I told you so!

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Review of The Road to Delphi: The Life and Afterlife of Oracles by Michael Wood.

I don't believe in astrology, but I also know that not believing in astrology is a typically Taurean trait. When I first caught a bright young friend browsing in the astrology section of a bookshop – 'How can you believe in that rubbish?' – he pointed to a line in the book he was holding where it was written that a Taurean would typically say: 'How can you believe in that rubbish?' The reason, apparently, is that Taureans are all so practical and down to earth. In fact there is nothing more down to earth than a Taurean, because not only is the bull an 'earth' sign but it is also a 'fixed' sign, nailed to the ground. Hence people born when I was, towards the end of April or in the first weeks of May, are home-lovers, green-fingered, deeply conservative, routine-loving, inexorable, well-throated, prone to kidney disorders, peasants.

On the other hand, we are also 'ruled' by the planet the Greeks called 'Aphrodite', which means Venus is anciently 'at home' in that particular part of the night sky, for some reason not entirely clear to me (nor to anyone else, despite numerous plausible theories; the Moon, moreover, is 'exalted' in Taurus, at the second of Taurus' 30 degrees to be precise, a dogma which is equally mysterious and apparently even more ancient). It is the fondness of the planet Venus, goddess of love, for the Taurean part of the sky which infuses us with that luxuriousness for which Taureans are so notorious: voluptuous peasants. We aren't very cerebral, however, which is unfortunate for an academic, as some of my colleagues would probably agree. Some say we are a bit dull, lazy and predictable. But the experts insist we are just misunderstood: 'Taurus invests energy judiciously.'

Unfortunately for a non-believer, I have been forced over the years to recognise that I do seem to others to exhibit characteristics that have long been identified as typical of Taureans, which means I have to avoid astrology nuts at parties if anyone who thinks they know me is within earshot to contradict my well-prepared denials. 'No! He is exactly like that! He loves gardening. He loves staying at home, stroking velvet cushions with soily fingers, and eating chocolate. That's really amazing.'

I don't believe in astrology but I am rather fond of it. In the first place I like to be reminded that things are happening in the solar system. If Neil Spencer didn't tell me in the *Observer* that Mercury is 'retrograde' – i.e. moving up to overtake us on the inside lane – I would have no idea that Mercury was doing anything at all in our blinded night sky, going forwards, going backwards, or indulging in figures of eight. Anything could be happening out there. The Earth could be lost in space.

Reasonable people and God-fearers have long been appalled at the resurgence of astrology in the 20th century, but their attempts to disprove it or explain its effects – 'humans have evolved to detect patterns and ignore randomness, and so are always overimpressed by coincidence,' 'astrologers trick the public by producing horoscopes which might be applicable to anyone, but seem cunningly to speak to you alone' – seem irrelevant. I don't think esomenology (the science of what will be) is the issue, though certainly it is unwise for seers to proffer a future so specific that it is impossible to ignore its erroneousness when the real thing comes along. Rather, people just get enmeshed in astrology's elaborate nets, the way it shades the contours of the world, its slicing up of moods, traits and time, its sublime juxtaposition of the precise-measured progress of remote heavenly objects with fuzzy feelings inside. How wonderful to have anything at all on the cards for your love life over the next few days. Was Mystic Meg referring to your ex-husband remembering your ex-anniversary on Tuesday, or did she mean that lingering look from sexy Jeff at work on Thursday? Getting into astrology is like being drawn through the door of your own private cathedral or seduced by a fugue constructed out of the letters of your name. People aren't deceived into thinking astrology predicts the future correctly, they are simply entranced by it. They fall for it in the same way they fall for languages or football: because it's beautiful.

I have no idea what stars were rising when Michael Wood's *The Road to Delphi: The Life and Afterlife of Oracles* pushed onto the planet's surface, but so brainy a book must have a lot of air signs in its chart. It seems at first to have been born under the sign of Aquarius: analytical, determinedly rational, truth-seeking, teasing out logical knots. But considering it manages to take in so vast a range of topics – Kafka, Wittgenstein, 9/11, *Oedipus Rex*, *The Matrix* and *Macbeth*, as well as Delphi, Herodotus and horoscopes – I think it is more of a Gemini: intellectually voracious, mentally dextrous, eclectic, 'often in two minds about things'. The end leaves no room for doubt, for the book actually splits into two voices, a man's and a young woman's. The conversation between them finally comes to rest on the question of oracles as forums for talking about hopes and fears – not banishing them, but 'getting along with them'. Even this is not quite a conclusion: 'So what are we going to tell them?' 'We'll think of something.' Typical Gemini.

The Road to Delphi is a work of criticism, not cultural history. And there is very little sense of something that Cicero in *De Divinatione* considered the big issue: god/s. An author as self-conscious as Wood is, of course, by no means innocent of the possibility of his own oracularity qua author, which serves nicely to ironise the quantity of erudite, esoteric allusion, alternately formal and familiar, which will for many readers be the most striking characteristic of the work – 'as Johannes Megas discovered', 'as Alyosha Karamazov recommends'. The aspect of oracularity Wood seems most interested in developing, however, is not obscurity so much as uncertainty, enacted, it seems, as a fudging of the distinction between fact and fiction. He does this not only by conflating fictional and historical oracles, a conflation he seems to think is crucial, but also by eschewing much of the paraphernalia of non-fiction – references, footnotes – at the same time inserting between chapters little italicised narratives, one or two pages' worth, which look as if they are fragments of an experimental novel. After all this, it is hardly surprising to learn from the acknowledgments that he has been talking to Paul Auster, whose recent *Oracle Night* treats with some of the same topics. *The Road to Delphi* is very much Auster territory, emphasising the uncanny effects you can produce when you play Escheresque games with time and narrative, when the fuzzy prospect of an ending is placed in the middle of a text, so that narratives turn neatly, and modernistically, into tales about their own eventuality.

