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RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Riddle Wrapped in a Mystery: The Elusive E at Delphi

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[†]To my parents, Ruth and Jürgen Garstka, who introduced me to Delphi and to so much else.

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Abstract

There has been no dearth, since Plutarch's day at least, of erudite theories about what message the E at Apollo's temple was meant to convey to visitors. Yet no account so far has added up to a truly compelling answer, not for lack of ingenuity, but because the various approaches have tended so strongly towards the sophisticated and artful, rather than the probable. This article will review why the familiar answers are more impressive than convincing, and will propose in their place a much simpler explanation: namely that the E was meant to represent the mysterious itself, reminding pilgrims that they were entering a realm where logos continued to hold sway, to be sure, as the other inscriptions testified, but where the human intellect must leave room for mantic wisdom, and where logical reasoning must be supplemented with contemplation and meditation upon the enigmatic, the hidden, and the ineffable.

I

The enigmatic E that has been intriguing and confounding commentators for 2,000 years or more,[1] was not placed just anywhere: it hung high and in a most conspicuous spot at the gateway to the most revered oracle in the ancient world, at the very navel of the Greek universe.[2]

[1]According to Plutarch (*De E apud Delphos* 3), the first and oldest E at Delphi, made of wood, was called 'the E of the Wise Men', that is to say, the Seven Sages, which might make it as old as the sixth or even seventh century by our reckoning. Yet, while references to the Delphic inscriptions abound in our sources from the classical period, leaving plenty of room for conjecture, the E is never mentioned explicitly there, leaving modern commentators in the uncomfortable position of having to put their trust in what Plutarch reports at a distance of more than half a millennium. The leap of faith that is necessary to lend such venerable traditions enough credence to justify explorations of the sort I shall undertake here does not seem so very great to me; but I admit to the skeptic that I shall have to *assume* that what Plutarch reports is more than a figment of the ancient imagination, without being able to demonstrate it to the satisfaction of the modern scholarly critic.

[2]Where exactly the inscriptions were located remains a matter of debate, but it is said that the E was on prominent display beside the most famous Delphic maxims. Pausanias locates the inscriptions in the *pronaos*, or forecourt, but like Plato he mentions only two, 'Know thyself' and 'Nothing in excess' (Paus.

This pride of place should, then, be the starting point for any convincing effort to understand the intended meaning: whatever it may turn out to be, it must be profound and important enough to merit such a distinguished position. As Plutarch himself wrote, 'It is likely that those who, in the beginning, sought after knowledge of the god … used [the letter] as a token with reference to some other *matters of the highest concern*, and thus adopted it.'[3]

Second, the inscription of the original E was widely attributed to the Seven Sages[4] as part of a core arrangement of exhortations including the famous Γνῶθι σεαυτόν, Μηδὲν ἄγαν, and Ἐγγύα πάρα δ᾽ Ἄτα. Whatever message the E was meant to convey must therefore bear some appropriate relationship, both in form and significance, to these vital truths, the very essence of wisdom as the ancient Greeks conceived it at the time.

Third, if the E is taken to be an abbreviation or symbolic representation, some plausible reason needs to be given why it should be the only inscription not written out like the others, especially if the proposed text is so short that the need to save space cannot explain it. And fourth, if it is assumed that the meaning of the E could be so readily expressed, then some explanation needs to be given for how something so important and easy to convey could possibly be forgotten so completely.

Dissatisfaction with the various explanations on offer is nothing new and has sometimes been expressed rather severely,[5] even unfairly, considering that quite a few of the professed ideas are clever and imaginative, occasionally even brilliant, and often defended rather ingeniously. What none of them accomplish very successfully, however, is to clear the above hurdles and answer the obvious common-sense challenges in a way that would add up to a fully compelling explanation. No wonder, perhaps, that in light of this notable failure, recent scholarship seems to have turned away

10.24; Pl. *Prt*. 343B; cf. Griffiths (1955) 237 on this 'strange' omission). Roscher stresses other sources attesting to the presence of the E (especially a Kallias fragment) and goes furthest in insisting on the prominence of its placement, right in the middle of the entrance to the temple, above and as it were 'at the head' of the other inscriptions, and 'probably quite large' as well (Roscher (1901a) 82, 96; (1901b) 475–8, 486, 489). Plato (*Chrm*. 164D) has been taken to suggest that 'the god's salutation to those who enter the temple' must have been the first thing to catch the visitor's eye (cf. Goettling (1851) 228 and Roscher (1900) 28).

[3]Plut. *De E* 6, italics added for emphasis (unless noted otherwise, translations follow the Loeb editions). Compare Lagercrantz (1901) 414: 'Plutarch is firmly convinced that Apollo wished both to set a riddle to his devotees and to point the way towards its solution by the special position of the E.'

[4]*De E* 3; Paus. 10.24; Pl. *Prt*. 343AB; cf. Roscher (1901b) 474 on corroborating references from Pindar, Euripides, and Kritias. Taking this tradition seriously does not require us to imagine seven historical individuals literally sitting down together and deciding on the E as something to hand down to posterity. What it means is crediting that the ancient Greeks had legitimate reasons for looking upon the E as a transmission that had come down to them from the most respected teachers and wise men of the past, and that it could therefore be taken to express some profound and timeless truth worth pondering. The determined modern sceptic may dismiss all such venerable traditions as mere hearsay; but doing so risks turning the past into a field of bleached bones and rubble, wretched scatterings in grayscale of a life that was once fully and vibrantly coloured, especially around Greek temples (thus a question of principled credulousness, one might say; see my fuller discussion at Pellerin (2021) 196–8, including Donald Kagan's 'I'm credulous by trade and I believe in the higher naïveté'"(p. 198)).

