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CHAPTER ONE

The Interval

The act of speaking implies an act of hearing—another’s or one’s own. Between these two events, however, there is an interval, which is perceptible in several forms. It may consist of a gap in time that is due to the process of articulation; it may appear as a lag in cognition that lasts as long as it takes for what has been said to acquire sense and consequence. It is tempting to dismiss such transient phenomena as accidents of articulation and comprehension. The truth is that they attest to a precious possibility. When speaking and hearing imply each other without being coincident, what is said can be heard otherwise than as it was intended. There is a chance, then, for language to prove itself more than an instrument to an end and for it to exceed “communication,” defined as the transmission of information by means of a code, a context, and a contact from an addresser to an addressee.¹ When what has been uttered must be apprehended part by part, when it runs the risk of being heard solely in part, and when it may therefore be understood too soon as well as also too late, meanings shift. Senses accrue and are effaced. Diverse, conflicting, and even contradictory phrases and propositions become audible. The saying itself, in its shifting relation to understanding, becomes an event.

What appears in such circumstances may well appear to be no more than a minor perturbation in the course of discourse. Yet

the membrane that separates articulation from comprehension can also allow a truth to sound. Its sign can appear in many guises. It may seem to be incontrovertible or to be concealed, yet susceptible to identification by means of intuition or a technique of decipherment. It can be the fruit of a concerted effort to listen or to listen in, to hear or to overhear, if not to eavesdrop, but it can also be the unintended effect of a momentary distraction or the result of concentration on some unrelated matter. It can be audible in a fleeting resemblance: an echo or a pun by which a syllable, word, or phrase suggests several meanings at once. It may be sealed in a slip or parapraxis in the Freudian sense, in which an apparent blunder of the tongue or ear turns out to be the index of a thought that can assume no other shape. Evidently or subtly, such events all interrupt the orderly exchange of intentions. They give respite from communication: a pause for breath in which explicit statement and oblique suggestion, word and omen, can scarcely be told apart.

Whether such moments are understood as accidents or as the effects of a hidden cause, they imply the variety of event known as “coincidences,” which can be neither foretold nor repeated and in which distinct series of causation seem suddenly to cross. Those who have dared to consider such happenings as objects worthy of study in themselves compose a company of interpreters at once motley and distinguished. In various settings and for the most dissimilar of reasons, prophets, priests, and rabbis, poets and philosophers, linguists, psychiatrists and psychoanalysts, novelists and filmmakers have all suggested that in the hazards of speaking and hearing, misspeaking and overhearing, there are indications that can be gleaned by no other means. To catch and read them, they have also held, arts of inference and elucidation are required.

Those arts have an exceedingly long history. One might even argue that they stretch beyond the records of the past, being identifiable with a practice that is attested across the world: “divination,” as it is called in the traditions that understand themselves in vocabularies

marked by the terminology of the ancient Romans. Cicero, who is the first author to employ the Latin word *divinatio*, defines it as the anticipation of what seems to occur by accident: “the prediction and presentiment of those things which are thought to occur by chance” (*earum rerum, quae fortuitae putantur, praedictio atque praesensio*).² Cicero presents *divinatio* as the Roman equivalent of a Greek expression, *mantikē*, which, as he well knew, also admitted of other understandings. Sextus Empiricus, a century or two after Cicero, presents it as “a theoretical and interpretative knowledge of the signs sent by gods to men” (*epistēmē theōrētikē kai exēgētikē tōn hypo theōn anthrōpois didomenōn sēmeiōn*).³ The Hippocratic treatise *On Regimen* offers a fuller account:

Divination is like this: By the visible it knows the invisible, and by the present it knows the future, and by dead things it gains knowledge of the living, and it becomes aware from things that have no awareness. The person who knows it is always correct, while the person who does not sometimes is and sometimes is not. In this way it imitates human life and human nature [*physin anthrōpou kai bion tauta mimeitai*].⁴

“Divination” in that broadly Hippocratic sense has been studied from almost innumerable perspectives, in research informed by anthropology, sociology, political science, philosophy, and religious studies.⁵ In scholarship on the cultures of the ancient Mediterranean, mantic theory and practice has been the object of at least three critical approaches. One line of inquiry has taken it to involve the field of apparently supernatural causation all too summarily dubbed “magic.” A second mode of analysis understands it as involving forms of inferential reasoning that in their outline, if not in all their contents, illustrate or anticipate the methods of modern science. A third approach understands divination as a crucial element in collective social and political practices.

