

Wisdom, Prophecy and Divine Inspiration: Staniewski's Delphic Journey

INTRODUCTION

Staniewski's Pythian Oratorio, *premièred* in Gardzienice on September 28th, 2013, is the second of a series of oratorios that will be based on prophetic texts and oracular sayings: the first was the Oratorio Sibyllinskie at Lazienki Royal Palace in Warsaw last May. In both cases, we are following Staniewski's 'divining spark' which led him to Delphi to explore the performativity of words and stones.

In the Pythian oratorio, we find a tapestry of wisdom sayings, oracles and prophetic chants. In this paper, I am drawing attention to the enigmatic quality that weaves sayings, oracles and voice together. I suggest that these—let us call them 'components' of the performance—are revivals of the dynamic tension between secrecy and revelation which is characteristic of riddling utterances of an almost timeless ancientness. I also suggest—even more presumptuously- that this tension gives way to the emergence of ancient Greek philosophy. I then conclude by referring to a papyrus which gives clues to the vocalization of prophetic song in post-classical theatre.

Wisdom sayings, oracles and epicist poetry share a common ancestry in a huge ritualistic background of prayer, sacrifice and mystery religion which is characterised by obliqueness and riddling speech. In the Derveni papyrus—Europe's most ancient surviving religious manuscript, Orpheus, the quintessential poet (I quote) '**says momentous things in riddles**'.

Similarly, the language in which the wise sayings are delivered—or, rather reported to have been delivered—is poetic, oblique and condensed: They are described by Plutarch and earlier by Plato as "**short and compressed-- deadly shot[s]**", "**twisted together, like a bowstring, where a slight effort gives great force.**" Socrates calls them "**far-famed inscriptions, which are in all men's mouths --'Know thyself,' and 'Nothing too much.'**"

The Delphic oracles, as we know, are notorious for their ambiguity

"the Lord whose oracle is in Delphi neither says nor conceals: he indicates"

So says the 6th-century BCE 'philosopher', Heraclitus of Ephesus—himself known as the 'riddler' or 'the obscure'.

In Herodotus the historian (as later in tragedy—with the widely known example of Oedipus) many stories revolve around the problem of the human failure to interpret oracles correctly—famously the oracle delivered to Croesus, the fabulously rich Lydian king, who failed to realize that when the Pythia told him that a great kingdom will be destroyed, it would be his own and not that of the Persians.

Three oracles from Herodotus are sung in the Pythian Oratorio: one addressed to Croesus; two to the Spartans in connection with their attempt to conquer Arcadia. Here is what, according to Herodotus (1.66) the Pythia replied in one of them—in hexameters:

**“You ask me for Arcadia? You ask too much; I grant it not.
There are many men in Arcadia, eaters of acorns,
Who will hinder you. But I grudge you not.
I will give you Tegea to beat with your feet in dancing,
And its fair plain to measure with a rope.”**

**“Ἀρκαδίην μ’ αἰτεῖς: μέγα μ’ αἰτεῖς: οὐ τοι δώσω.
πολλοὶ ἐν Ἀρκαδίῃ βαλανηφάγοι ἄνδρες ἕασιν,
οἳ σ’ ἀποκωλύσουσιν. ἐγὼ δὲ τοι οὔτι μεγαίρω:
δώσω τοί Τεγέην ποσσίκροτον¹ ὀρχήσασθαι
καὶ καλὸν πεδίον σχοίνῳ διαμετρήσασθαι.”**

“Overlooking the ambiguity of the oracle” (--in Herodotus’ words) confident they would win and enslave the Tegeans **“the Spartans brought shackles with them”** But they lost the battle and the those of them who survived **“were made to work the Tegean plain measuring it out with a line and wearing the very shackles they had brought along with them.”**

The importance of deciphering the oracle’s obscure meanings to reveal god’s will was crucial, and the high premium placed on enquiry and ‘getting it right’ is not far removed from the quest for truth and wisdom which came to be called philosophy.

Plutarch says that Apollo is **“a philosopher as well as a prophet”** and suggests that his oracles take a riddling form because **“enquiry is the beginning of philosophy”**.

