

Plutarch's account of a supposed dialogue between Demetrius and Cleombrotus (sections 410 and 421).

## THE OBSOLESCENCE OF ORACLES

(The persons taking part in the conversation are: Lamprias, Demetrius, Cleombrotus, Ammonius, Philip, Didymus, and Heracleon.)

1. THE story <sup>a</sup> is told, my dear Terentius Priscus, that certain eagles or swans, flying from the uttermost parts of the earth towards its centre, met in Delphi at the omphalus, as it is called; and at a later time Epimenides <sup>b</sup> of Phaestus put the story to test by referring it to the god and upon receiving a vague and ambiguous oracle said,

Now do we know that there is no mid-centre of earth or of ocean;  
Yet if there be, it is known to the gods, but is hidden from mortals.

Now very likely the god repulsed him from his attempt to investigate an ancient myth as though it were a painting to be tested by the touch. (2.) Yet a short time before the Pythian games, which were held when Callistratus <sup>c</sup> was in office in our own day, it happened that two revered men coming from opposite ends of the inhabited earth met together at Delphi,

<sup>a</sup> The numerous other references to this story may be found most conveniently in Frazer's *Pausanias*, v. p. 315.

<sup>b</sup> Diels, *Frag. der Vorsokratiker*, ii. p. 191, Epimenides, no. B 11.

<sup>c</sup> The year 83-84 A.D.

Demetrius <sup>a</sup> the grammarian journeying homeward from Britain to Tarsus, and Cleombrotus of Sparta, who had made many excursions in Egypt and about the land of the Cave-dwellers, and had sailed beyond the Persian Gulf; his journeyings were not for business, but he was fond of seeing things and of acquiring knowledge; he had wealth enough, and felt that it was not of any great moment to have more than enough, and so he employed his leisure for such purposes; he was getting together a history to serve as a basis for a philosophy that had as its end and aim theology, as he himself named it. He had recently been at the shrine of Ammon, and it was plain that he was not particularly impressed by most of the things there, but in regard to the ever-burning lamp he related a story told by the priests which deserves special consideration; it is that the lamp consumes less and less oil each year, and they hold that this is a proof of a disparity in the years, which all the time is making one year shorter in duration than its predecessor; for it is reasonable that in less duration of time the amount consumed should be less.

3. The company was surprised at this, and Demetrius went so far as to say that it was ridiculous to try in this way to draw great conclusions from small data, not, as Alcaeus <sup>b</sup> puts it, "painting the lion from a single claw," but with a wick and lamp postulating a mutation in the heavens and the universe, and doing away completely with mathematical science.

<sup>a</sup> Ὀκτανῶ καὶ Τηθύι Δημήτριος. Cf. also Huebner, *Ephemeris Epigr.* iii. 312; Clark, *Archaeol. Jour.* xlii. p. 425; Dessau, in *Hermes*, xlv. (1911) pp. 156 ff.

<sup>b</sup> Bergk, *Poet. Lyr. Graec.* iii. p. 184, Alcaeus, no. 113.

Cleombrotus continues with a story of his journeys in younger days.

21. Then Cleombrotus continued, "I shall be surprised if it does not appear to you much more strange than what has already been said. Yet it seems to be close to the subject of natural phenomena and Plato<sup>a</sup> has given the key-note for it, not by an unqualified pronouncement, but as the result of a vague concept, cautiously suggesting also the underlying idea in an enigmatic way; but, for all that, there has been loud disparagement of him on the part of other philosophers. But there is set before us for general use a bowl of myths and stories combined, and where could one meet with more kindly listeners for testing these stories, even as one tests coins from foreign lands? So I do not hesitate to favour you with a narrative about a man, not a Greek, whom I had great difficulty in finding, and then only by dint of long wanderings,

<sup>a</sup> Cf. 421 F, *infra*.