Each of these three scholarly paths has proven fertile, and none has been exhausted. Yet there are also other means by which to grasp practices of divination and the forms of reasoning that they

have involved. In an extraordinarily wide-ranging essay first published in 1979, Carlo Ginzburg presented mantic procedures as among the oldest examples of an epistemological model that he called the “conjectural paradigm.”⁶ According to his account, divination consists in a detection by means of clues that is close in kind to the forms of reason informing such disparate practices as hunting, medicine, criminology, art-historical authentication, and psychoanalysis. Focusing on ancient Greek texts, Peter Struck, by contrast, argued in an original 2016 book that divination is best understood as involving “surplus knowledge,” which is extracted from “messages” from the world that “add up, sometimes in uncanny ways, to more than the sum of their parts,” constituting what is known today as “intuition.”⁷

In a few brief texts composed in 1932 and 1933, Walter Benjamin proposed an elusive, yet far-reaching account of such an intuition that he rooted in an ability that he called “the mimetic faculty.” “Nature produces similarities [*Ähnlichkeiten*],” he declared, introducing his “doctrine of the similar,” adding, “one need only think of mimicry.” Human beings, as he went on to state, “possess the highest capacity for producing similarities.” Because of “the once powerful compulsion to become similar and to behave mimetically,” they perceive resemblances, and “there is perhaps not a single higher power” of the mind in which such an apprehension does not “play a decisive role.” That a “mimetic faculty” enables the human perception of likenesses among things that share a common form is obvious enough. More striking and more perplexing is the claim that the same power enables human beings to grasp similarity of a subtler kind: “nonsensuous resemblance” (*unsinnliche Ähnlichkeit*). The meaning of that term is far from clear. It appears to signify a likeness between things that do not or that no longer share a “sensuous” (*sinnlich*) property, such as a shape, form, feature, or set of traits. Benjamin gave several examples of practices consisting in the detection of such “nonsensuous resemblances.” He alluded to games and make-believe, in which children and adults imitate human

and inhuman objects and processes. He mentioned dance, which Stéphane Mallarmé and Paul Valéry, in works that he read with care, cast as an art by which human beings become “everything” and “nothing.”⁸ Above all, Benjamin evoked divination, both archaic and modern, his preferred examples being the interpretation of the motions of celestial bodies in astrology, the extraction of a sense from handwriting in graphology, and the study of the viscera of sacrificial animals in extispicy.

All such procedures, for Benjamin, involve the perception of nonsensuous similarities. To employ his term of choice, they are therefore practices of “reading.” Today, that activity is commonly understood to involve the coordination of a graphic sign, such as a letter or a character, with a sound, word, or idea according to a convention. Benjamin proposed a different account, in which the habits of children and adults and the practices of earlier and later stages of humanity converge. “The schoolboy reads his ABC book, and the astrologer reads the future in the stars. In the first sentence, reading is not separated out into its components. Quite the opposite in the second case, though, which clarifies the process at both its levels: the astrologer reads the constellation from the stars in the sky; simultaneously, he reads the future or fate from it.”⁹ Moved by the “compulsion to become similar and to behave mimetically,” readers, whether children or astrologers, grasp correspondences between orders that share no stable likeness: orders such as script and speech or the constellation and a present, past, or future moment. In such practices of putting into relation the unlike, a “nonsensuous resemblance” is grasped in the perception of a fugitive event. “The perception of similarity is in every case bound to a flashing up,” Benjamin wrote, stressing its transience. “It flits past. It may be won again, but it cannot truly be held fast as can other perceptions.”¹⁰ Reading is in this sense a productive practice, which implies at once the identification of units such as letters in media in which they are inapparent, the ordering of such units in a sequence, and a consequent act of inference. Far from corresponding to a given script, reading,

then, is what enables writing. Benjamin found the formula for such a generative process in a phrase of Hugo von Hoffmannsthal's that he cited more than once: "reading what was never written" (*lesen, was nie geschrieben wurde*). It is "the oldest reading": "reading prior to all languages, from entrails, the stars, or dances."¹¹