[5]Thus: *fanciful* and *unsatisfactory*, if not altogether *untenable* and *misguided*, and countless other uncharitable characterisations of a similar tendency (cf. Bates (1925) 240; Roscher (1900) 22; Griffiths (1955) 237–8).

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from the mystery of the E altogether, becoming engrossed instead in elaborate disquisitions upon the form and meaning of Plutarch's writing.[6] 'The conundrum remains unsolved', Parke sighed more than eighty years ago: 'Plutarch's treatise enumerated many unconvincing explanations and modern scholarship has added some equally unlikely reasons.'[7] It would take a brave soul to conclude otherwise even today.

II

The Sages' message has not, it seems, been getting through for a long time, and we might pause and ask ourselves why that should be. Were the senders really such inept thinkers and teachers that they had no conception at all of what the recipients might be able to grasp, since the meaning of the E appears not to have been much clearer to their more immediate posterity either?[8]

Before impugning the sagacity of our philosophical forebears quite so readily, perhaps we ought to consider that the blockage may also be found on our end. Is it possible that we are not making enough of an effort to understand the intention behind the symbol, or are we perchance trying too hard? We might at least consider the possibility that our straining after the answer is not availing us much because we keep approaching the problem from the wrong angle, so that our very labours carry us further away from the solution – somewhat in the manner of those cerebral students of Zen who keep presenting their masters with the most carefully crafted dissertations on the meaning of the koan they have been assigned, only to be dismissed from their interviews and sent back to their meditation cells, time and again, because they are missing the point of the exercise, which is not to intellectualise a puzzle that cannot be resolved in so logical a manner, but rather to break through to a different perspective and a new mode of answering altogether.

To make this possibility a little more plausible, let us remember what scant warrant we have for approaching the questions surrounding the oracle at Delphi, including the E itself, from too analytical a perspective – or rather, what persistent warnings we have been given *against* doing so. Thus Plutarch himself made a point of cautioning his readers that Apollo was 'no less a philosopher than a prophet … [and that] it seems only

[6]The most eagerly debated question in and around the scholarly tomes published on the dialogue in recent years seems to be with what exact degree of approbation or humour Plutarch meant to present his teacher's position, or whether perhaps the whole dialogue is after all no more than 'a literary bagatelle' (Lamberton (2015) 305; cf. Müller (2012) 247–8; Obsieger (2013) 19–46, 67; Thum (2013) 1–20, 62; Roskam (2015) 319–20; van der Wiel (2021) 82). Scholarly discussion has taken quite a marked turn, in other words, away from the old question of the E itself and towards more strictly textual interpretations and preoccupations. Such a move may be legitimate, but it cannot be made binding on all, and one may still insist that the older question was more germane and interesting. It would be presumptuous to think one could settle it at this late hour, but quite unobjectionable, surely, to 'put it back on the table' as I do here, in the words of an insightful anonymous reviewer.

[7]Parke (1939) 398.

[8]Thus Hodge (1981) 83–4 (italics added for emphasis): 'Although the E was accorded universal respect as a venerated tradition dating from the sixth century or earlier, it is plain that nobody had the slightest idea what it meant or what it was doing there… *The E does not communicate*, as shown by the fact that no one has ever understood it.'

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natural that the greater part of what concerns the god should be concealed *in riddles*'.[9] In so doing, Plutarch was giving expression, moreover, to a well-established ancient tradition according to which the Delphic deities spoke, through the oracle, 'neither to hide nor to make fully explicit, but to *hint*, in order thereby to rouse the questioner to thought'.[10] After all, the god of logic, order, and harmony, though the undisputed patron of the temple, still shared his inner sanctum with Dionysus and communicated by the tongue of a vapour-inhaling Pythia for whom the very earth had broken open to facilitate her inspirations.[11] Though by no means all pronouncements were opaque, let alone impenetrable, there were enough cases of egregious misinterpretation (the especially famous one by Croesus, for example,[12] or those swirling around Socrates' supposedly superior wisdom[13]) to justify amply the warning that ancient sagacity had seen fit to interpose in the small space that still remained between the questioner and his answer.

The Sphynx of Delphi may greet us, one might say, with her Apollonian head, and that side of her nature is well-represented by an easily recognised letter; but her ease with the logos should not lead us to overlook the rest, the body so to speak, which is much more Dionysian and mysterious.[14] Hidden within the E, in other words, there is a lesson about all that cannot be grasped by reasoning alone, as if the gods of the temple were calling out to their visitors, 'Remember where you are: this is no ordinary place, but a realm of mystery and wonder, a place between the worlds! Heed and honour that

[9]*De E* 2 (italics added for emphasis). Compare Thum (2013) 52, 79–80, 83, on the E as a 'riddle *par excellence*' that remains mysterious even while it prompts reflection and attempts at solution.

[10]Thus Goettling's formulation of a characterisation by Heraclitus (Fragment B93 DK, cf. Goettling (1851) 224, italics added for emphasis).

