One Man’s Parmenides


Jean Frère’s slim volume is made up of ten chapters of commentary, a plain Greek text (occasional angular brackets, whose origin is unexplained, but no apparatus and no indication of the authors who quote the fragments), a French translation and a modest bibliography. Seven of the ten chapters (one now modified) have already been printed elsewhere. The text and translation are adapted from the text and translation published some years ago by Vrin.¹

‘Le point crucial de la doctrine parménidienne consiste assurément avant tout dans les affirmations répétées de l’unité …’ (p. 7). An auspicious beginning if, as he would seem to do, Frère refers to Parmenides’ own words. In the surviving fragments there is only one reference specifically to the ‘unity’ of being (fr. 8.6). To find even a single ‘repetition’, we should have to collapse the distinction between being ‘one’ (v. 6: ἕν) and being ‘alone’ or ‘unique’ (v. 4: μοῦνον). Otherwise, despite the bravado (‘assurément avant tout’), the solitary ‘affirmation de l’unité’ (fr. 8.6) is nowhere repeated in the extant fragments. The friend and critic can only hope that this is a starting hiccup, and not a sign of things to come in the pages that follow (pp. 15-20), where Parmenides’ ‘one’ being will supposedly be shown to be both ‘non-spatial’ and ‘non-temporal’.

In order to grasp ‘le caractère non spatial de l’Être’ (p. 16), we are told to begin by envisaging ‘comme une structure d’ordre spatial de l’Être’, before eliminating the contradiction by means of what Frère calls a ‘transposition’ (p. 19). The raw material of a ‘transposition’ is provided by a series of images, starting with a gigantic atom (‘on peut songer à un atome colossal’) and ending with the romantic writer’s stock-in-trade, a sunset (‘on peut encore songer à l’image d’un soleil couchant’). The sunset, provided it has been duly ‘transposé’, will lead to a ‘quasi lieu’ that has been not only ‘transposé’ but ‘transfiguré’, and is therefore able to harbour a ‘quasi corps’ endowed with a ‘figure’ and a ‘structure’ that are ‘transcendées’.

¹) Études sur Parménide, ‘publiées sous la direction de Pierre Aubenque’, 2 tomes, t. i, Le poème de Parménide, Texte, traduction, essai critique, ‘par Denis O’Brien en collaboration avec Jean Frère pour la traduction française’, t. ii, Problèmes d’interprétation (Paris, Vrin, 1987). The translation into French was a collaborative effort by Jean Frère and myself. I had no hand in nor, I am happy to say, any foreknowledge of the revised text and translation included in the volume under review.

© Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, 2013 DOI: 10.1163/18725473-12341252
'Transposé', 'transfiguré', 'transcendé': is the repeated prefix any more than a device for making the words of the poem mean whatever the modern commentator wants them to mean? When the Stranger of Plato’s *Sophist* quotes verses where Parmenides’ one being, in addition to comparison with a sphere, is specifically said to be ‘stretched out equally from the centre in all directions’ (*Soph* 244 E 3-5 = *fr.* 8.43-5), he pretty clearly takes the object so described to be spatially extended. He is almost certainly right. The conception of a being that is truly non-spatial, not to be found in any ‘place’ and without extension, is nowhere explicitly attested before the *Timaeus* (52 A 8-B 5). It will be a commonplace in the pages of the Neoplatonists. But that is no good reason for crediting Parmenides with a watered-down version of the same concept by appealing to atoms and sunsets, however heavily transmogrified.2

The timeless being of the *Timaeus* is again a warning that the ‘one’ of Parmenides is perhaps not as timeless as Frère thinks it should be. Plato excludes the temporal adverb ‘now’ from the being that neither ‘was’ nor ‘will be’ (*Tim* 37 E 3-38 B 5). Parmenides doesn’t: ‘It was not at one time nor will it be, since it is now…’ (*fr.* 8.5-6). Neoplatonic commentators rewrote the verse to exclude the ‘now’. Frère, in aiming, as they do, at a ‘one’ that is both ‘eternal’ and ‘timeless’ (‘intemporel’), keeps the ‘now’, but adds what would seem to be intended as a warning, or perhaps a correction. The adverb ‘ne désigne pas ici une période plus ou moins longue, intermédiaire entre un passé et un présent’ (p. 18 n. 5 = p. 153).