and after paying large sums for information. It was near the Persian Gulf that I found him, where he holds a meeting with human beings once every year ; and there I had an opportunity to talk with him and met with a kindly reception. The other days of his life, according to his statement, he spends in association with roving nymphs and demigods. He was the handsomest man I ever saw in personal appearance and he never suffered from any disease, inasmuch as once each month he partook of the medicinal and bitter fruit of a certain herb. He was practised in the use of many tongues ; but with me, for the most part, he spoke a Doric which was almost music. While he was speaking, a fragrance overspread the place, as his mouth breathed forth a most pleasant perfume. Besides his learning and his knowledge of history, always at his command, he was inspired to prophesy one day in each year when he went down to the sea and told of the future. Potentates and kings' secretaries would come each year and depart. His power of prophecy he referred to the demigods. He made most account of Delphi and there was none of the stories told of Dionysus or of the rites performed here of which he had not heard ; these too he asserted were the momentous experiences of the demigods and so, plainly, were those which had to do with the Python. And upon the slayer of that monster was not imposed an exile of eight full years,<sup>a</sup> nor, following this, was he exiled to Tempê ; but after he was expelled, he fared forth to another world, and later, returning from there, after eight cycles of the Great Years, pure and truly the 'Radiant

<sup>a</sup> Cf. *Moralia*, 293 B-C.

One,' he took over the oracle which had been guarded during this time by Themis. Such also, he said, were the stories about Typhons and Titans<sup>a</sup>; battles of demigods against demigods had taken place, followed by the exile of the vanquished, or else judgement inflicted by a god upon the sinners, as, for example, for the sin which Typhon is said to have committed in the case of Osiris, or Cronus in the case of Uranus; and the honours once paid to these deities have become quite dim to our eyes or have vanished altogether when the deities were transferred to another world. In fact, I learn that the Solymi, who live next to the Lycians, paid especial honour to Cronus. But when he had slain their rulers, Arsalus, Dryus, and Trosobius, he fled away from that place to some place or other, where they cannot say; and then he ceased to be regarded, but Arsalus and those connected with him are called the 'stern gods,' and the Lycians employ their names in invoking curses both in public and in private. Many accounts similar to these are to be had from theological history. But, as that man said, if we call some of the demigods by the current name of gods, that is no cause for wonder; for each of them is wont to be called after that god with whom he is allied and from whom he has derived his portion of power and honour. In fact, among ourselves one of us is Dīus, another Athenaeus, another Apollonius or Dionysius or

\* Cf. 360 F, *supra*.

<sup>11</sup> θεολογουμένων] μυθολογουμένων in some mss. and Eusebius.

<sup>12</sup> παρ' οὗ δυνάμεως . . . εἰληχεν] οὗ τῆς δυνάμεως . . . μετέ-  
εἰληχεν Eusebius.

<sup>13</sup> Δίος Eusebius (cf. Crönert, *Hermes*, xxxvii. 226): δίος.

Hermaeus ; but only some of us have, by chance, been rightly named ; the majority have received names derived from the gods which bear no relation to the persons, but are only a travesty."

22. Cleombrotus said nothing more, and his account appeared marvellous to all. But when Heracleon inquired in what way this was related to Plato and how he had given the key-note for this topic, Cleombrotus said, " You well remember that he summarily decided against an infinite number of worlds, but had doubts about a limited number ; and up to five<sup>a</sup> he conceded a reasonable probability to those who postulated one world to correspond to each element, but, for himself, he kept to one. This seems to be peculiar to Plato, for the other philosophers conceived a fear of plurality,<sup>b</sup> feeling that if they did not limit matter to one world, but went beyond one, an unlimited and embarrassing infinity would at once fasten itself upon them."

" But," said I, " did your far-away friend set a limit to the number of worlds, as Plato did, or did you not go so far as to sound him on this point when you had your interview with him ? "

" Was it not likely," said Cleombrotus, " that on anything touching these matters, if on nothing else, I should be an inquisitive and eager listener, when he so graciously put himself at my disposal and gave me the opportunity ? He said that the worlds are not infinite in number, nor one, nor five, but one hundred and eighty-three,<sup>c</sup> arranged in the form of a triangle,

<sup>a</sup> Cf. Plato, *Timaeus*, 55 c-d ; *Moralia*, 389 F, *supra*, and 430 B, *infra*.

<sup>b</sup> Cf. Aristotle, *De Caelo*, i. 8 (276 a 18).

<sup>c</sup> Cf. Proclus on Plato, *Timaeus*, p. 138 B.