[11]In the *adyton*, where the Pythia received her vaporous inspiration (cf. Paus. 10.5.7) and gave her answers, there was not only a golden statue of Apollo, but also the ostensible grave of Dionysus (Poulsen (1920) 151). Compare Plutarch's own comment that the share of Dionysus in Delphi 'is no less than that of Apollo' (*De E* 9). For a description of how violently the priestesses could be affected by their visions, see Plut. *De def. or.* 51.

[12]That is, his failure to consider that the great empire he would destroy by waging war on the Persians might turn out to be his own (Hdt. 1.53–54; note, though, how much better Croesus did with the more cryptic replies he had received to his first and third inquires, cf. Hdt. 1.47, 1.55).

[13]Whereas the Pythia had done no more than give a negative reply to whether anyone was wiser than Socrates, presumably meaning to put a damper on such fruitless speculations and to stress the limitations of all human wisdom, the way the answer was widely interpreted made it look, much more provocatively, as if Socrates had been declared superior, with all the familiar consequences. Socrates thought it was a rash question to ask the oracle ('you know how impetuous Chaerephon was'); the scanty terms of the Pythia's response suggest that she would have agreed (Pl. *Ap.* 20E, 21A, 23A, etc.).

[14]There is no need to follow all that Nietzsche read into this distinction. It was already well-established in German literature when he gave it his famous treatment (see Baeumer (1965) and (1967)), and the argument here requires only the first step – the not very controversial contrast between Apollo the god of logos and rationality, as in the well-ordered music of the lyre, against the ecstatic flutes and drums of Dionysus, the most enigmatic, mantic, uncontrollable, and elusive of the gods (OCD[3] (1999) 122 (Apollo), 479 (Dionysus)). That this contrast does not imply complete opposition, but a tension between 'spheres' that 'intersect' and can exist peacefully side by side (Suárez (2021) esp. 58, 61–2, 76–7) is an important dimension of how I see Delphi as well. In other words, one does not have to consider the two divinities entirely distinct to use them as twin metaphors for distinguishing the great daylight dominions of what is readily mappable by language and rational conceptualisation from the unbounded shadowlands of what eludes such definitional delineations.

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mystery if you want to benefit from it!'[15] Not that human wisdom loses its value here – hence the other inscriptions beside which the E is set – but be mindful as you cross this threshold that you are now entering the domain of a *mantic* wisdom that cannot be understood by human categories alone.[16] If, in full view of all that points here towards the inexpressible, the ineffable, you are still unable to catch any glimpse of realities not readily reducible to the diminutive dimensions of our human logic; if, that is, you cannot even for a moment look at the E *laterally* rather than literally, not just straight at it but as it were *through* the apparent and down to layers of meaning that come into view out of the corner of your eye but cannot be easily put into words; then you will have missed the point, the distinctive magic, of the place. So we might imagine the gods of Delphi exhorting their votaries then, and calling out to us still.

III

What is probably the most popular scholarly explanation of the past hundred years – presented in variations by Bates, Berman and Losada, and Hodge – views the E as being connected in some manner to the goddess Earth, who by Pausanias's and other traditional accounts was widely credited with hosting the original oracle.[17] The inscription on the omphalos of which Bates made so much was always a rather precarious basis for Gaia's claims and no longer finds much favour among scholars,[18] but the case for her ownership of the E has been reformulated by treating E as equivalent to ΓΕ – thus a ligature or monogram in which the gamma has been invisibly superimposed upon the E (Berman and Losada), or else what remained after the Γ fell off (Hodge).[19]

The superimposition theory is certainly ingenious but, beyond the wish to uphold Earth's claims, there is nary a shred of evidence to make it plausible,[20] and the same goes, with aggravation, for Hodge's remarkable account of how ΓΕ supposedly got mutilated. Letters that make up displays at the most sacred human sites are at all times in the public gaze; they are not simply allowed to fall off and remain unrepaired![21] Of course we can imagine rarefied scenarios in which a letter might perhaps have been struck by lightning or removed by an animal in a way suggestive of divine intent, hence left unrestored; but such a prodigious event would have been widely noted and, in the

[15] We cannot be sure that the E was found only in Apollo's temple at Delphi; all we can say is that it was never mentioned in any other context. The exclusivity would make sense though, on the interpretation offered here, because the E is *not* taken as a generic religious formula such as 'Thou art', 'Come on in and be not afraid', or 'Keep a reverent silence', as other commentators have proposed.

[16] Compare Goettling (1851) 224, 232.

[17] Paus. 10.5.5.

[18] Bates (1925) 241–4, 246 as against Hodge (1981) 83; cf. Bousquet's 'devastating article' (1951). Also Berman and Losada (1975) 115.

[19] Berman and Losada (1975) 116–17, Hodge (1981) 84.

[20] On the technical point of whether such a contraction by superimposition is consistent with known Greek practice, see Hodge (1981) 84 as against Losada and Morgan (1984) 231–2; but the deeper problem here is one of common sense, not linguistic artistry.

[21] 'Letters do not accidentally fall off together', Hodge admits himself (Hodge (1981) 85); but what they do even less, especially in such sacred displays, is to fall down and remain on the ground with nobody bothering to pick them up and restore them to their place of honour – or at least leave a trace in the historical record about why it was thought appropriate *not* to do so!

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absence of a definite tradition to that effect, it is clasping at straws to simply posit it for its convenience.