Readers of the *LRB* will not need to be told that Wood is well up to the challenge such games present, and the book is full of clevernesses and insight into all manner of masterpieces and trash: not just Shakespeare's *Macbeth* but Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood*, not just Sophocles' *Oedipus*, but Pasolini's and Stravinsky's. I especially liked his discussion of the plot-corridors of *The Castle*, not obviously about oracles, but another of those Modernist blind-maze texts with which Wood seems to have a special affinity. What his sense of the oracular in *The Castle* adds to those tricksy set-ups you find in brain-fuck box-office hits such as *Groundhog Day* and *Minority Report* is power and inscrutability, or at least a powerful sense of ignorance stumbling across the surface of a great remote and unknowable thing that moves in mysterious ways, a sense of the sub-realism of a vulnerable little life lived on the edge of a vast, intricately patterned carpet whose overall design is impossible to grasp. It is that sense of littleness that astrology configures so successfully, just as Delphi with its enigmas configures obscurity, of things in the future, in the past and indeed the present. Much scholarship on ancient oracles over the past few decades, most recently Veit Rosenberger's *Griechische Orakel: Eine Kulturgeschichte* (2001), has taken a rather different tack from Wood's, playing down narrative and esomenology so that the mirror-walled games of internal refraction never get a chance to start opening up. Instead of future-text it focuses on processes, materials and techniques, the howness rather than the whatness of oracles, how oracles work in real time.

It is a great mistake to view Delphi as a glorified crystal ball. Greek seers including those at Delphi are better taken as metaphysical portals or channels to another kind of truth or actuality of which eventuality – truth about what will happen in the future – is only one of the secret's several varieties. Oracles reveal what is and what has been, as well as what will be, and also offer religious instruction and useful information. They are points of god-contact, sites and occasions for *divining* in a much broader sense. Probably the largest portion of even Delphi's oracles were not lines of hexameter but simple positive or negative responses to a proposed course of action: 'Go for it'; 'Hold your horses.' One way of looking at the more elaborate 'predictions' is as spectacular and palpable demonstrations of divine wisdom, of the goodness of Apollo's good counsel, not so much of the

ability of the god to see into the future, but of the god being proven right in a particularly precise, gob-smacking, counter-intuitive and incontrovertible way when the sealed envelope of the future is finally opened: I told you so!

But what is an oracle? What isn't? The word 'oracle' (Latin not Greek) is perhaps unhelpful and is not really examined by Wood with any curiosity. In fact I cannot think of a straightforward equivalent for 'oracle' in Greek. The Greek word normally translated as 'seer' is not *prophetes* which implies 'spokesman' (*phesi*, 'he says'; *pro*-, 'in place of'), but *mantis*, perhaps from a root *ma*-indicating 'reveal', and related by Greeks to *mania*, 'raving'. *Mantis* gives us all those –mancies, those odd subdivisions in the science of knowing the unknowable: geo-, necro-, oneiro-, ornitho-, biblio-mancy, to which one might now add nancymancy or 'gaydar'. One cannot be sure what it was about the appearance or the behaviour of a certain spooky headhunting insect that led the Greeks to call it, too, *mantis*; perhaps its habit of adopting a motionless position as if transfixed.

It is significant, I think, that Apollo himself, a god, could be called 'seer' as if it were a particular talent he had, and that unlike omniscient Allah, Yahweh or God, even Zeus can be surprised by fateful futures. Cassandra is also 'mantis', but Apollo's female voices, like the Pythian priestess at Delphi, were sometimes called 'pro-mantises', as if to emphasise the fact that they were not seers but stand-ins for the true divine seer who stood behind them and operated them, with his hand, so to speak, up their skirts. Hence *manteion*, 'seer-site': 'divination location' is one of the words often translated as 'oracle'.

Greek literature is full of tales of legendary seers which have a different tenor from that of the more famous oracle stories. Perhaps the most illustrious mythical *mantis* was Blackfoot (Melampous). Among other hermeneutical feats, he once discovered from the woodworm living in the beam in the roof of his prison cell that they were moments away from chewing right through. He got out with seconds to spare. This odd story is probably designed to melodramatise detection, the sharp-sensed seer, like a latterday Morelli, attributer of paintings to painters, noting the most trivial, insignificant signs from little creatures, as if the world gives away its true attributes only at the very margins of the noteworthy, depending on mere inadvertence to keep its secrets unknown. Stories about seers sometimes make it sound as if animals talk to them, but most often that is probably shorthand for an expert reading of animal placements in and movements across the ouija board of the world, just as closely watched sacrifices might be said to manifest a 'word (*logos*) from Zeus'. At the most ancient oracle, the oracle of Zeus at remote Dodona in the direction of Albania, divination seems to have taken the form of structured bird-watching, involving the behaviour of doves and a sacred oak tree. This readable tree became voluble timber when a piece of wood from the oak was used in the construction of the *Argo*.
Note also that Blackfoot's source of information, the woodworm, is directly implicated in the chewed-through beam. Delphi likewise is often not unimplicated in the events it clarifies. You might well consult Apollo about a plague, for instance, because Apollo was the god who brought plague in the first place.

Finally, the event Blackfoot foresees is imminent, a temporal sliver. In life, in *modo operandi*, divination is not about leisurely contemplation of uncertainties but about decision and decisiveness, about immediate action, the discovery of *kairos*, the 'right time', 'opportunity', 'the moment of truth'. The so-called Iamid seers, who had their base at holy Olympia, were looking for this *kairos* when they inspected entrails on battlefields as far away as Italy: they seem to have specialised in predicting the outcomes of military engagements. They were looking for a victory window, a change in the heavenly weather, a tipping of the cosmic balance, so that when warriors went over the top, they would do so with full conviction that the gods were on their side. There was a cult of Olympic Kairos ('Moment of Olympic Truth') in a place near Paestum in southern Italy: the handsome young god was depicted with angelic wings for passing swiftly, holding a pair of tipping scales to indicate the moment of decision, and with a strange haircut like a hippy monk, bald at the back because it is impossible to seize the moment once the moment has passed, and long at the front to give those who saw it coming an opportunity to grab hold.