¹ struck with foot

It is not difficult to associate the Socratic *elenchos*—the procedure of question and answer—with trying to find consistency in the riddling utterances of oracles and in the wisdom speech of sages.

The wise sayings (or maxims) in Staniewski's performance are chosen from a list of 147 maxims said to have been carved on Apollo's temple at Delphi and copied from there by a certain Sosiades about whom we know very little. This list included the famous *meden aghan*—'nothing in excess', and *gnothi sauton* 'know thyself', and were attributed to Seven Sages [*sophoi*] living in the early decades of the sixth-century BCE. The first explicit attestation is in Plato, who enumerates the Seven Sages as Solon from Athens, Chilon from Sparta, Periander from Corinth and four others from Eastern cities.²

A 3rd century BCE inscription in the Graeco-Bactrian city of Ai Khanum (in present day Afghanistan) discovered in 1966 claims convincingly that it is a faithful copy of the so-called 'original' list of the Seven Sages dedicated to Apollo in Delphi.

The inscription was found at the base of a *stèle* bearing the tail end of the list of maxims together with a claim by the dedicator, (a certain Klearchos) that the maxims are a faithful copy of the original ones in Delphi. At the time of writing, this tail-end featured in the performance of the Sibylla Oratorio at Lazienki Royal Palace in Warsaw .

² Pittacus of Mytilene, Bias of Priene, Cleoboulos of Lindos on Rhodes, Thales of Miletus. Protagoras 343 AB CHECK. **Plutarch names**, as the seven wise men, Thales, Bias, Pittacus, Solon, Chilon, Cleobulus, and Anacharsis. Plato (*Protagoras*, 343A) puts Myson in place of Anacharsis, and in other lists Periander is found in his stead. Pherecydes, Epimenides, and Peisistratus are the other candidates for a place in the list. Pausanias 10.24.1-2

De Delphes à l'Oxus, inscriptions grecques nouvelles de la
Bactriane

In: Comptes rendus des séances de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, 112e
année, N. 3, 1968.



FIG. 5. - Estampage de l'inscription des maximes.

ΠΑΙΣ ΩΝ ΚΟΣΜΙΟΣ ΙΣΘΙ	<i>as a child—well behaved</i>	Jako dziecko bądź skromny
ΗΒΩΝ ΕΓΚΡΑΤΗΣ	<i>as a youth—self disciplined</i>	Jako młodzieniec opanowany
ΜΕΣΟΣ ΔΙΚΑΙΟΣ	<i>as of middle-age — just</i>	W wieku średnim sprawiedliwy
ΠΡΕΣΒΥΤΥΣ ΕΥΒΟΥΛΟΣ	<i>as an old man —sensible</i>	Jako starzec rozumny

The 147 sayings belong to a complex tradition of wisdom and didactic lore which antedates Plato even to this very day in modern Greece. However, the actual distribution of the wisdom sayings among 7 sages varies and the membership to this canonical set is by no means fixed: (if we sum up the lists that survive from antiquity, at least 17 people qualify for inclusion in the group of 7 which occasionally includes other known figures such as the enigmatic Pythagoras.)

What *does* remains consistent throughout is that they are represented as a group of 7—a quasi magical number—and usually placed in symbolically charged predicaments from which they emerge as shrewd, practical and wise.

This practical wisdom is often delivered in *verse*. Thales,³ (624-546 BCE-- thought of as the first philosopher), wrote a guide to reading routes by the stars *in verse*; Solon known primarily to history as a law-maker and reformer, chief archon of Athens in 594 B.C.E., is said to have written more than five thousand lines of verse; and Kleoboulos was the author of thousands of lines of songs and riddles.⁴

The maxims of these sages are largely made up of 2 words and fit readily into hexameters .

The dactylic hexameter, described by Edith Hall yesterday as ‘unimaginably ancient’ is the form in which the oracle is reportedly delivered, either by the Pythia herself or through the *prophetes*. As Edith pointed out, it is also the meter of Homeric poetry and is revived by the Presocratics who often performed their philosophical treatises as if they were bardic performances of epic poetry. It is used by Xenophanes⁵, known for his satires against the gods;

³ **Thales of Miletus** (c. 624 BC – c. 546 BC) was a pre-Socratic Greek philosopher from Miletus in Asia Minor,. Many, most notably Aristotle, regard him as the first philosopher in the Greek tradition.