Even if one were willing to disregard such qualms for the sake of argument, it would not help the proposed theory much. For this house of the gods had most definitely and irrevocably changed owners, and however magnanimous the current proprietor (great scion that he was of the latest and most powerful family of gods), there is no reason why tributes to previous divine residents, no matter how respectable and ancient, should have been paid in so prominent a location, rather than more quietly on the side. Besides, what need was there in the first place for grand pronouncements about an ancestral tradition that everyone knew about? If such a crude identification of divine ownership by signpost were at least combined with a call to some kind of appropriately reverential act or attitude, it would be one thing. But wasting so signal and central an opportunity for directing the devotions of the faithful on nothing more than the invocation of a god's name, and not even that of the current proprietor but an archaic one, would bespeak no very lofty conception of the divine.

IV

The interpretation advanced most forcefully by Plutarch himself,[22] around the suggestive force of the letter's sound taken to mean 'Thou art'[23] – or as Poulsen put it, 'Apollo's mystical letter that contained the believer's assurance of the god's existence'[24] – may seem to improve matters at least insofar as the god is not only named, but his exalted and timeless being affirmed in a gesture of pious reverence. This too, however, is open to grave objections: for to make pronouncements upon a god's being is hardly man's place[25] and, what is more, consistency with the other inscriptions would

[22]Despite the strict and conservative character of local hieratic lore (Roscher (1901b) 472) and Plutarch's status as an official at Delphi (Bates (1925) 241; cf. Plut. *An seni* 17), he apparently could not discover anything conclusive about the meaning of the E beyond 'the commonly accepted opinion that the guides give', namely that only the *name* of the letter had any significance (*De E* 4).

[23]Strictly speaking, the Plutarch who appears in the dialogue, being at the time in the throes of an immoderate enthusiasm for mathematics, takes a numerological position alongside his brother (*De E* 7–8); but Plutarch the later author seems to present the account of his teacher Ammonius as the most conclusive (cf. Roscher (1901b) 472), not least because if the numerological card were played, it would need to say seven, not five (*De E* 17–21; see also the many references at Roscher (1901a) 91). Boys-Stones's argument for the *De E* as a dramatisation of the Platonic ascent from mere opinion, via teacherly guidance, to truth no longer taken on authority but justified by immediate experience (Boys-Stones (2021) 150–1, 158), is one to which I am personally quite sympathetic; but my argument here is not concerned with Plutarch's own educational journey, intriguing as it may be, nor with the power of the Platonic dialectic and the possibility of witnessing for oneself the Sun of the Good, the True, and the Beautiful, but with the intended meaning of the E at Delphi, which looks more mysterious and less epiphanic to me, limited as I am perhaps by my own continuing proximity to the ways of the Cave.

[24]*De E* 17; Poulsen (1920) 149. Compare also *De E* 21: 'As a sort of antithesis to "Thou art" stands the admonition "Know thyself", and then again it seems, in a manner, to be in accord therewith, for the one is an utterance addressed in awe and reverence to the god as existent through all eternity, the other is a reminder to mortal man of his own nature and the weakness that besets him.'

[25]Goettling discerns a 'distasteful familiarity' in the proposed exchange and argues that such pronouncements upon his own divine being would be inappropriate even coming from the mouth of the deity himself, let alone from his human devotees (Goettling (1851) 237). Nor is it altogether obvious why any god, if he really be one, should be so keen on the assurance that he does indeed exist, as if the matter

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require that this one too be understood as directed *from god to man*, not the other way around.[26]

Thus Goettling first, and later Schultz, took Plutarch's idea and reversed its direction,[27] now interpreting it not as directed from man to god, but from Apollo to man, as if to call out,

> 'Thou art', that is, you are a creature endowed with reason and self-consciousness, a *human being*. [The E] is therefore a true precursor to the famous *cogito ergo sum*…, capturing also the essence of the Sphynx's riddle…, hinting at the immortality of the best part of the being it addresses … and as it were awakening the spirit and the conscience of man with a word about his subjectivity.[28]

Edifying though one may find this turn of thought, it suffers from two debilitating weaknesses. First, it would 'destroy completely' the harmony with the other maxims that Goettling himself stressed,[29] by assuming a simple present tense instead of an imperative; and second, even more seriously, the Greek, taken in this way, by affirming no more than *that man is*, leaves it entirely to the interpreter's discretion to fill in the substance of *what exactly man is taken to be*.[30] Everything will depend, in other words, on what one expects the results of man's self-inquiries to be, and so it is hard to see what has been accomplished by the E beyond pointing back to the Γνῶθι.

V

Wilhelm Roscher emphasised particularly that any solid interpretation of the E must yield an oracular imperative, a precept, or a divine commandment to match the other inscriptions[31] – even if it may turn out to be as gentle as Roscher's own welcoming exhortation for the hesitant devotees to step forth without fear. One cannot help being charmed by such kindly solicitude for the pious shy and their reverent 'trembling and

could be in any doubt, or why the faithful should be thought so dependent on reassuring themselves in the same manner, as if they could not be quite sure of their faith without making noisy proclamations.

[26]Roscher calls the Ammonian interpretation not only 'rational' and 'pretty', but *geistvoll* (high praise quite untranslatable into any other language), though nonetheless improbable, nay, 'unthinkable', because it would be the only case in which man addresses the god, and not the other way around (Roscher (1900) 23–4). Compare Griffiths (1955) 238: 'Whatever the E means, its presence in the *pronaos* of the temple near the inscriptions Γνῶθι σεαυτόν and Μηδὲν ἄγαν … implies that it is, like these statements, an injunction or exhortation made by the god to man rather than a greeting or request made by man to the god.'