Olympia's own oracle centred on the annually increasing mountain of mud, ash, animal parts and flies which was the great sacrificial altar of Zeus; it was this oracle which allowed Olympia to be celebrated as 'Mistress of Truth', as it says on the new Olympic medals. Pindar explains why Olympia is so called, 'the place where mantic men (*manties andres*), taking evidence from what's on fire, do test tangentially bright-lightning Zeus, to see if he has something to say about men and boys seeking super excellence, and from their exertions, a breather'. Here at Olympia the Iamids sometimes sacrificed dogs, closely inspecting their insides: cynomancy. But all sacrifices were a bit oracular. A sacrifice can be seen as a kind of rendezvous between the mortal and immortal spheres, a super-sensitised occasion, full of anxiety that everything should go according to plan: that the animal didn't do anything odd, that its innards were normal, that the sacrificer did not stumble, that the meaty smoke rose like Bisto and the animal's tail curled up to heaven like a happy spreading grin, crackling in the flames. It was not easy to avoid divination in ancient Greece. The key point was to order significance, to prioritise times and places of greatest import and to rank interpreters and significations, so as not to be overwhelmed with divinatory data. Otherwise you might become 'superstitious', like a Syrian.

Having escaped from his worm-eaten cell, Melampous went on to cure the king's impotence, 'having learned' from a vulture, a long-necked, hook-beaked bird, that when he was a boy the king's father had threatened him with a gelding knife now embedded in the bark of a certain tree. Having divined a past event, and having discovered an object long ago mislaid, Blackfoot then prepared a concoction from the rust on the knife which restored the king's fertility.

Seers don't just discover information about events, they discover remedies and solutions. Indeed, no prophecies at all are ascribed to Branchus, the legendary founder of the great dynasty of seers at the Oracle of Didyma in the territory of Miletus on the west coast of Turkey. Instead, it is told how Branchus cured plague once by a sprinkling of water from his wand and with two lines of strange words, each line consisting of arrangements of the 24 letters of the alphabet. Perhaps to produce this bizarre text he had simply thrown an alphabet on the ground, twice. For some reason, around 500 BC the Branchid seers were kidnapped en masse by the Persians and the oracle was left in ruins. It was revived by Alexander nearly two hundred years later. Alexander also found the descendants of the Branchids in the place the Persians had put them. He slaughtered every last one of them, for treachery to the cause of the Greeks. Back home, allegedly, the people of Miletus, who still remembered some ancient, but mysterious, injury at the hands of their former prophets, cheered him on. Hence when the oracle of Didyma was revived, there were no Branchids, just a self-less woman, Delphi-style, a water-surface and a hem dipped to disturb it. With the end of paganism, a church, now a mosque, was put in the sanctuary, looking tiny beside the temple's impractically large remains.

In this later period, shrines of Asclepius, Serapis and Amphiaraus (a legendary descendant of Blackfoot) were the source of an enormous number of prescription oracles, sent at night in dreams to those who slept in their sanctuaries. Of course Asclepius is god of health, just as Apollo is god of plague and Mercury god of communications. For an Athenian, going to Delphi to ask Apollo how to cure plague was not all that different from visiting a mafia boss to ask how to cure violent intimidation. Wood's understanding of 'oracles' as essentially disinterested is an intrinsically post-pagan understanding – one definition of his 'oracles' might be 'messages from gods no one believes in (any more)'.

All these elements of ancient divination are illustrated in a story about another of Blackfoot's renowned descendants, Polyidus, a story no longer well known but which in the fifth century BC provided the plot for no fewer than three lost tragedies, one each from Aeschylus, Sophocles (*The Mantises*) and Euripides (*Polyidus*). When King Minos lost his son Glaukos, he held a competition to discover who could best describe a strange cow of many colours, white, red and black. 'It's like a mulberry,' suggested Polyidus, showing a mastery of metaphor that clearly marked him out as the man to find Glaukos, which he duly did, having divined from an owl (genitive *glaukos*) perched on a wine-store and bothered by a bee, that the young prince had accidentally drowned in a jar of honey. By watching snakes, Polyidus goes on to divine a way to bring the boy back to life, teaches him his mantic art, and then, as he is leaving Crete, unteaches him by getting him to spit into his mouth.

The story of Polyidus underlines how close prophets are to poets, making riddles as well as unravelling them, viewing the world as metaphor-active, full of signs and rebuses, things that make words and words that make things: a mulberry of many colours > a multicoloured cow; an owl > a noun > a name > a prince. Poets, *poietai*, are, let us remember, 'makers' (*poiein*, 'to make'), makers of images ('makers manifest' or 'makers-up'), and the Greeks often talked of texts, even histories, not as linear narratives, 'storytelling', but as 'showings' of things to look at, as spectacles put before the reader's eyes. When Sappho sings that some people find a muster 'lovely to look at', she is talking not (just) of the sight of an army or a fleet but of a kind of poetry in which images of armies and fleets are conjured up: 'Some people love epic.' She herself prefers to look at, i.e. to conjure up in words, an image of, say, an absent girlfriend. Hence, as Lacanians are fond of emphasising, 'visions' are not as different as you might think from puns and rhymes, which is how Julia Kristeva was able victoriously to divine that a patient who was preoccupied with Klaus Barbie's television trial was in fact anxious about motherhood: *tortionnaires > torso > io > naître/pas naître.*

The most illustrious Greek seer in the historical period was an Olympian Iamid called Tisamenus, son of the seer Antiochus, who had gone to Delphi (Olympia's 'sister' shrine) to ask the god about his childlessness. 'You will win the five greatest contests,' the god said. This phenomenon of gods 'automaticking', responding to questions apparently different from the ones that have been put to them, or even thrusting oracular portents on people who happen to be in the Oracle's vicinity, is not uncommon, a kind of free gift, the god demonstrating his right to be capricious at this divine service-station, to exceed demand. Hence you might go to find a cure for a stammer and get an order to leave home and move to Italy. Tisamenus thought the oracle about the five contests meant he was destined to win the pentathlon, trained for it and in fact very nearly did win it, but failed at the last hurdle. Immediately, the Spartans realised that the oracle was still unfulfilled and guessed that the victories Apollo promised were victories in war, not games. They made Tisamenus a Spartan citizen, purloining for Sparta his five-fold fated good fortune.