Well no, of course not. But how puzzling. Whoever could have thought it did? Answer: my own poor self. The words quoted conclude Frère’s criticism of my attempt at explaining Parmenides’ two uses of the same temporal adverb (*νῦν*), once in *fr.* 8, to describe ‘what is’, and once in *fr.* 19, to describe the world we see around us. Although the adverb is the same in the two places, Parmenides is at pains to mark the difference between ‘what is now’, in the singular, unborn and imperishable (*fr.* 8), and things ‘that are now’, in the plural, all of which came into being in the past, and will come to an end at some time in the future (*fr.* 19). My attempt at explaining both the repetition of the adverb and the difference of context may or may not have been successful. That is not for me to judge. But rest assured, dear reader, that neither the words nor the thought that my critic would

21 Frère’s ‘atome colossal’ is seemingly a reminiscence of the ‘world-sized atom’ attributed to Democritus by Aetius (i 12.6). Aetius’ atom would be a particularly unsuitable candidate for ‘transposition’ into a non-spatial being, since it is almost certainly (so at least I have sought to show elsewhere) the result of a misunderstanding, the assumption that endless differences of shape would require an endless multiplication of parts and a corresponding increase in size. Take away the multiplication of parts leading to differences of shape, and what would be left? A Democritean atom, too small to be seen.
seem to ascribe to me are mine. Do the words Frère has chosen even express a thought? Whether applied to a world of change (fr. 19) or to a world that is changeless (fr. 8), what could it possibly mean for there to be a ‘now’ that is prior to the present and yet not in the past (‘intermédiaire entre un passé et un présent’)?

‘Transposed’ sunsets and a ‘now’ suspended between ‘past’ and ‘present’ are both alike the product of Frère’s own imaginings. Whether affirmed or denied, they have no relation to the text of the fragments, and do nothing to establish Parmenides’ ‘one’ as a being beyond either space or time. No less imaginative will be Frère’s account (pp. 20-38) of the world we live in, the world we see and feel around us, as described in the second part of Parmenides’ poem.

Frère nails his colours firmly to the mast. ‘L’Être est fondement intemporel de toute chose’ (p. 16). ‘Le discours sur l’Être n’a de sens que comme fondement d’un discours sur le cosmos’ (p. 20). ‘Les choses qui deviennent, loin de n’être qu’apparitions, sont réelles’ (p. 26). Parmenides himself is a good deal less categorical. When he has completed his account of a being changeless, unborn and imperishable (fr. 8.1-49), he states specifically (fr. 8.50-2) that he is about to abandon his account of ‘truth’ in order to turn to ‘the opinions of mortals’, which he had already warned, in the prologue, are without ‘true belief’ (fr. 1.30), so much so that the account he will now give of them is specifically said to be ‘deceitful’ (fr. 8.52: ἀπατηλόν). If Frère is right, why should that be so? ‘Les choses qui deviennent’ can hardly be other than the things that ‘mortals’ speak of as ‘coming into being and passing away’ (fr. 8.40). If, as Frère contends, such things are ‘real’, why should the account that will be given of them be said to deceive?

Frère has an answer, of sorts: ‘Le discours qui peut tromper est, parce que fondé dans l’Être, discours qui ne se trompe pas’ (p. 26). This is not to be taken as the dubious truism that it might seem to be (anyone who knowingly deceives another cannot, at the same time and on the same topic, be supposed to ‘deceive himself’). Frère’s point is that, when describing the world we live in, Parmenides’ words, though they may ‘deceive’ or mislead, nonetheless, if rightly understood, are true. To support the distinction (‘deceptive’ but true), Frère appeals to Simplicius (pp. 22-3), seemingly unaware that, in doing so, he is appealing to a wholly anachronistic interpretation of early Greek philosophy. Simplicius shared the orthodox assumption of his day, in supposing that Parmenides and other early thinkers, Pythagoras, Empedocles, Anaxagoras, were already conversant with the essentials of the conceptual world that would find expression in the writings of Plato. For Plato, and therefore, so Simplicius supposes, for Parmenides, an explanation of the phenomenal world, though not comparable to the knowledge we have of forms, was not therefore to be condemned as false. Frère, with disarming naïveté, repeats the party line. Deceptive Parmenides’ words may be, false they
are not. ‘Le discours trompeur (apatelos) n’est pas le discours faux (pseudes)’ (p. 26).