[27]'Out-Plutarching Plutarch', according to Griffiths (1955) 238.

[28]Goettling (1851) 236. Schultz's variation on the same theme is less elaborate but comes to much the same thing (Schultz (1866) 215): 'It is god calling out to man: *thou art*, that is, you are a finite but still a thinking, self-conscious being … [so] act as such, as a thinking being endowed with reason.'

[29]Goettling himself protested vociferously against 'tearing this *Thou art* out of the context of the other maxims altogether', by understanding it as something addressed by man to the god, rather than the other way around, as with the other inscriptions (Goettling (1851) 236).

[30]Roscher (1900) 25.

[31]For 'precepts', see Roscher (1900) 22; for the inscriptions as commandments making up a 'hexalogue … that approaches the Mosaic decalogue in dignity and ethical content', see Roscher (1900) 38–9 (cf. Roscher (1901b) 477, Goettling (1851) 247).

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wavering' over the threshold of their holiest of holies.[32] The clever but rather strained philological foundations upon which Roscher builds his argument have not attracted many other partisans, however.[33] The interpretation of εἶ that he proposes has been criticised by some for not having a very natural ring in Greek,[34] while to others the need for abbreviation does not appear sufficiently evident.[35]

Meanwhile Roscher's argument for how such a clear and straightforward message could have ever been forgotten in plain view of so many pilgrims – namely that after the great fire of 548 BCE it remained unseen for so long that its meaning became obscure – is perhaps the weakest part of his case.[36] Such breaks in tradition can occur, of course, but only if a sacred object is kept from view for several generations; otherwise the living memory of priests and visitors alike will preserve the original meaning. That so hallowed an object should be allowed to disappear without a trace, for decades on end, or more likely a full century before it might be forgotten, cannot just be supposed in the absence of any direct evidence.

The trepidations that Roscher imagined so vividly, and for which he invokes the doubtful testimony of Epictetus,[37] may have been very real in many cases; but if so, would the power of a single syllable bidding them enter really have sufficed for soothing them? The call to come on in, by itself, need not even be reassuring, and there are many settings where it would further unsettle quaking knees not steady them.[38] Nor is it obvious that we must imagine the typical answer-seeker as quite so timid a soul, and not rather a robust traveller amidst plenty of hardy hustling and bustling around the

[32]Roscher (1900) 27, (1901b) 479–80.

[33]To get his explanation off the ground, Roscher must interpret the E as being pronounced with a true diphthong, which would only be the case in the Corinthian alphabet. His spirited case for just such a connection with old Corinth (Roscher (1901b) 480–5) has not met with much approbation (cf. Lagercrantz (1901) 418–19, Babbitt (1936) 195–7).

[34]Roscher cites his own correspondence with a 'sharp-witted and outstandingly learned professor' who had expressed his concern as to whether the intended meaning would not have been more probably expressed by a 'less awkward, abrupt, and easily misunderstood' word of encouragement (Roscher (1901a) 83). The solution to the riddle proposed by said colleague – to take the E for a stonemason's mark that became a revered symbol by accident – is as amusing and original as it is unconvincing, because it would require a most implausible period of oblivion during which no practitioner of the stonecutting craft ever saw fit to point out the obvious. As a practical joke by the masons, or a scholarly prank, this account would be unbeatable; as a serious explanation, less so.

[35]Roscher refers to other welcoming inscriptions, such as the χαῖρε or *Salve!* on the thresholds of ancient houses (Roscher (1900) 27, (1901a) 86), and we might add the comparable doormat motifs in our day. It is surely significant, however, that these messages are precisely *not* abbreviated because they are directed at visitors who are unfamiliar with the environment and therefore need reassuring in unmistakable terms.

[36]Roscher (1901a) 87–8.

[37]*Enchiridion* 32.2. I am not convinced that Epictetus meant to tell us how particularly prone the pilgrims were to fits of trembling at the temple. His point was that at Delphi or anywhere else, we can stand before the gods fearlessly and confidently only if we first leave behind the imperious promptings of desire and aversion.

[38]If only the E could be made to yield a more unambiguous 'Do not be afraid', it would have an easily recognisable religious ring (over 300 repetitions in the Bible, it is said) and the notion of abbreviating it might perhaps gain credence by reverse analogy with the Lambda that the Lacedemonians embossed on their shields to *terrify* their foes. Then again, easy visibility is much more requisite in battle than in more contemplative settings, and while terror can be struck at a glance, quieting it is commonly a much more involved and less easily abbreviated process.

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temple[39] – as one may surmise from Pausanias's description of shepherds grazing their flocks nearby, or locals such as Plutarch and his companions in the famous dialogue taking their seats and holding their discussions in the immediate vicinity.[40] The general hawking and gawking around the sacred precinct was probably quite unlike the decorum that we tend to expect of such hallowed settings, and perhaps closer to the incessant hubbub that the contemporary visitor might discover around the Mahabodi Temple in Bodhgaya, to give just one salient modern example.