With the seer onside Sparta began to clock up successes. First of the five was the battle of Plataea, fought against the Persians in 479 BC. The final came about twenty years later at Tanagra, a victory of Spartans over Athenians, less glorious than the all-Greek victory of Plataea, but glorified in the most astonishing fashion with a trophy affixed to the apex of the huge new temple of Zeus at Olympia itself, the closest thing to a pagan St Peter's: a gilded Victory stood on a shield, with an inscription, since rediscovered, commemorating the battle. The Athenians must have bristled at the fact that a monument of their military humiliation was on display for eternity in just about the most conspicuous place in all Greece, but the Spartans, cunning in their modesty, might argue that it was the marvellous god-given gifts of Olympia's own seer Tisamenus and the fulfilment of a prophecy that were being celebrated – not the military success itself, which was a mere mise en scène.

On the great triangular pediment beneath the trophy marking Tisamenus' long-awaited fifth win, standing right over the entrance to the great temple, was a sculpture group showing the founding myth of the Olympic Games, the catastrophic end of an era, start of an era chariot race between the murderous King Oenomaus (who was to crash and die), and young Pelops, racing him for the hand of his daughter and the kingship (of the Peloponnese). Today, visitors to Olympia's museum, where the pediment now rests at ground-level, might be forgiven for not noticing any drama. For nothing is happening; everyone just seems to be standing around, the two teams on either side of Zeus waiting for starter's orders, an elision, like a messenger's speech, of the horrific crash itself. But this little offstage nudging of the real subject of the pediment, the crash, this murmuring anticipation, this sense of immanence, of pre-momentousness, is typical of early classical art. It is used on the Parthenon frieze in the British Museum, for instance, where the seated gods look like an audience not watching, but getting ready to watch the event, adjusting their clothes, passing round the popcorn, chatting. On the Olympian temple, which predates the Parthenon by about twenty years, the imminent is more prominent. For on either side of the competitors, two old seers crouch in the dust; one of them presses a worried fist to his mouth, the other, looking more confident, wears a holy yarmulke, like Ganymede. It seems very likely one or both of them are Tisamenus' mythical ancestors, perhaps even Blackfoot himself.

The seer's famous fist-in-mouth in fact represents not psychological but metaphysical realism, a trace of the future crash in the present, a representation of the nail-biting Kairos, a radical foreshortening of time. In this way Olympia's huge temple, with its peaceful-looking pediment and its unexpected battle trophy on top, makes a link between the foundational chariot victory of Pelops, the seer Tisamenus' first victory against the Persians at Plataea, his fifth victory against the Athenians at Tanagra, and his victory, that never was, in the pentathlon. The trivial and the momentous, games and warring, myth and history, portent and eventuality, immediacy and due course, the past, the present and the future, the event and the knowledge of it, *seeing* victory and *seizing* victory, fuse dizzyingly in a single quiet synopsis.

This is a key point, the key to the strange logic of prophecy, for the story about the oracle unequivocally presents Tisamenus as *owning* the victories he is predicted to predict. Delphi promises victories to Tisamenus the seer of victories and it is only by incorporating Tisamenus that the Spartans can take *his* victories. He doesn't just see a victory and announce a victory: he brings a victory, he is the source of it. Other people who spoke to Herodotus, the source for the story, were equally insistent that their Iamid battlefield seer was directly responsible for their success in battle. The seers produce victories. They have got it in them; they are victory-conductors, so to speak. Likewise, the Etruscan storm-seers do not just read lightning, *keraunoskopia*, they can produce it; they are lightning-conductors. And the Romans under Nero manufacture their own punning omens about his imminent demise in order to help to make it happen. Signs are not merely indicative but responsible, productive – as signs, in practical fact, always potentially are. And prophets, therefore, like Elijah or Elisha or Jeremiah are always latent wizards, 'wise men', magi, magicians, dangerous to be around. A 'Fate', a *fata*, is also a fey, fateful fairy who does not just record things happening but makes things happen, killing with a cut of the thread.

Oracles become quite different things when they are removed from live time and viewed under a synoptic gaze in the dead time of history now passed, in closed narratives, done and dusted, with closing credits and 'The End' at the end. It is the difference between watching a race live when victory is still in the balance and watching a recording when victory is already decided, whether or not you know the result. Live oracles, constructing moments of truth, full of emergency and anxiety, with swift long-haired Kairos coming at you, have nothing to do with dead oracles, when bald Kairos has long since gone on his way, and the two types of oracle should not be confused. Neat, mirror-walled, internally refracting, plot-device oracles sealed off from the world can only be oracles of a world which no longer exists, or which never existed, quintessentially and necessarily oracles of fiction, oracles of fantasy, oracles of art, oracles of a comprehensively over and done with pagan past, ancient history, nothing to do with us any more. When the World Trade Center was attacked, people looked to the stars, to the Bible, to Daniel and to Nostradamus for signs it had been written, but no one went through the Pythia's prophecies looking for foreshadowings in oracles from Delphi. Apollo had long since closed his account.

Consultation at Delphi was so constructed as to produce texts with an unusual freshness and pertinence, i.e. an unusual degree of presence, live real-time prophesying by appointment, which stood in stark contrast to the countless moth-eaten oracles that had slipped their moorings, if indeed they had ever had any, and floated around the Greek world hoping to snag on a crisis: a succession dispute in Sparta, a 'plague', or 'starvation' (*loimos/limos*) in Athens. Many of these oracles sold by 'oracle-mongers' were ascribed to a mysterious nympholeptic ('nymph-possessed') Bakis, who is less well known now than he was in the time of the Romantics. These written-down oracles produced on no particular occasion or on an occasion long since forgotten could be dusted off by demagogues whenever there was a crisis or a decision of great moment. Aristophanes has great fun in *Knights* satirising this political use of oracles by dodgy politicians; it seems as if demagogues kept them to hand so they could dramatically pull out a piece of paper and wave it in the audience's face at the right time. Delphi was demonstrably and deliberately different, an oracle of formal rigour, systematic method, transparency and accountability.

