Contrary to what Derrida and others have to say on logocentrism of the Greeks, one of the salient characteristics of ancient Greek tradition, both popular and philosophical, was its deep distrust of the ability of language to express the true order of things. To do justice to the characteristically Greek view of verbal communication or, to be more precise, the lack of verbal communication with the divine, we have to go as far back as the myth of creation.

As distinct from the Judeo-Christian tradition, the Greeks saw the cosmogonic process as proceeding in accordance with the biological pattern or, as M.P. Nilsson put it, “automatically.”1 Rather than having been “created,” the world was conceived of as having been “born,” or “developed,” from a limited number of primary elements in what can be seen as a quasi-evolutionary process. None of the stages of this development, represented as a series of births issuing from perpetual interaction between the male and the female principles, was accompanied by the intervention of a transcendental force. The Greek gods, who did not create the universe but themselves were “born” in the process of its development, were conceived of as immanent to the universe and thus subject to its laws. This naturally rules out any idea of a creator who transcends the universe and therefore is free to dictate its laws. Furthermore, this also rules out the idea of a “divine word” that could precede the act of creation or be involved in it. Nothing even remotely similar to “And God said, Let there be light; and there was light” of the Book of Genesis can be found in Greek sources. As distinct from language, which was conceived of as a social phenomenon, the laws of the universe were seen as pre-social and therefore beyond language. “Necessity,” anankê, and “Destiny,” moira, the supreme forces that ruled the universe and were responsible for its coming into being, were mute.

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In so far as the order of things cannot be expressed in language, it cannot be communicated either. This is why, rather than leading to true knowledge, language can only represent aspects or segments of truth. Accordingly, there is no literary meaning available, and all statements issuing from man’s attempts at communication with the divine are metaphors. In view of this, it is only natural that divine messages delivered through the medium of language are open to misconstruction and that people’s attempts at literally following them as a rule end in disaster.

Consider for example the oracles. On the surface of it, this characteristic Greek institution was precisely the means that made man’s communication with the divine possible. The oracles formed part of the art of divination (*mantikê*), this, as Plato termed it, “art of communion (*koinônia*) between gods and men,” through which “all the intercourse (*homiâlia*) and converse (*dialektoς*) of God with man, whether awake or asleep, is carried on.” It is characteristic, however, that Greek oracular practice did not privilege verbal communication over other ways of communication with the divine. Even more often than through language, the gods’ will was revealed by the casting of lots or by the observation of signs, such as the rustle of the leaves in Zeus’ sacred oak at the famous oracle at Dodona. The interpretation of verbal messages as delivered for example at Delphi was thus not substantially different from the interpretation of non-verbal ones, such as the rustle of leaves at Dodona. In other words, each reading of a divine message, whether verbal or not, would amount to its decoding. This attitude to verbal communication with the divine is epitomized in the following words of Heraclitus: “The lord whose oracle is in Delphi neither speaks out nor conceals, but gives a sign (*sêmainei*)”.

The worst possible thing that could happen in the process of decoding of verbal messages coming from gods was their literal interpretation. Let us consider Herodotus’ account of the oracular response received by the Athenians in the time of the Persian invasion. The response contained, among other things, the following phrase: “Safe shall the wooden wall continue for thee and thy children.” What happened in the Athenian

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3 Cf. Plato, *Phaedrus* 275b: “There was a tradition in the temple of Zeus at Dodona that oaks first gave prophetic utterances. The men of old, far less wise than you sophisticated young men, deemed in their simplicity that if they heard the truth even from ‘oak or rock,’ it was enough.” Tr. B. Jowett – H. Pelliccia.