic Myth and Its Origins* (Berkeley, 1959).

<sup>14</sup>Roger Lipsey, *Have You Been to Delphi?* (Albany, 2001); Michael Wood, *The Road to Delphi: The Life and Afterlife of Oracles* (London, 2005); Aude Busine, *Paroles d’Apollon: Pratiques et traditions oraculaires dans l’Antiquité tardive (IIe–VIe siècles)* (Leiden and Boston, 2005); Hugh Bowden, *Classical Athens and the Delphic Oracle* (Cambridge, 2005); Broad, *The Oracle*; Esther Eidinow, *Oracles, Curses and Risk among the Ancient Greeks* (Oxford, 2007); Michael Attyah Flower, *The Seer in Ancient Greece* (Berkeley, 2008); Yulia Ustinova, *Caves and the Ancient Greek Mind: Descending Underground in the Search for Ultimate Truth* (Oxford, 2009); and now Richardson Stoneman, *The Ancient Oracles: Making the Gods Speak* (New Haven, 2011). Philipp Vandenberg’s journalistic survey, *Das Geheimnis der Orakel: Archäologen Entschlüsseln* (1981: Vienna, 2004) has been reissued, as has its translation, *Mysteries of the Oracles: The Last Secrets of Antiquity*, trans. George Unwin (1982: New York, 2007).

<sup>15</sup>*In Our Time*, ‘The Delphic Oracle’, Radio Four, Oct. 30, 2010. James Rollins, *The Last Oracle* (New York, 2008), for which I was consulted.

<sup>16</sup>Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism* (Oxford, 2000), p. 49.

implications for writing about the past, the critical tussle over the authority of the Church Fathers, discourses of occult technology, the birth of Romantic historicism, the charged political historiographies of the early nineteenth century, the first fruits of modern archaeology, even Mesmerism and its afterlife—all larger histories, most overlapping, in which the pagan oracles came to play their part.

Perhaps no theme has haunted the oracles so profoundly as the eternal conflict between reason and faith: what part can reason play in explaining religious phenomena, such as prophecy and divination? And what right does it have to do so? The journalist William Broad, rather piously, has seen in the Pythia a reproof to scientific arrogance.<sup>17</sup> Many agree—the comment box of a National Geographic documentary on Delphi, uploaded to the video-sharing website YouTube, is replete with similar sentiments and, inevitably, impassioned responses thereto. For instance:

- Spirits can cause altered states of consciousness, give prophecies (often false), and they can cause vapors and mists to rise from the ground or pervade the atmosphere in a room. Scientists can't explain the supernatural realm, and they sound goofy when they try to come up with a scientific explanation for supernatural things.
- Science does not apply to the supernatural. That doesn't stop scientists from discovering and explaining the cause of events that SEEM supernatural.
- No oracle is required because no one believes fortune tellers anymore. And that's all she was. The best con artist in ancient Greece.<sup>18</sup>

Such exchanges owe little to past considerations of the subject. But the oracles had prompted the same concerns since antiquity, and when early modern scholars and thinkers came to argue over the phenomenon, they frequently disagreed as to how far reason, or philosophy, or secular criticism might go in assessing the historical evidence. What was quickly rejected was the attempt to rationalise oracular *divination*. To explain the oracles by reason became instead to deny that they were, in fact, oracles—that is, to separate the historical institution, whose existence was undeniable, from the reality of prognostication. But this too came up against the strictures of faith, for as critics turned away from metaphysics to an analysis of the textual sources, they had to adjudicate between ancient authorities, both pagan and Christian, and between different standards

<sup>17</sup>Broad, *The Oracle*, pp. 149–150.

<sup>18</sup>See the website <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ToVeoUzhR0Q> (last accessed Oct. 28, 2010).

of scepticism about past testimony. It was almost impossible to write on the subject without revealing one's intellectual biases: the very nature of the oracles, both historical and putatively marvellous, forced the hand. In tracing the story of their presence in Western thought, therefore, we trace, from one angle, the aims and fortunes of reason itself.

In so many cases, then, scholarly controversy turned on the propriety of given interpretations. The most famous controversy of this kind, between the Parisian *savant* Bernard de Fontenelle and his Jesuit opponent Jean-François Baltus, has received some critical notice over the past century, although the mechanics of their debate have never been given any serious attention. Other historians, in the tradition of Henri Busson and René Pintard, have commented on the rôle of the oracles in the 'libertine' critique of revealed religion in the seventeenth century. In each case we find a conflict between the conservative and the radical, the orthodox and the heterodox, with the latter usually glorified, explicitly or not, as the harbinger of Enlightenment.

One aim of this book is to redress the limitations of that narrative, in two ways. First, I devote greater attention to the actual process and texture of argument, and to those who, from our perspective, lost the debate. Contemporary critiques and condemnations, no matter how reactionary, must be respected as the authentic testimonies of intelligent readers. Heterodoxy, as I argue below, is not as transparent as it may seem, and has often been taken for granted without justification, or sought in the wrong places. Studied carefully and without bias, the case of the pagan oracles can tell us much about the conduct of early modern disputes—and, just as validly, about the contemporaneous persistence of differing views *without* dispute.