The Greeks often referred to an oracle from Delphi simply with 'the god said', which raises the question – one that Wood carefully avoids – of the relationship between the mantises of Greek polytheism and the 'prophets', self-consciously and ideologically not-mantises, of its rival and ultimately successor religions, the mono-cults and mono-creeds of the 'People of the Book', Judaism, Islam and Christianity, oracle-fixated religions which eventually made 'oracles' a thing of the past. If oracles are not poems, why aren't they Revelations? If prophets are not poets, why aren't they oracle-mongers?

The Greeks would have had no hesitation in grouping Samuel, Muhammad, Isaiah, Moses, Jesus even, alongside Blackfoot, Polyidus, Tisamenus, Cassandra, Branchus and Bakis, although they may then have had second thoughts. Prophets sit in caves and receive messages from the god. They have dreams and visions and interpret them. They hear voices and voice them. Indeed, more recent versions of the Bible, less anxious about paganism, are quite happy to translate various Hebrew words relating to these various messages from the god as 'oracles', although the King James Version avoids the term, except in one or two special instances.

Prophets such as Samuel, Elijah and Elisha seem to belong to groups or schools, like the Iamids. Some seem to have lain in the dust, like the seers of the pediment at Olympia. Some, like Ezekiel, talk dirty, foul-mouthed, saying unspeakable things like the nympholeptic Socrates in the *Phaedrus*: 'The word of the Lord came again unto me, saying ... "And she lusted after their lovers there, with their cocks as big as donkeys, and their sperm as copious as that of horses."' Old Testament prophets shared with Polyidus a penchant for puns and rebuses, but a great deal, of course, is lost in translation. 'And he said, Amos, what seest thou? And I said, a basket of summer fruit. Then said the Lord unto me, The end is come upon my people of Israel' (*qayits*, 'summer fruit'; *qets*, 'end'). 'The Lord said' here seems to mean something like 'it occurred to me,' just as 'Zeus rains' meant 'it is raining.'

The prophets of Samuel's school seem to have raved like Cassandra, possessed by the spirit of the god, and 'prophesying' all at once, which seems to mean, since they are not apparently saying anything worth recording for posterity, that they started 'speaking in tongues' or mystically rambling, generating perhaps those 'magic words', the *voces mysticae*, the language of angels, beloved of the authors of magical papyri, of Pentecostalists, St Paul and the Corinthians. St Paul actually asked the Corinthian Christians to tone the *glossolalia* down a bit in case the weird phenomenon scared off potential converts stepping in off the street into a room full of gobbledygookers: 'Will they not say that ye are mad?' 'If any man speak in an unknown tongue let it be by two, or at the most by three, and that by course; and let one interpret. But if there be no interpreter (*diermeneutes*), let him keep silence in the church; and let him speak (*laleito*, 'babble') to himself, and to God.' It must have been extremely liberating for a poor pagan Greek, a small-time shopkeeper or a textile worker, brought up with stories of Cassandra and the great Iamids of Olympia, and the miraculous priestess at Delphi, to find herself suddenly pro-phesying, speaking words not her own, along with almost everyone else in the room. In a Christianised synagogue or an ex-pagan house in one of the poorer parts of Corinth, that little trickle of the divine which emerged on special occasions to special people at special locations, seemed suddenly to have become a great banks-bursting flood. Prophecy was a game anyone could play.

Early Christians, including Paul, used Greek translations, the Septuagint, rather than Hebrew texts of Old Testament books. Indeed, the Greek Bible was even used in the deserts of deepest Judaea by the community at Qumran – scraps of it were found among the Dead Sea Scrolls. It is this translation which is the ultimate origin of that important rift between pagan oracles and the prophecies of the prophets of the People of the Book, and we can see these semantic discriminations continuing into the new era most clearly in Acts, which often describes wizard-war scenes that could have come from *The Lord of the Rings*.

The authors of the Gospels and the Greek-speaking Jews who translated the books of the Old Testament try in their translations to distinguish their divinations, their seers, their oracles, at first glance so similar, from the pagan seers of the Greek dominant culture, by using a different vocabulary and carefully avoiding mantis words. In some ways the Greek Bible is more self-consciously un-Greek, its 'Lord God' more removed from

manifestation, than the Elohim and Yahweh of the Hebrew text it was translating. Most important, the translators present their own seers as mere spokesmen, *prophetai*, mouthpieces of a hidden God, direct-lines, not 'oracle-mongers' but self-less transmitters of God's words, eliding process, mediation and interpretation. This insistence on directness, this elision of wizardry, this demantification of prophesying, is taken to its sublimest level in the extraordinary traditions of the Koran. According to that tradition (I am relying on Muhammad Abdel Haleem's new Oxford translation*), Muhammad received his first messages from Allah in the Cave of Hira outside Mecca. During later transmissions witnesses described a strange humming noise and Muhammad limp and flushed and sweating. As soon as he came out of this state he would begin reciting verses of the Koran which his followers would immediately learn by heart. What is so extraordinary about the Koran is that, unlike the Bible, which is not, as often alleged, 'God's Word', but which merely contains messages and quotes from God framed in narratives and biographies ('And the Lord spake unto X saying'), Muhammad generally spoke as Allah himself in the first person, commanding himself to say things – 'They ask you about crescent moons. Say, "They show the times appointed for people, and for the pilgrimage"' – although there are a few exceptions, when Muhammad seems to speak, for instance, in the person of a mediating spirit, identified as the angel Gabriel.