As chance would have it, we happen to know that that was not the meaning given to Parmenides’ words by his contemporaries. For this is one of the rare occasions when an undoubted verbal repetition links one Presocratic thinker to another. Inspired by his ‘white-armed Muse’, Empedocles knows that he speaks the truth about the world we live in (fr. 114). He therefore tells his pupil Pausanias: ‘Listen to an array of words that is not deceitful’ (fr. 17.26: οὐκ ἀπατηλόν). If Empedocles’ discourse is ‘not deceitful’, it is because it is true. He obviously took Parmenides’ apatelos to mean ‘deceitful’ and therefore not true. The deliberate contradiction (Parmenides’ ἀπατηλόν, Empedocles’ οὐκ ἀπατηλόν) would otherwise have no point. Empedocles sets out to replace an account of the phenomenal world that he takes to be avowedly false by one that is true.

The meaning Empedocles gives the words he undoubtedly refers to (our fr. 8.52) matches what is to be found in the fragments: Parmenides stigmatises the ‘opinions of mortals’ as false because they contradict his own account of what is true. Mortals speak of ‘not to be’ (fr. 8.40). Parmenides denies that ‘not to be’ is possible (fr. 2.3). That is why, in the opinions of mortals, so he tells us, there can be no ‘true belief’ (fr. 1.30). Frère struggles in vain to circumvent the contradiction, and therefore to construe as true words that, in the poem, Parmenides has firmly excluded from the ‘trustworthy logos’ that has ‘truth’ for its object (fr. 8.50-1).

‘Truth’ and ‘trust’ or ‘belief’: the words have to be heard in Greek for the subtle repetitions to be given their full force, as at once a commendation of Parmenides’ own belief and a condemnation of the belief of mortals. The πίστις ἀληθής, the ‘true belief’ that is denied to ‘the opinions of mortals’ in the prologue (fr. 1.30), reappears in the positive statement of Parmenides’ own belief (fr. 8.28), and both words are repeated, πίστις as an adjective (πιστὸν λόγον, the ‘trustworthy logos’), ἀληθής as a noun (ἀμφὶς ἀληθείης, ‘concerning truth’), in the triumphant two verses that announce the end of the argument (fr. 8.50-1). 3

There is the same interplay with the very similar association of ‘truth’ and ‘persuasion’. The disciple is promised, in the prologue (fr. 1.29), that he will be told of ‘the still heart of persuasive truth (ἀληθείης εὐπειθέος)’. The two words, the second as a noun and without its prefix, are repeated in the definition of the first way

---

3 It is irksome not to be able to translate the same word in the same way, but I cannot quite see how to do so. ‘Trustworthy’ is the obvious translation of πιστὸς (fr. 8.50), but ‘true trust’ would come out oddly as a translation of πίστις ἀληθής (fr. 1.30, fr. 8.28), which has therefore to be translated by some variation of ‘true belief’ or ‘true conviction’. Idiomatic enough, but without the verbal echo of the Greek.
(fr. 2.4) as ‘a path of persuasion (πειθοῦς), for persuasion accompanies truth (ἀληθείῃ).’ The same two words will be repeated a second time, but disparagingly, ‘persuasion’ as a verb, ‘truth’ as an adjective, in the description of ‘mortals’ (fr. 8.39-41), ‘persuaded’ (πεποιθότες) that the words they use to describe the phenomenal world are ‘true’ (ἀληθῆ).