⁴ in which he is said to have declared that "the excellence of a man is to divine the future so far as it can be grasped" (Diog.Laert. 1.68). Pittakos wrote songs, and one of his sayings, "It is hard to be good," was incorporated into a poem by the fifth-century writer Simonides (*PMG* 542). It is the discussion of what this saying means that prompts Plato's famous mention of the Seven Sages in the *Protagoras*.

⁵ **Xenophanes of Colophon**- c.570 – c.475 BC-- an ancient city in Ionia.

by Empedocles,⁶ to describe the separation of the 4 elements by Love and Strife; it is also used by Parmenides who is credited with the most counterintuitive views on record. (Parmenides's⁷, poem 'on nature' in Homeric hexameters begins with the traditional appeal for revelation from the divine authority of poetry-- presumably to legitimize his radical views).

Presocratics and sophists travelled from city to city and 'performed their wisdom' reciting their works at Panhellenic festivals alongside competitions of drama, music, epic and athletics. They travelled around in flamboyant dress performing orations to charm their listeners. Pythagoras is said to have been dressed in white, with a golden girdle and Persian trousers. Empedocles wore a purple robe, a golden girdle, slippers of bronze and a Delphic laurel-wreath and in his own words describes his reception:

**'Men and women worship me when I enter their flourishing towns;
and they follow me in countless numbers, asking where
the path to profit lies. Some want divinations; others, pierced for a
long time by harsh pains asked to hear a healing utterance'**⁸

The sophists, Gorgias and Hippias also appeared in purple robes and gave histrionic displays of their skills.

We heard from Edith about the Pythias's ecstatic pronouncements and the elaborate theatricalized preparations around them. This takes me to the third aspect of Staniewski's Oratorio: the ecstatic vocalizations performed by the Gardzienice singers which bring us almost within hearing distance of the oracular voices of a long gone past.

⁶ **Empedocles** (c. 490–430 BC) was a Greek pre-Socratic philosopher Sicily. Aristotle described Empedocles as Homeric and powerful in his diction The two poems together comprised 5000 lines.^[20] About 550 lines of his poetry survive. He also proposed powers called Love and Strife which would act as forces to bring about the mixture and separation of the elements. These physical speculations were part of a history of the universe which also dealt with the origin and development of life. Influenced by the Pythagoreans, he supported the doctrine of reincarnation. Empedocles is generally considered the last Greek philosopher to record his ideas in verse

Anaxagoras c. 510 – 428 BC brought philosophy and the spirit of scientific inquiry from Ionia to Athens.

⁷ **Parmenides of Elea** fl. early 5th century BCE) was an ancient Greek philosopher born in Elea, a Greek city on the southern coast of Magna Graecia. He was the founder of the Eleatic school of philosophy. Parmenides' use of this old poetic, mythological ruse might have been more than literary reference

⁸ DK31 B112 Transl. D.M. McKirahan.

There isn't time or space to enter into the controversy of whether Pythia delivered her oracles shouting babbled obscurities in hexameter, intoxicated by subterranean fumes rising from a cavern beneath her, saturated with Apollo's *pneuma*, or, whether she sat 'cool calm and collected', sanctioning or discouraging projects submitted by her consultants who would have written and versified her response in advance.

What there *is* evidence for however, is the existence of a 'special' prophet's voice, which appears both in literature and in theatrical performance.

According to Martin West, an authority on ancient Greek music, (I quote) **"prophets used a peculiar screaming voice for delivering prophecies, though whether this should be included under singing is doubtful."**

Ancient poets describing prophetic delivery use the verbs *klazo* and *lasko* which are applied to **crashing sounds, howling dogs, screaming birds** and, according to the *LSJ* (Liddell Scott Jones) Lexicon, to **ringing, rattling creaking and crashing noises**. They also use verbs expressing cries like *iacheo* and *eporthiazō* which mean to shout or cry and which are applied to humans as well as to objects 'ringing out'.