We have to imagine Muhammad, having emerged from his state of revelation, saying, for example: 'We established you on the earth and provided you with a means of livelihood there – small thanks you give!' It must have been a quite amazing spectacle. Other elements in the Koran and its tradition underline this directness, this belittling of the role of the medium's mediating self. Muhammad only started prophesying when he was about forty. He had not previously been known for prophecies or poetry (the Koran is in a kind of weakly rhythmic rhyming 'prose'). The text was clearly not of his making: 'We have not taught the Prophet poetry, nor could he ever have been a poet. This is a revelation.' 'Nor could this Koran have been devised by anyone other than God.' Muhammad in himself is nothing special, or rather he is special, but only inasmuch as he was chosen by Allah as his transmitter. Muhammad's ordinariness is critical. It means what he said could not have come from him.

Muhammad was not only not possessed by jinn: he wasn't even possessed by Gabriel the mediating spirit, let alone by Allah, although he used Allah's royal 'we'. When he speaks as Allah he is merely repeating from memory what Gabriel had told him minutes earlier – the short delay is crucial; this is not a live transmission. One of the most striking features of the Koran is that it was already a text before it was written down, composed especially for Arabs in Arabic by Allah, who kept a copy in heaven, the 'mother of the book', a 'preserved Tablet'. According to the dominant Islamic tradition, the first revelation to Muhammad began simply: 'Read!' It was only when Muhammad explained to Gabriel that he couldn't read (it) that Gabriel started reading excerpts out to him, a construction that makes the Koran far more esomenological than is sometimes claimed, since, already written, it nevertheless responds to events which unfold after the first instalment. It also means that Muhammad is no more possessed than someone who recites the *ipsissima verba* of a book he heard on *Jackanory*, a self-less channel who is never less than himself, a messenger several times removed from his source, Allah's Pro-pro-pro-phet.

Inasmuch as exchanges between men and gods are exchanges of gifts and favours, to which gods might respond positively, very positively or stingily, and later rather than sooner; inasmuch as gods cannot be bought, or booked, cult (that is, offerings of sacrifice, precious objects, services, tragedies, comedies etc, at a particular time and place) constructs gods as personalities. Indeed the expense and the nature of the gifts – unyoked animals for unmarried goddesses, for example – help to colour in those personalities, their status and importance. Big god, big sacrifice: little god, little sacrifice.

The attempt to concentrate the cult of Yahweh at the Temple in Jerusalem and of Allah at Mecca helps to ensure a single metaphysical personality, who is brimful of subjectivity and agency, i.e. of grace, *gratia*, *charis*, a single unitary cosmic economy encapsulated in a sole and central field of exchange with the divine, and one particular exchange, the gift of a life of devotion and credulity which will be returned at a time of his own

choosing, indeed at the very end of time, the Big Payback Time, the Day of Judgment, the Settling of Accounts, itself to some extent originally the result of a pun, apparently, slurring 'The Day of the Almighty' (*El Shaddai*) into a 'Day of Destruction' (*sh-dd*). But just as monogamy produces adultery, so with the MonoTheoi comes pandaemonium: crowds of minor invisible 'breaths' ('spirits'), also referred to as *daimones* (in Greek, generic godhoods, mini-gods or geniuses), angels (*angeloi*, 'messengers'), *genies* (geniuses), *jinn* ('hidden' spirits) who might inhabit and animate living creatures, such as unclean pigs, or even inanimate but movable materials such as lamps or rings (aniconic objects) or clay – demons of possession.

These abject minor metaphysicals are necessary for monotheisms in order to account for mantic phenomena, unauthorised possession, unauthorised oracles, homosexuality (possession by the 'demon of homosexuality') or sometimes just scepticism. Hence 'witchcraft', with all its familiars, far from being a remnant of an old religion, as is sometimes alleged, is thoroughly monotheistic, as adultery is monogamistic. Deracinated daemons without places of worship are produced by the monopoly of cult by the One Gods. Dispossessed, they have no alternative but to possess. In that respect, inasmuch as her daemons are just passing through, from episode to episode and from series to series, there is nothing pagan about *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. In many respects it is an orthodox-ish Protestant programme.

The daemons of the monotheisms are also essentially self-less, however. They have more autonomy than mere 'messengers', but a marginal kind of autonomy. Above all, they have no long-term relationships, no contract, no covenant, no faith. They are metaphysical butterflies, essentially promiscuous. They are not localised receivers and bestowers of gifts with continuing personalities and some discretion, but rather slavish or whorish, amenable to bribes, able to be booked for specific tasks, obedient to the secret commands of witches, priests, Beelzeboul, Jesus the Anointed or God, rather like wayward employees of a big corporation who have momentarily forgotten who really pays their wages. It is a mistake to try to persuade them with gifts: you simply have to discover how to manipulate them, to report them to a higher authority, someone higher up the line of unitary command. They can answer back but not for long:

And there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit; and he cried out, saying, Let us alone; what have we to do with thee, thou Jesus of Nazareth? Art thou come to destroy us? I know thee who thou art, the Holy One of God. And Jesus rebuked him, saying, Hold thy Peace, and come out of him. And when the unclean spirit had torn him, and cried with a loud voice, he came out of him.

When the demon of homosexuality is exorcised, incidentally, through the skilful nancymancy of an American 'evangelical' preacher or a Nigerian Anglican archbishop, it neither cries out, nor turns over a bowl of water; it comes out as vomit. Amazing.

The Greeks by contrast had countless cult-sites, countless Meccas and Jerusalems, and therefore countless different cosmic personalities, gods with a bit too much personality you sometimes feel, personalities kept under construction by cult images that represented them in various aspects, and by stories about them behaving like subjects of *charis*, receiving gifts, returning favours, or vengefully punishing: relationships of exchange, with each other and with mortals and their polities, which might then find their way into other exchanges further down the line, to create not just a series of discrete fairy stories but an integrated 'mythology'. This mythology, this giant system of exchanges between personalities over time and in time, presents a quite different economy from the single integrated field of exchange of the monocults and monocreeds, with their great checkout tills waiting at the end of history.