The disparagement is unmistakable. ‘Persuaded’ that ‘to be’ and ‘not to be’ are both alike a ‘true’ description of the phenomenal world (fr. 8.39-40), mortals have no understanding of the radical incompatibility of ‘being’ and ‘non-being’ imposed by the modal statement of the two ‘ways’ (fr. 2): ‘“is”, and it is not possible not to be’ (v. 3, the first way), ‘“is not”, and it is necessary not to be’ (v. 5, the second way). The two ways cannot both be true: if ‘not to be’ is ‘impossible’ (v. 3), then it cannot also be ‘necessary’ (v. 5). Parmenides is adamant (fr. 8.15-18): the first way is ‘true’, the second is ‘not true’. That is why mortals are condemned to lack of ‘true belief’ (fr. 1.30). Beguiled by the senses, ‘persuaded’ that ‘non-being’ is no less true than ‘being’, mortals are ‘persuaded’ of a truth that is no truth at all.

Parmenides’ subtle repetitions and denials of ‘truth’ and ‘belief’, of ‘truth’ and ‘persuasion’, cannot be understood unless they are related to the two ‘ways’. The modal opposition of ‘being’ and ‘non-being’, of ‘being’ that cannot ‘not be’, of ‘non-being’ that cannot ‘be’, is the guiding force in Parmenides’ own argument and in his condemnation of the ‘opinions of mortals’, who fail to recognise the opposition and who therefore introduce ‘non-being’ no less than ‘being’ into the account of the phenomenal world that they are ‘persuaded’ is ‘true’.4

The modal opposition of the two ways is hardly alluded to in the pages of Parménide ou le souci du vrai.5 The errors of detail that result from, or perhaps have led to, Frère’s strange indifference to the argumentative core of the poem cannot all be listed here. The few that I do list I hope may serve as a warning to the casual reader, or even the casual reviewer, all too easily tempted by the charitable assumption that there can be no smoke without a fire, that Frère’s persistent reiteration of his thesis must have some support, somewhere in the detail of the text. Is that so? Let us see.


5) The modal formulation of the first way gets a foot in the door, on the opening page of Frère’s Introduction (p. 7). The only time both modalities appear is when Frère quotes fr. 2.1-6, in order to illustrate the difference between ‘persuasion’ (cf. v. 4), ‘davantage affective que logique’, and ‘la foi’, supposedly orientated to ‘la découverte de la vérité’ (pp. 44-5). A dubious distinction.
Fr. 8.38-41, a single long sentence listing the ‘names’ that mortals have given to objects in the sensible world, begins: τῷ πάντ᾿ ὄνομ᾿ ἔσται. The first word may be construed either as a demonstrative pronoun: ‘for it (τῷ)’ (and therefore, in the context, ‘for being’), ‘all things will be a name’, or as a conjunction: ‘all things will be therefore (τῷ) a name’, a use that the word frequently has in Homer and elsewhere in the poem. As one would expect him to, Frère fastens on the first meaning (pp. 36-8), if only because it links the ‘names’ of things in the phenomenal world to the undoubted reality of the ‘one’. But, in doing so, he seems not to realise that either translation excludes the other, since he translates the same word twice, once as a demonstrative pronoun and once as a conjunction: ‘pour lui (τῷ) seront donc (τῷ) un nom…’ (p. 148). One or other construction can be, and has been, defended. To pack both meanings into the same translation, as Frère has done, is indefensible. The word may have one or other meaning. It cannot, at the same time, have both.

My own preference is for the second meaning. A denunciation of reliance on perception by the senses (fr. 7) has been followed by a long demonstration in favour of a being unborn, deathless and motionless (fr. 8.1-36), culminating in the even more provocative claim that, apart from such a being, there is nothing else (vv. 36-8): ‘There neither is nor will there be anything else apart from being.’ The provocation is followed by an abrupt return to the world of change and becoming (vv. 38-41). The provocation and the abrupt return call for an explanatory particle: ‘Therefore they will be a name…’ (v. 38). The point I take to be that, since they cannot be included in the being that is changeless, and since there is nothing other than a being that is changeless, ‘all’ the things that mortals speak of as changing (v. 40: ‘coming into being and passing away, being and not being’, v. 41: ‘changing place and altering their bright colour’) are ‘therefore’ (v. 38: τῷ) no more than a ‘name’. The connective particle is all but indispensable.