For all the ingenuity with which Roscher weaves together the thin threads of reported tradition into a seamless composition between the columns,[41] one cannot help wondering whether so perfect an arrangement (into two tidy hexameter series, no less[42]) is really probable for a temple tableau in ancient times, and whether a more incremental and haphazard accretion of elements would not have been a lot likelier. Indeed the very centrality of the E to the entrance hall (as Roscher envisages it) ends up undermining the structural soundness of the account: for in the setup that Roscher has in mind, the letter is not just an especially salient feature in a series of inscriptions, no mere *primus inter pares* among the *grammata*, but rather the indisputable focal point of the whole display.[43] Whatever merits Roscher's 'Come on in' may have as part of a scholarly *tour de force*, the meaning he proposes for the letter simply does not match the unique prominence that he himself insists on.[44]

Even if the abbreviation could be invested with all the significance of Jesus's 'Come to me'[45] (which would be granting a great deal), still it would not stand out enough among the other pronouncements to justify its architectural distinction, any more than that one Gospel phrase can be said to rise markedly above and beyond the others. Besides, even conceding the utmost to this tenuous line of reasoning, no one has ever claimed that Apollo's soothing words were meant to convey anything so momentous as an offer of salvation if only the glad tidings be accepted. Thus what finally stands out most about Roscher's impressive Delphic vision is not so much the E itself but the refinement of the reasoning and how cleverly the construction is fortified and defended against what look like nearly unanswerable challenges from the start.[46] As an argument about the Delphic pronouncements as an ensemble, it

[39]Cf. Plut. *De prof. virt.* 81DE. Griffiths wonders whether the likelier concern of temple officials would not have been with safeguarding a suitably reverential attitude among ordinary visitors (Griffiths (1955) 241), rather than with encouraging those of a more delicate sensitivity.

[40]Paus. 10.5.7, *De E* 1.

[41]Compare Goettling (1851) 224–5 and Roscher (1900) 27, 38–40, (1901a) 96, (1901b) 476–7, with references, for why the maxims must have been located on the columns, not the walls, and for some more specific ideas about the arrangement.

[42]Goettling (1851) 228, 234–5, Roscher (1900) 29–33. As both series began with an E, at least in these two ingenious reconstructions, 'the E could be taken for a summation of the Delphic teachings as a whole, thus the essence of Apollonian ethics and itself something holy' (Goettling (1851) 237).

[43]See especially the graphic at Roscher (1901a) 96, but also (1900) 28 and (1901b) 475–8, 486, 489.

[44]The sequence as Roscher envisaged it runs as follows (Roscher (1901b) 489): '*Come on in*, follow the commandments of the gods and the laws, and make best use of your time! Know thyself, cultivate moderation, and avoid dangerous promises!' Logically the welcome, represented by the E, must come first; but surely that is about it in terms of precedence in this series.

[45]See Roscher (1901a) 87 with reference to Matthew 11:28.

[46]Lagercrantz rather invited pointed rejoinders by the strident way in which he introduced his interpretation, calling it '*ganz einwandfrei*' (flawless or unanswerable, Lagercrantz (1901) 411). To his credit, he

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is a remarkable work of art, but the role of the E, advertised as the lead, ends up looking a bit part, and the production as a whole cannot help coming off as a little contrived.

VI

Among the modern scholarly accounts, it is Griffiths' that does the most convincing job of clearing at least our first two tests. The appealing idea that the E was an abbreviation for Εὐφήμει, enjoining a suitably reverent silence and 'general religious attitude' upon visiting pilgrims (the rough equivalent, perhaps, of signs reminding meditators at a contemporary meditation centre to 'keep noble silence and cultivate mindfulness'), does indeed look 'most apposite'[47] – not only in its general spirit and orientation, but also in how well it fits the location and occasion, and how it parallels in form and complements in meaning the other exhortations right beside it.

Unfortunately, for all its attractiveness in other respects, Griffiths' account does not fare nearly so well with the third and fourth tests. Why the temple at Delphi alone should use a sign in this style is not even the biggest problem,[48] nor why something so elementary would have required saying. What weighs much more heavily upon Griffiths' theory is the question why so very short and straightforward an exhortation would not have been written out like the others. What need was there for abbreviating the briefest inscription of all, and why should its meaning have subsequently sunk into oblivion when it was so very clear, so very simple, and so very fitting?[49]

The likeliest solution to the puzzle may have eluded so many learned labourers because it is so deceptively simple. The E is not shorthand for a sound or anything else that could have easily been made more explicit – or if it were, the burden would be on anyone who argues in this vein to make a compelling case for why the message required such abbreviation at the risk of being misconstrued and eventually forgotten. In default of such an argument, and in light of the above difficulties with the other interpretations, accomplished as they may be, it seems safest to assume that

sought to establish as robust a foundation for his theory as possible, and to do without any fancy constructions. The trouble, alas, is that by his own admission, he engages in a process of elimination that 'truly does not leave much to choose from' (pp. 419–20): *He said* remains as the putative meaning of the E in default of better options, and invites the question just what is gained thereby. So now we have been duly reminded that the inscriptions so prominently displayed at Apollo's uniquely famous temple can be attributed to none other than … Apollo! Truly, it is not much. As a farewell salute to departing pilgrims, perhaps for the purpose of putting some kind of seal on the oracle's pronouncements, such a message would not have been very necessary, but at least not out of place. Yet the arrangement of the temple entrance was clearly such that the E *greeted* visitors, and a redundant reminder of who was speaking would be little more than an inexplicable waste of sacred space. (What is indeed impeccable about Lagercrantz's article, and still makes it well worth reading, is the beautifully expressive German in which it was written, by a Swede.)

[47]Griffiths (1955) 243–4.

[48]Griffiths (1955) 244–5.