In the *Agamemnon* (line 156)—having recounted the omens that have aroused Artemis' anger-- Aeschylus' chorus describe the voice of the prophet Calchas, as having **rang out-- *apeklaxen*** :

Such, with great good things beside, ἀπέκλαγξεν= rang out in the voice of Calchas /τοιιάδε Κάλχας ξὺν μεγάλοις ἀγαθοῖς ἀπέκλαγξεν.

A few lines further on (201), they say again, '***o mantis eklaxen***'

**..... against the bitter wind
the seer's voice clashed out
..... and spoke of Artemis,.....**

ἐπεὶ δὲ καὶ πικροῦ...χείματος
.....μάντις ἔκλαγξεν προφέρων
Ἄρτεμιν,.....

The word '*lasko*' (meaning, remember, ring, rattle, creaking, crash) which is used in connection to oracles is also applied to bronze—armour and shields as for example in book 14 in the *Iliad*

...and about their bodies (**λάκε**) *lake*= rang the stubborn bronze, as they thrust one at the other with swords and two-edged spears.

and in Aristophanes' *Ploutos*, the slave, Carion asks:

And with what responding tones did Phoebus (Apollo) resound? /

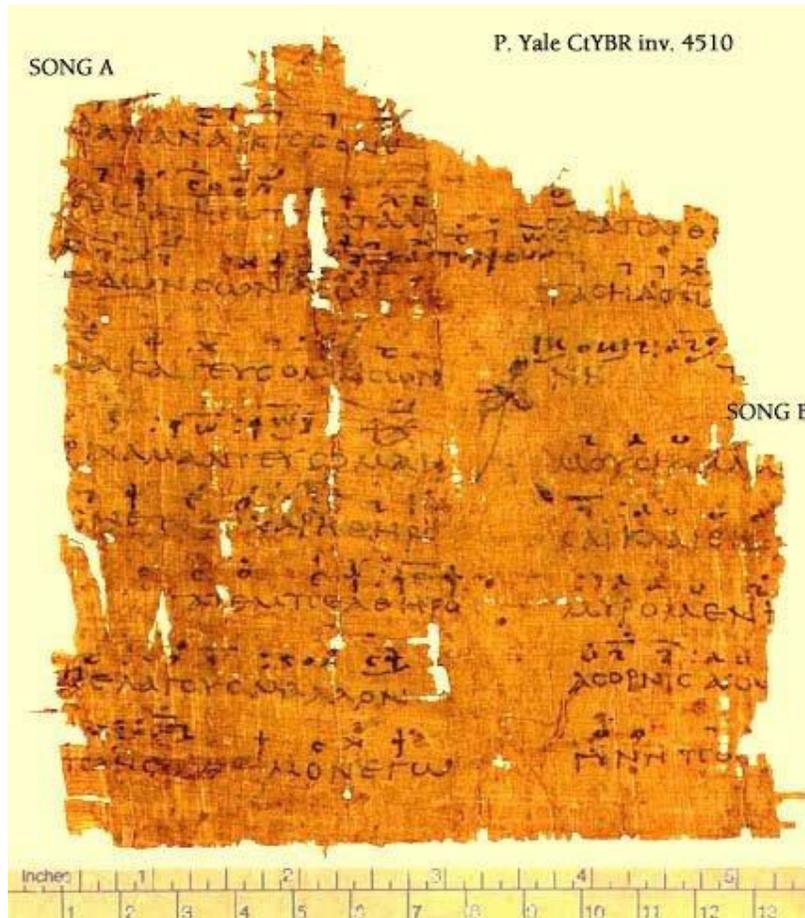
τί δῆτα Φοῖβος ἔλακεν ἐκ τῶν στεμμάτων;

In Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, during the long passage (lines 1072 to 1177) between Cassandra and the chorus, her entirely true insights into what is happening in the murderous palace of Argos are sung, using endless cries, gnomic sayings, and interjections to Apollo: "**oto-to-to-toi, po poi da; Apollon, Apollon.** The chorus call Cassandra's music a 'tuneless tune (1142)', 'inarticulate shrieks' and 'loud notes (1152-3)', 'whining notes', 'shattering to the ear (1165-6)'; and 'songs that are laden with death (1176).'