The anomaly of Frère’s translation is that it acknowledges the need for an argumentative link, by including a consecutive particle (τῷ, ‘donc’), while at the same time the addition of a consecutive particle betrays the author’s misunderstanding of the Greek. If we are to give the first word in the sentence (τῷ) the consecutive meaning that the sequence of thought and argument calls out for, we have to abandon use of the same word as a demonstrative pronoun, looking back to the ‘one’.

The ‘mortals’ that are the subject of the subordinate clause that follows (fr. 8.39: ἄσσα βροτοὶ κατέθεντο…) cannot be divided, within the same sentence, into two groups, as Frère would seem to think they can be, ‘thinking mortals’ (p. 20: ‘mortels savants’), who speak of ‘being’ and ‘non-being’ (v. 40), and their less enlightened brethren, whose talk is restricted to change of place and change of colour (v. 41). The syntax is continuous (vv. 38-41). The one subject (βροτοὶ) cannot be
supposed to change its reference in mid-stream, as the sentence flows smoothly (no hint of an adversative particle) from one set of infinitives (v. 40: coming into being and passing away, being and not being) to the next (v. 41: change of place and change of colour).

It makes no difference, from this point of view, whether we translate \( \beta \rho \sigma \tau \omega \) by ‘des mortels’ or by ‘les mortels’. French, unlike English, cannot match the absence of an article for the subject of the verb (\( \beta \rho \sigma \tau \omega \), ‘mortals’).\(^6\) In his commentary on the fragment (pp. 32-5), Frère insists at length on ‘des mortels’, seemingly in the belief that translating by a ‘partitive’ article entitles him to single out, from the common mass of mortals, a privileged class of ‘mortels savants’, who speak of ‘being and non-being’, and not merely, as we all do, of changing place and changing colour. The ‘mortels savants’, so Frère claims, put forward views that Parmenides will appropriate and refine as part of his own explanation of how ‘la multiplicité du devenir’ is derived from ‘l’éclatement du principe un’ (p. 26).

Such a construal of the sentence is illusory. The choice of translation, in French, between ‘des mortels’ and ‘les mortels’ has no equivalent in the Greek text (v. 39: an unadorned \( \beta \rho \sigma \tau \omega \)), and the translator’s preference for one or other expression does nothing to further Frère’s attempted distinction, within the same sentence, between ‘thinking mortals’ and their unthinking confrères. Whichever translation is adopted, whether we translate by a ‘partitive’ article (‘des’) or by a definite article (‘les’), the reference has to be the same throughout the four verses (fr. 8.38-41). Whatever difference of fact there may be (or may have been in the society that Parmenides frequented), the syntactical implication of the sentence is not in doubt: mortals (‘les mortels . . .’, ‘des mortels . . .’) who speak of ‘being and non-being’ are no different from mortals who speak of change of place and change of colour.

Not only is the distinction Frère seeks to draw out from the sentence (fr. 8.38-41) impossible syntactically; the distinction he argues for is not maintained throughout the volume. Although he insists at length on ‘des mortels’ in his commentary (pp. 32-8), Frère nonetheless reverts to ‘les mortels’ in the translation printed at the end of the book. Does he not realise that the inconsistency is damning? The translation ‘les mortels’ (p. 148) belies the distinction that,\(^6\)

\(^6\) The French speaker who has difficulty in adapting to the lack of an article need look no further than Latin for a language where, as in Homeric Greek, the article has not yet found its place. The difference between French and English is partly to be explained by a difference of pronunciation. In French the sibilant that, in the written language as in English, is the mark of a plural is unvoiced except in liaison. With no article to help him, a French speaker cannot tell, from the sound alone, whether the single word ‘mortel(s)’ is an adjective or a noun, a singular or a plural. An English speaker at once recognises that ‘mortals’ is a noun, and a plural.
a hundred pages earlier (pp. 32-8), had been insisted on as requiring translation by a partitive article: ‘des mortels’.7

Frère is equally fickle in his translation of successive uses of doxa, βροτῶν δόξας in the prologue (fr. 1.30), δόξας βροτείας in the preliminaries to the account of the sensible world (fr. 8.51), κατὰ δόξαν in verses that very likely concluded the poem (fr. 19.1). There are no other uses of doxa in the surviving fragments. As briefly as possible, I take the three passages in turn.