[49]The scarcity of space that Griffiths invokes seems a little feeble when it comes to a single word. Griffiths himself raises the question of why the meaning he proposes should have been forgotten and blames the 'all too familiar procedure that elaborates an original simplicity with the mystical sophistication of a later age' (Griffiths (1955) 244). He may be right; but his account remains open to the countercharge that he is himself deploying the equally familiar procedure of imposing a modern simplicity on the mystical sophistication of an earlier age.

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the E was meant to be nothing more and nothing less than a representation of the enigmatic itself, thus a symbol for that which cannot be readily or reliably reduced to the parameters of human reasoning.

The inherent complexities of the setting, an outwardly Apollonian temple with heavy Dionysian undercurrents running beneath (crack in the earth and all), cannot be insisted upon too much. For while the other prominent inscriptions covered in outline what reason can teach man – self-knowledge, prudence, ethical conduct[50] – that worldly aspect of things was only one side of the temple equation and urgently required a supplement. The E, or something like it, was plainly needed in order to encompass the other, dimmer and darker,[51] more mysterious and mystical side[52] – this not by way of honouring the older gods as against the newer, but in order to reflect symbolically the inherent tension between that which one can reason one's way into and that which requires at least an element of inspiration or revelation such as the Pythia personified.

VII

We are left, then, with the question why the Seven Sages should have settled on the E, of all available symbols, as a fitting representation of *the everyday meeting the enigmatic, and the ephemeral touching the eternal*. It is a question that probably cannot be settled, only speculated about; but a starting point for such reflections is visible even in the terms, suggesting that in the English too (a remote relative of ancient Greek, granted, but still part of the Indo-Germanic tree of languages) there seems to be something about the E that suggests both the unexceptional and the extraordinary.

Vowels are not spelled out in all systems of writing, of course, but sometimes left for the reader to supply, as in Arabic or Hebrew; but in the Indo-Germanic family they are, by their very nature, highly visible and vital connectors – and the E in particular forms a kind of ubiquitous cement spread so thickly throughout the brickwork of these languages that it might almost be called their common denominator, or even *the* essential

[50]Strictly speaking, only an exhortation to heed the dangers of standing surety; but behind this, an implied call to make no promises that one might not be able to fulfill (cf. Goettling (1851) 243), which in turn implies that promises must be kept, along with the other basic ethical precepts upon which human societies have generally agreed. (Roscher points out at (1901a) 99–100 that pilgrims would have often vowed gifts to the gods; that many contracts were entered upon and deposited at Delphi for greater sanctity; and that loans were frequently made available at the temple for those who had guarantors – all turning on the sanctity of promise-keeping.)

[51]Taking 'darkness' in the sense Goettling employs to characterise oracular pronouncements sacred to 'the mantic god' and perhaps only fully intelligible to him (Goettling (1851) 232, 243).

[52]According to Xen. *Mem.* 1.1.6–9, where the grasp of our ordinary human intelligence and learning suffices to make plain our duties and interests, there it would be impious to consult an oracle; but so much remains hidden from us, according to Socrates, that he often directed his friends to consult the oracle on whether something should be undertaken or not. 'No one, he would say, who wishes to manage a house or city with success, no one aspiring to guide the helm of state aright, can afford to dispense with aid from above… To suppose that all these matters lay within the scope of human judgment, to the exclusion of the preternatural, was preternatural folly.' (Trans. H. J. Dakyns. Compare also *Anabasis* 3.1.5–7 on Xenophon's own consultations with Socrates about whether to join Cyrus or not, and, more generally, Epict. *Ench.* 32.3.)

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letter.[53] One does not need to consider the Sages 'proto-linguists'[54] to think that they might have noticed, or grasped intuitively, the predominance of the letter – no more than one needs to be a professional scholar today to notice that the E on one's keyboard seems to be getting worn out disproportionately. Thus the choice would have been, if not an altogether obvious then at least a very plausible one for early philosophers wishing to express their fascination with the power of language, and to represent the intersection of what is knowable and expressible, the logos, with what lies beyond.[55]

Given how much, more than 2,500 years of usage later, we take writing for granted, it is easy to overlook how recent and remarkable an invention it would have still seemed from the perspective of the Seven Sages – and not only writing in general, but the alphabet in particular. The astounding discovery that everything intelligible could be reduced to only two dozen characters was made, if not by the Sages themselves, then in their immediate intellectual vicinity, and it had not yet lost, we may assume, any of its freshness and wonder. To their minds its peculiar dual nature would have still been much more present than it perhaps is to ours, though we too might marvel if we paused to ponder the matter: a contrivance that was almost certainly invented for mundane purposes, written contracts most probably (hence the Phoenician connection), could also be employed to signify the greatest mysteries! There was magic still in the alphabet, one might say, and surely it is not such a stretch (though it would be impossible to prove) that the Sages might have thought it very apt to single out the most widely used letter to represent both the expressible and the inexpressible at the same time.

VIII

The Sages would have done better, it might be said at last, to settle on a less ambiguous symbol instead, maybe their version of something like Wallis's infinity loop, or a kind of 'cosmic hieroglyph' such as some interpreters have proposed as their solution to the riddle.[56] Yet a more specific symbol of this sort would have done little to capture the dual nature of an Apollonian temple also sacred to Dionysus – the home of a mantic no less than a philosophical god – with a warning implied that while prophecies must perforce be rendered in terms comprehensible to human ears, nothing would be more

[53]E and A are the most common letters in all Indo-European languages, and the latter was clearly unsuitable for the Sages' purposes because of its strong associations with beginnings. I and O not only occur less frequently, but their representations are also too simple to suggest mystery and too easily misconstrued as a mere line and a circle, respectively, or as a representation of endings in the case of the Omega. (The vocalic Eta can be disregarded here because it was introduced only after the lifetime of the Seven Sages, by Simonides of Ceos (556–468 BCE), according to traditional accounts.)