The ancient Romans were familiar with a saying that sets out the conditions of such reading in the perception of unwritten language. The saying is a dictum that in its verbless syntax yokes together two words of a resemblant sound: *nomen omen*. The meaning of the proverb is at first glance clear. It states that the name (*nomen*) is a portent or a presage (*omen*). The second term of the phrase, one might comment, is implicit in the first, just as the Latin *omen* lurks within the word *nomen*. According to the grammar of the ancient language and the logical ambiguities that mark assertions of identity, however, the proverb also suggests an inverse thesis: *omen nomen*, "the portent or the presage is a name." The two sentences concord in suggesting that the unexpectedly revelatory signs that the Romans called "omens" (*omina*) are discernible not only in such obviously portentous phenomena as constellations, striking natural occurrences, and the enigmatic morphology of living bodies. Presages are also to be found in the field of names, which is speech.

Yet when exactly might words and portents, *nomina* and *omina*, converge or coincide? The answer that is proposed in the pages of this book is that it happens in the gap that separates utterance from understanding, in moments of hesitation and confusion, when speaking cannot be distinguished from misspeaking, when hearing fades into unanticipated mishearing or overhearing, and when seemingly clear statements suddenly show themselves to contain riddles to which guesses alone are adequate. At such points, language runs off the rails of its "communicative function." If only for an instant and if only in the most particular and least repeatable of situations, signs are susceptible to divination, defined as a "reading of what was never written."

Such a coming to legibility implies a model of linguistic activity that is in several respects unusual, if not unique. Here, what is at issue is not the articulation envisaged by the Augustinian and the Cartesian traditions, by which thinking beings clarify their own representations to themselves through a sonorous or silent chain of reasoning. Yet the conditions of the disclosure of the *nomen-omen* (or *omen-nomen*) are also irreducible to conversation as it is generally conceived, in which several people in one place and at one time address each other. When a portent momentarily “flashes up” in a word, a phrase, or the silences that punctuate it, one or many speakers may be present, but the paradigms of the monologue and the dialogue are inadequate. To define such occurrences, one requires another model: that of reading the unwritten.

Those who catch an unanticipated sense in a scrap of discourse can be intimately, even intensely touched by it. Yet they grasp immediately that the striking sign hails from elsewhere. Should they themselves have spoken the word or phrase that astonishes them, they will be aware that they did not distinctly intend to do so; otherwise, they will hardly have been surprised by it. Should the revelatory expression, by contrast, sound from the mouth of another individual, hearers will likewise understand that it was not ostensibly addressed to them or that its speaker did not mean to utter it as they have inadvertently — rightly or wrongly — received it. Perceiving an omen in a passing word, catching a presage in a fragment of circumstantial talk, the diviner deciphers something that no one has spelled out, like the astrologer grasping fate in the constellation or the graphologist reconstructing character from a series of immobile marks.

How to do so, according to what rules and principles, and to what effects, are questions that can be treated adequately only case by case, through a reconstitution of the diverse ritual, literary, psychological, and philosophical uses to which the seeming accidents of speech have been put. Such an endeavor requires that one entertain

the possibility that the mishaps of communication may be more than they appear to be. Such a supposition may of course prove to be unfounded, and it cannot be granted in advance that the interpretations that it enables explain more than misunderstandings. Yet there is also no certainty that unanticipated coincidences in the emission and the reception of discourse are but senseless stumbles. It may be that that in concentrating on the fleeting interval that ties and disjoins hearing from speaking and in attending to what comes to pass in it, one may catch sight of a thing rarer than error: truth readable in the unexpected, be it necessity or chance.

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