Although for the Greeks there was no rigid class system of God, angels and devils, not all metaphysical personalities are equal. Zeus was 'highest'. At the base of the apex there were local 'heroes', conceived of as once living, and having been subject to ageing at some point, but now dead (powerful 'ghosts' of legendary mortal men and women), similar to saints in some ways and sometimes clearly their antecedents in cult, but more than mere intercessionaries. In contrast to saints, the regular ones at any rate, these minor metaphysicals

were autonomous in their fields of action, capable of mischief and bad moods, and needing regularly to be persuaded out of them. Also, there were countless poorly differentiated lustful local 'nymphs' who might well possess a passing stranger and make him ramble or rave or prophesy, as they ambushed Socrates resting by a spring in the *Phaedrus*, making him move into a poetic mode, and to say rather naughty things he couldn't, having recovered his senses, remember.

Between the highest and the lowest was a well-developed sub-pinnacle, where the Greeks placed a pantheon, a large but not immense family selected from about twenty strongly characterised powerful and reasonably autonomous panhellenic *theoi*. An average Athenian might have to take just a handful into consideration in the normal course of things: Pallas Athena, Dionysus, Artemis, Hermes, Aphrodite, Demeter and Daughter, Apollo, Poseidon – plus, occasionally, Hephaestus, Heracles, Hera. Although they had many cult-sites and seemed to have different personalities in different places, these different metaphysical characters were identified as one locally manifesting deity, taking on a unitary role in the panhellenic mythology of the poets, who had to shoulder much of the burden of reconciling local divergences of personality. They were all ruled by Zeus but with minds very definitely of their own, able to persuade, seduce, deceive each other and to be persuaded, seduced and deceived in turn.

Among the heavenly gods were special winged messengers, *angeloi*, notably Zeus' messenger, Hermes, by any standards a god with a god's fully realised personality, and Iris, the iridescent goddess Rainbow, much more like a slavish angel, with little of her own autonomy. Both were occasionally despatched with messages, and so, to some extent, they served the same purpose as Yahweh's and Allah's messengers, allowing the highest god to maintain a certain amount of dignity that might be lost if he were forever intervening in person. But the messages of Hermes and Iris are normally not for living mortals and prophets but for mortals of the distant past and especially for other metaphysicals, dotted as they were around the Greek world, a reflection therefore of a plurilocal, quintessentially polytheistic metaphysical universe, in which cosmic power is diffused.
Greek oracles are the product of a very specific kind of geopolitical organisation. Plurilocal gods reflect a world of plurilocal power: city of Athena, city of Hera, city of Artemis, of Poseidon, of Aphrodite. Small Greece was divided into numerous mostly tiny autonomous, acephalous, fiercely rivalrous polities; there were two separate states even on little Mykonos, and the island of Cefalonia found room for four. That is another reason why there is a road to Delphi, and to Dodona, and Didyma. These are distant places, outside power, though the movements of history might make them less or more marginal as time elapsed. And they were politically independent, at least until Alexander came along.

There is no long winding road, by contrast, from Solomon to Nathan the Nabi' or Gad the Seer. Nathan the Nabi' is on hand. Gad is Solomon's seer. Although what can be deduced about power and religion in early first millennium Palestine is highly debatable, the Bible seems to describe a time when seers and nabi's were court-prophets, the authority of whose discourse was directly related to the authority of the king. Other prophets, even the most anti-establishment, are preoccupied with the centres of power, very keen to get access to the throne, rivals of those seers who already have access. Jeremiah even resorts to getting his oracles written down. He does so on the orders of Yahweh, just as some years later Aelius Aristides would have his oracles commemorated on the orders of Asclepius, 'John' on the orders of Jesus, and Muhammad on the orders of Allah. After hearing a few pages of jeremiad, however, King Jehoiakim chops up Jeremiah's prophetic text and throws it on the fire. Jeremiah, on God's advice, makes another copy with extra fire and brimstone.

The Dead Sea Scrolls contain more of what God had said to Moses, or to Ezekiel, than anyone ever suspected, although now, very occasionally, if the committee agrees, these new little bits of Bible are gradually finding their way into new standard revised versions of the text. This raises a lot of questions. The Book is nothing if it is not the Edited Version. The reason these new prophecies were previously unknown is that they never made the final cut. And it is that final cut, the authoritative text, that closes down the production of 'God says' and imposes economy on the unstructured din of the prophets after the fact. An impossible way to operate in real time became a perfectly manageable way to operate in real time, when the era of God-speaking subjects became

the era of God-spoken artefacts, when religions of revelation became religions of the revealed, when the time of running races became the time of races won. If Greek religion, like the religion of early Israel, is a religion of people who had prophets, the religions of the people of the Book are religions of people who have had prophets, but don't have them any more. There is a great gulf between the religion of the people in the Book and the religion of the people of the Book: the people in the Book didn't have the Book to refer to.

Islam made the transition from religion of revelation to religion having been revealed in just a few years. Unusually, the prophet and the power resided in one man. Muhammad's own military success provided the cogency which made disputation of his sole claim to revelation moot. And then his third successor, the Caliph 'Uthman, ordered definitive texts of the Recitation to be copied and distributed throughout the now vast conquered territory. Revelation was a thing of the past. If anyone claimed to be receiving any further revelations after Muhammad, no one was writing them down.

The New Testament seems by contrast the least convincing of all the holy books, full of anonymous pseudonymous texts by who knows who, from who knows where, written who knows when: forged Letters of Jesus' Brothers, 'of James', 'of Jude, brother of James', 'of Paul' and 'of Peter', who seems to have found time between fishing trips on the Sea of Galilee to master the art of rhetoric in Greek, not always very cunning forgeries that fell off the ancient equivalent of the back of a lorry, apostolic relics 'in my own hand' (Paul's) that could be sold for sums pagan oracle-mongers could only dream of.