Second, I engage, as exhaustively as possible, with texts outside the canons of libertine and antilibertine thought. The extent of historical interest in the oracles may come as a surprise: alongside the poets and preachers who reworked conventional tropes from antiquity, hundreds of scholars, theologians, and critics commented on the subject, drawing on all manner of intellectual contexts to frame their beliefs. This *copia* of material and genre paints us a richer narrative than the march of Enlightenment: my story is not about the progress of knowledge but instead about the profound stability, across eras, of the use to which paganism was put in understanding Christianity itself. Whatever one's view of the true religion, pagan worship, encapsulated above all by the ancient oracles, stood as its vanquished antithesis. To speak of the oracles, therefore, was indirectly to comment on one's own identity as a Christian, and debates on the subject carried a particular charge. Today, paganism has lost its relevance to our cultural identity. But the ideas of the Pythia fostered in the late Renaissance, and adapted in the Romantic era, are still

with us, on both the page and the screen. The textual construction of the oracles remains, on this level, more powerful than the fragmentary results of their archaeology.



This book is divided into three parts. The first provides a description of the most conventional view of the oracles in early modernity—namely, that they were the work of the Devil, and that they fell silent with the coming of Christ. Chapter one outlines the classical and patristic sources, and their reception by early modern humanists. Chapter two describes in some detail the place of the oracles in Christian theology. The second part delineates the learned reactions against this view: chapter three—a small portion of which has appeared in a slightly different version as a separate article<sup>19</sup>—on theories of natural causation, and chapter four on the idea that the whole business was a sham, perpetrated for money or political gain.

The third part presents conflict and resolutions. Chapter five turns away from the chronological narrative and focuses exclusively on the landmark exchange between Fontenelle and Baltus. Fontenelle's celebrated *Histoire des oracles* (1686) was an adaptation of an earlier work, the *Dissertationes duae de oraculis ethnicorum* (1683) by the Mennonite preacher and physician, Antonie van Dale. Both argued, with great erudition and critical acumen, that the oracles had been pure frauds. If recent scholars, especially in Germany, have begun to shift their focus back to the more obscure figure of Van Dale, I here focus instead on Fontenelle—not because his work is more accessible than its source but because it was the *Histoire*, not the *Dissertationes*, that Baltus attacked at length in 1707. These two, therefore, must be paired as direct interlocutors. The analytical, nonhistorical approach of this chapter suits its goal: to examine the conflict between two *mentalités*, and the way in which their respective assumptions about history and humanity underpinned their disagreement on the oracles. In taking Fontenelle and Baltus seriously, both in their own right and as figures in history, my aim is to overcome the old dichotomy between 'rational' and 'historical' reconstructions of past thought, that is, between anachronism and antiquarianism.<sup>20</sup>

Chapter six returns to history, dealing with the aftermath of the Fontenelle-Baltus exchange, and its eventual overcoming, via a series of

<sup>19</sup>Anthony Ossa-Richardson, 'Pietro Pomponazzi and the Rôle of Nature in Oracular Divination', *Intellectual History Review* 20 (2010), 435–455.

<sup>20</sup>Richard Rorty, 'The Historiography of Philosophy: Four Genres', in *Philosophy in History: Essays on the Historiography of Philosophy*, ed. Richard Rorty, J. B. Schneewind, and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge, 1984), 49–76, especially p. 49: 'We should do both of these things, but do them separately'.

new perspectives and scholarly disciplines, in the nineteenth century—a transformed intellectual world. The ground had been laid for the momentous findings of the 1892 excavation, at which point the old magic of pagan antiquity seemed to have disappeared for good.

A final note on Sibyls, here for want of a better place. This book is not about the Sibyls, who were not the same as the ancient oracles, even if some scholars were led to confuse them, and especially the Delphic Sibyl with the Pythia.<sup>21</sup> Nor is it about the forged corpus of Judaeo-Christian prophecy known as the Sibylline Oracles.<sup>22</sup> The latter corpus has only a word in common with our subject: even in early modernity, it prompted different kinds of critics to ask different kinds of questions. Such questions, of undeniable interest, need not concern us here.

<sup>21</sup>Jacques Hardion, ‘Trois dissertations sur l’oracle de Delphes’, *Histoire de l’Académie Royale des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres*, 50 vols. (Paris, 1736–1808), III (1730), p. 174, still felt the need to remind his reader, ‘il ne faut pas confondre la Pythie avec la Sibylle de Delphes’.

<sup>22</sup>Anthony Grafton, ‘The Strange Deaths of Hermes and the Sibyls’, in his *Defenders of the Text: The Traditions of Scholarship in an Age of Science, 1450–1800* (Cambridge, MA, 1991), 162–177.