The stage performance of oracles by specially gifted singing seers was a popular item in post-classical theatre. Edith Hall has drawn my attention to two precious papyri containing the remains of two such 'mantic' scenes, with musical notation, which show that actors were expected to display great vocal skills when performing them. One has Cassandra being cued to extemporize a prophetic song at Troy, where she deliriously describes Hector's battle against Achilles.

The other has a prophetic song for a baritone voice, which shows that the singing actor had to leap down more than an octave and a third to mark the moment he receives divine inspiration. William Johnson, the editor of the papyrus, argues that the sudden descent in pitch was designed to represent the voice change caused by spirit possession. He shows that the abrupt shift of the notes to a much lower range is a dramatic flourish which accompanies the word '*manteu-somai*' -I prophesy.

<http://classics.uc.edu/music/>



Column i

- 1] .. [
- 2]φαρ, ἴα, νάρκισσον ε-
- 3]τε κρατήσω τόξα τὰ λη-
- 4]ποδων ἰών, ἄσω \ δὲ τὰ Καταλίδων / [κλω]
- 5]κα καὶ γεύσομαι ἰών
- 6 τ]ρίχρα μαντεύσομαι
- 7]νε τοξοχάρη θηρο-
- 8]τὰ τέμπεα θηρο-
- 9]-α \ τ/ελαγους μάλλον
- 10]πλήσω βωμὸν ἐγὼ

[Song A] ... ² [oil?], violets, narcissus ... ³ I will hold a bow (of the child of Leto? / tender?) ...
⁴ (before?) your (feet?), and I will sing the [...] of the Kastalian nymphs ... ⁵ and I will taste of your
... ⁶ (hair? / in three ways?) I will proclaim the prophecy ... ⁷ (O maiden?) you who delight in the
bow and [in killing?] the wild beasts ... ⁸ Tempe (the valley) ?where the wild beasts [are born (*vel
sim.*)] ... ⁹ (of the sea? / the hares?) rather than ... ¹⁰ I will fill [up?] the altar ...

The few whole words that come down to us, are full of Delphic **mythological allusions** . In the first columns you read (**Muses, Tempe(?)**, 's/he who delights in the bow') along with pregnantly dramatic declarations ('I will taste of your...!', 'I **will proclaim the prophecy...**', 'I will fill the altar...'); the frequent use of the first and second person also suggests a dramatic scene .

At number 4 "**I will sing of the Kastalian nymphs**" The Kastalia of course is spring of inspiration, at number 6 I will proclaim the prophecy –(manteusomai) and Tempe at number 7 is the valley of the sea of olives below Delphi.

(There is another column which is too faded to show on power point but there is evidence there of **weeping and wailing.**)

The song is florid and dramatic, with a rich array of melodic and poetic adornment with repetitions and rhyme. You can hear **the dramatic leaps in the melody line** which are apparently quite rare –and note the point at which the singing seems to imitate, by a wild plunge into the bass, the shift in voice which, according to Martin West, is characteristic of spirit possession.

Here is the song sung by **Christopher Brunelle** of Vanderbilt University.

PLAY SONG from computer but also available from
<http://classics.uc.edu/music/yale/index.html>

CONCLUSION

Wisdom sayings, oracles, ritual prayers together with the ancient hexameter poetry of epic were part of the fabric of much slower-changing forms of religious observance and ritual. As philosophy emerged against this relatively static background, predetermined epithets and formulae and their performance became detached from the cultic settings in which they were forged. At the same time, ancient gnomic speech, hexameter verse and Apollonic motifs gained a renewed momentum as they were revived and recycled to claim authority for what was patently an explosion of novelty.

Possibly the integration of maxims, Herodotean oracles, and portrayals of the Pythia in Staniewski's *gezamtkunstwerk* brings echoes of a prephilosophic, pre theatrical time –or maybe a post-philosophic post-theatrical time reverberating with a new intensity of unimaginably ancient ritual utterance and poetic possession.

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