The first expression, rendered simply enough as ‘des opinions des mortels’ in the translation at the end of Frère’s book, acquires a quite different meaning when, in the course of the commentary, the same expression is translated as: ‘des jugements de penseurs mortels’ (p. 38). There are no ‘thinkers’ (‘penseurs’) in the Greek text (fr. 1.30: βροτῶν δόξας). ‘Thinkers’ have been conjured out of thin air to provide the ‘penseurs mortels, philosophes ou poètes’ (ibid.) that here, as in his commentary on ‘names’ and ‘naming’ (fr. 8.38-41), Frère seeks to supply as the supposed target of Parmenides’ proselytising zeal, in place of the common run of mortal men, presumably left to wallow in their ignorance.

Frère pursues the same theme when he passes from βροτῶν δόξας (fr. 1.30) to δόξας βροτείας. The text reads (fr. 8.51-2): δόξας δ᾿ ἀπὸ τοῦδε βροτείας / μάνθανε κόσμον ἐπέων ἀκούων. Frère goes to great lengths (pp. 24-6) to persuade himself and his reader that δόξας βροτείας is not, as it is usually taken to be, the object of the verb that follows, but an ‘accusatif de relation’, translated therefore ‘quant à des opinions mortelles’, with the result that κόσμον has to be made the object of μάνθανε, ‘apprends l’ordre du monde’, and that ἀκούων, with a silent λόγον ‘understood’, is the object of the participle ἀκούων at the end of the verse, ‘écoutant un discours susceptible de tromper’.

As a reward for his pains, Frère concludes that in the two verses, construed as he has construed them, Parmenides announces his intention of grafting onto the ‘opinions of mortals’ an account of the ‘le déploiement de l’ordre du monde’ (kosmon, v. 52, as supposedly a ‘préfiguration’ of diakosmon, v. 60), a ‘révélation’ (Frère’s word, p. 25) that will be true, even if the expression of it is liable to mislead.

7) More troubling still is the anachronism in Frère’s statement of the thesis Parmenides has supposedly taken over from the ‘mortels savants’. An ‘éclatement du principe un’ as the origin of ‘la multiplicité du devenir’ (p. 26) exactly matches Empedocles’ theory of the origin of multiplicity as an ‘éclatement’ of the Sphere that is ‘one’ (fr. 31). Does Frère not realise that Empedocles’ intrusion at this point strikes at the very heart of his interpretation of Parmenides? Empedocles’ succession of ‘the one’ and the ‘more than one’ (fr. 17) was designed as a refutation of Parmenides’ ‘deceptive’ logos, an answer to Parmenides’ denial of the reality of the sensible word. Frère’s Empedoclean Parmenides is not the Parmenides that Empedocles knew, and sought to refute.
But the chopped-up syntax supposedly pointing to Frère’s ‘revelatory’ reading of the verses has only to be looked at twice to collapse. The appeal, at this point, to an ‘accusative of respect’ is merely arbitrary. An accusative cannot be classified as an accusative ‘of respect’ simply by being cut off from any more specific syntactical relation with the words in its immediate vicinity. No less arbitrary is the supposition that logos can be carried over from the preceding sentence, where the logos in question is a logos that one may ‘trust’ (v. 50: πιστός), and silently attached to an adjective with a wholly different meaning (v. 52: ἀπατηλός). The words of a Greek sentence cannot be duplicated at will, as though they were so many pictures on a computer screen. Logos is not used anywhere else in the surviving fragments with the pejorative meaning that Frère would give it here. There is therefore no reason to suppose that the hearer or the reader would be likely to supply from the inner ear a use of the word that, for all we know, he would not have come across elsewhere in the poem.