With the exception of a few genuine letters of Paul, every single text in the New Testament is probably 'pseudepigraphic'. Many of these pseudepigrapha are not merely falsely ascribed, but the result of deliberate deception. It is entirely possible that the New Testament contains works written by people who weren't even Christians, just people with a good idea of what Christians sounded like and what Christians wanted to hear. Would a true believer really have faked a vision of Christ, as did the pseudonymous author of Revelation, or a letter of Peter or Paul?

The liberties taken with the text of the Bible are astonishing, especially when you consider the integrity of many pagan texts. The texts of Aristophanes or Sappho or even Homer seem to have been considered far more sacred by the Greeks than 'God's word' was by the Judahites and Christians. The difference, of course, is that one is playful art and the other is potent prophecy, and far too important, therefore, not to be interfered with. Only despotism could confer cogency on such a dodgy-looking collection. If the first steps towards the Book were taken under the Persian colonial administration of Ezra, Nehemiah and the high priests, and then the hellenistic kings, the process was more or less completed under emperors of Rome.

There is a nice irony here, for Constantine's critical conversion was dependent, we are told, on old-fashioned battlefield oracles not dissimilar to those in which the Iamids – who were still apparently prophesying after perhaps a thousand years or more but would not do so for much longer – had proved so expert. First, according to a contemporary panegyric of around 310 AD, a mystic vision was granted to Constantine. The mantic god Apollo, Sun Unconquered, appeared to him with the winged goddess Victory and three crosses XXX, guaranteeing thirty years of rule. Then, much later, we hear of a slightly different image, not the three crosses of thirty, but the X of Xristianity, a rebus to end all rebuses, a final godly punchline, the ultimate visual pun. When the X was tilted slightly to become the cross of crucifixion, one of three on Golgotha, Tisamenus' beloved butterflying Victory was transmogrified into Constantine's Christian angel, not hovering uncertainly, but sent down from Lord God direct. In the same way the gigantic Winged Victory on the roundabout at Hyde Park Corner was reconfigured for the Edwardian period as an 'Angel of Peace'.

The authenticity of God's Word was now guaranteed by God's Sword, wielded by Constantine, Theodosius and Justinian: an absolutist editorial policy, an absolutist text, dependent on an absolutist temporal power, which would ensure through force of arms, if necessary, the integrity of the authorised version. At the start of the

fourth century, Eusebius was already distinguishing the ‘bastard’ and ‘impious’ writings from the ‘agreed’, and ‘widely credited’ ones, which more or less correspond to the modern New Testament, and by the end Athanasius was circulating a list of what he called for the first time ‘the *kanon*’, although the inclusion of Revelation was controversial right up until the tenth century AD.

We like to think of the Bible in a positive way, as a repository of what it contains, an Ark which has preserved some precious ancient texts, as a gathering, a collection: ‘what it says in the Bible’. But what it says *out* of the Bible is equally important, for the Bible has a shadow, a twin sister, an abject invisible anti-Bible, as much a part and parcel of what the Bible is as what the Bible actually contains. We should rather view the Book as what is left after a pastry cutter has been to work on an amorphous lump of dough, or as a scrapbook full of bits and pieces cut and pasted one on top of the other with crossings out and annotations, rewritings, additions and modifications. The apocryphal material within the Book looks less apocryphal when there is an Apocrypha outside it. Pseudepigraphic texts look less pseudepigraphic when there is a wastepaper basket in which to toss the ‘true’ pseudepigrapha. If the compilers of the Bible were undiscriminating, an iron-fisted discrimination seems nevertheless to have taken place.

Here, finally, we come to the heart of the difference between the oracles of the pagan Greeks of the classical period and the revelations of the prophets of the People of the Book. Greek seers had to operate under a very different economy of cogency. Such absolute temporal power, such imperial brute force, was simply not available to Delphi. There were no kings, no imperial commissioners, no governors, no high priests issuing their own coinage, no emperors, no sword-wielding messenger of God, no caliphs, no authorised versions, no national Holy Book – not in classical Greece. In that respect Delphi is quintessentially the product of a pluralistic, not just undespotic but anti-despotic culture, where belief is a gift offered as part of an ongoing relationship of exchange with the divine in an endless ongoing present, not a one-time and for-all-time surrender of disbelief until ‘the Present’ arrives. Delphi’s authority was only so much authority as the authority freely given to it by the numerous polities and individuals who chose to consult it, and who, by the very act of consulting it, tacitly accepted what Delphi would have to say. And that pluralism, a cosmic pluralism, a political pluralism, a geopolitical pluralism, the possibility of alternative readings and misreadings, of discretion, of exchange, of optimism and pessimism, of room for interpretation, is manifest in every word of every line of every (pagan) oracle ever uttered.

If you embark on Wood’s *The Road to Delphi* looking for cunning analyses of tricky plotting in mostly modern novels, plays and films you will not be disappointed, but the book claims to be something more than that: a work of Barthesian ‘ethnology’, a ‘cultural account’, ‘a form of curiosity’ ‘that is not only literary’, but which ‘embraces the diffuse particulars not so much of the world as of human behaviour’. For me, these ambitions are not realised. In short, there is a lot of ‘afterlife’ here, but not much ‘life’, and Wood never really attempts to rise above the received view of the oracle. Instead of being enlightened on the subject of the ‘cloudy space’ of oracles in culture, I found myself wondering about the construction of the playful space of art in history, and the fierce, bloody attempts to separate the ‘paranormal fluency’ of ‘prophets’ from that of poets and seers. When I say ‘history’, I mean History: politics and geopolitics, battles and dates. Without that context, Wood’s curiously limited curiosity about oracles looks like a cultured antiquarianism. Astrologers wouldn’t be surprised at that conclusion, for they note that although ‘Taurus is intrigued by and respects Gemini’s wit, mental agility and intelligence, he is sometimes annoyed with Gemini’s inability to make a commitment or to follow through on intentions.’ My review was, it seems, already written in the stars.