[54]As per a gentle chiding from one benevolent reader.

[55]As the 'old master' put it at roughly the same time in China, the Tao (for us) can be named and talked about; but the Tao in itself, the timeless Tao, cannot. As it is always manifest so it is ever hidden, and both are, behind the apparent certainty, deeply mysterious (cf. *Tao Te Ching*, chapter 1).

[56]Thus the interpretation advanced by Cook and Demangel, whereby the most familiar of letters acquires all the glamour of 'a cosmic hieroglyph comparable to the Egyptian' (Demangel (1937) 427), representing nothing less than 'the sky upborne by its central and lateral pillars' (Cook (1925) 178). The trouble with these highly creative solutions is that our E must first be flipped on its side – and even then the resemblance to the Egyptian equivalents is marred by the inconvenient detail that the latter boast *four* pillars instead of three, topped with a roof that is *not* just another line.

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unwise than to take away too literal a reading of whatever a pilgrim had received from the hand of Apollo and the mouth of the Pythia.

A line of argument introduced by Diels in 1910 would likewise have us take the E symbolically, but in a much more deflected manner: we are to believe that it originated not as an abbreviated aphorism or a mere letter at all, but as a votive offering, a key, which then came to be represented by a symbol and was subsequently misconstrued.[57] Dornseiff echoed Diels's view in 1923, only adding, with equal brevity, that the symbol from which the E was supposedly derived might have once represented a miniature temple, not a key.[58] Guarducci, finding herself still 'charmed', half a century later, not only by the question in general but by Diels's solution more particularly,[59] makes every effort to sustain it by offering a much more elaborate rationale for the key-hypothesis than the originator himself.[60] What stands in her way, however, is a key design so crude that it amounts to little more than an indeterminate object with three equal prongs, of which human ingenuity has devised many, for mundane and ritual uses alike, especially if the handle or base is not decisive.[61] The human imagination alone sets limits to the possibilities in this direction, and what is more, the association between *keys* and a particularly important religious site is so close for us not because of any strong Greek antecedents, but because of the keys of St Peter, as Guarducci herself recognises.[62] She makes a valiant defence, in other words, but in the end there is just not enough to go on.[63] What this whole school of interpretation fails to establish, moreover, is why the E, if it had such a simple meaning, should alone have been included among inscriptions with much more philosophical and urgent messages to the viewer.[64]

For the interpretation proposed here, by contrast, the E itself was never what mattered most, nor the reasons why the Sages would have chosen it over other possible

[57] In just a few lines, Diels noted the supposedly 'great resemblance' between an 'archaic E' and the kind of *balanos*-key that was used in very ancient locks, and left the matter at that (cf. Diels (1912) 214, (1914) 46–8).

[58] Dornseiff (1925) 23. The connection made by Fries with Sumerian inscriptions where the E supposedly stood for a house or a temple (Fries (1930) 344) has not found many followers. Writing in Latin in 1930 may not have helped his popular appeal, but there is also a problem analogous to what he charges Lagercrantz with. If the god had already spoken, Fries argues (p. 343), then what more was there to be sought? Fair enough; but on a similar point of redundancy, what need could there have been to put up a sign saying 'temple' at a site that nobody could have possibly mistaken for anything else?

[59] Guarducci (1983) 103, 107–8.

[60] Guarducci (1983) 109–12.

[61] Even a cursory consideration of the matter yields many such objects: sundry forks and tridents, simple combs, candelabras, or even the tripod on which the Pythia took her seat, which, simplified and represented in two dimensions, might also yield an E-shape – so long as the inconvenient orientation can be safely disregarded, as interpretations in this general school tend to assume rather freely (compare illustrations 1–3 at Comoth (1995) 13–15 as well as illustrations 4–7 at Comoth (1998) 14–17).

[62] Guarducci (1983) 109, 111.

[63] See also Griffiths (1955) 240.

[64] A consideration that also dooms, all linguistic scruples aside, Lanzani's otherwise intriguing idea that the E might stand for *Helios*, that is to say, Apollo (Lanzani (1915) 107). Once again, as with Fries (see note above), what need was there to advertise Apollo in his own temple? And even if that objection could somehow be met, why would the E appear on a par with other inscriptions of a much more philosophical tendency? Comoth reads *Hestia* instead of Helios and arrives by flights of erudition that I am not always able to follow at a destination not so very distant from mine, 'the revealed-concealed mystical E within the grand edifice of speculation and reflection' (Comoth (1998) 11; cf. (1995) 12–17).

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marks of the inscrutable. What they were after, these grandfathers of philosophy and seasoned contemplators of riddles, was not so much the answers we might give, as getting us to think as widely and deeply as possible about the nature of questioning itself. That a conclusive solution still eludes us more than a hundred generations later may be frustrating for us, but one could also take it as evidence for just how well the Sages chose their symbol.[65]

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[65]Compare Hodge's 'enigma that has defeated ancient and modern commentators alike' (Hodge (1981) 82) and Babbitt's musings about philosophers 'unwilling to face the unknowable' and therefore 'searching for an explanation of the unexplainable' (Babbitt (1936) 194).

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