Is Frère himself convinced of what he has written? In the translation to be found at the end of the volume (p. 149), he reverts to a traditional, much simpler and wholly different syntax for the same sentence (fr. 8.51-2): δόξας βροτείας is the object of μάνθανε, ‘étudie opinions émanant de mortels’, while κόσμον and ἀπατηλὸν are taken together as the object of ἀκούων, ‘entendant l’ordonnance du monde où l’on peut se tromper’. More straightforwardly, in English: ‘Learn the opinions of mortals (δόξας βροτείας μάνθανε), listening to the deceitful ordering of my words (κόσμον ἐμῶν ἐπέων ἀπατηλὸν ἀκούων).’

The traditional syntax is undoubtedly preferable, both as a more natural reading of the Greek and because it matches the parallel verse in Empedocles (fr. 17.26): σὺ δ’ ἄκουε λόγου στόλον οὐκ ἀπατηλόν. The words that are repeated (ἀπατηλὸν followed by ἄκουων in Parmenides, ἄκουε followed by οὐκ ἀπατηλὸν in Empedocles) lead naturally to matching κόσμον ἐπέων (Parmenides) with λόγου στόλον (Empedocles) as the object of the verb. An indulgent reader may be willing to overlook Frère’s seeming ignorance of the Empedoclean parallel. The inconsistency, once again, is damning. Faced with the choice between the two translations, Frère’s personal innovation (pp. 24-6) and the translation printed at the end of the volume (p. 149), any competent Hellenist would undoubtedly choose the latter.

With doxa in the concluding verses of the poem, we are back in the fantasies to be found in Frère’s commentary on the prologue. The words κατὰ δόξαν (fr. 19.1), though paraphrased soberly enough, at one point, as ‘selon l’apparence’ (p. 130), are elsewhere translated variously as ‘selon notre légitime opinion’ (p. 18) and as ‘selon un droit savoir’ (p. 152). In either case, an arbitrary and wildly misleading periphrasis.8

---

Frère’s troubles are not at an end when he passes from δόξα to γνώμη. In fr. 8.61, Frère translates βροτῶν γνώμῃ, preceded by a negation, as ‘aucun jugement de mortel’ (p. 149), an acknowledged borrowing (p. 34) from Barbara Cassin (misquoted as ‘aucun jugement de mortels’), apparently not realising that Cassin is translating a different text: ‘... afin qu’un jugement de mortel jamais ne te dépasse’ (Cassin) translates ως ου μή ποτε τις σε βροτῶν γνώμη (nominative) παρελάσσῃ.9

The text Frère translates has a dative. The subject of the sentence is ‘no one of mortals’ and γνώμῃ (dative) qualifies the action of the verb, ‘with his judgement’ or ‘by his judgement’.

The dative, to my ear, gives a better movement to the verse (a weak caesura in the third foot is followed by a break in sound and meaning between the two syllables of the fourth foot) and provides a clearer and more concrete image: the young man’s rival in the race is a fellow mortal, not a ‘judgement’.10

Confusion is worse confounded when Frère attempts to comment on the meaning of the word (pp. 33-4). There is only one other occurrence of γνώμη in the extant fragments, again relating to ‘mortals’ and to the account they give of the sensible world (fr. 8.53: γνώμας). To these two occurrences of the word (fr. 8.53 and 61) Frère has contrived to add a third: ‘s’y oppose’ (i.e. s’oppose to the two occurrences of the word already noted) ‘la gnômè fondée en raison, celle de Parménide’. But there is no third occurrence of the word. Frère has dreamed up from nowhere a use of γνώμη that would have described Parmenides’ own thesis, and in so doing would have given a much-needed boost to the epistemological foundation of the second part of the poem, as supposedly an expression of Parmenides’ own belief.

The dream can be no more than a dream. Frère’s airy allusion to a third (unattested) use of γνώμη is a tacit acknowledgment that Parmenides’ own words, as recorded in the fragments, are unable to bear the interpretative burden that Frère has put upon them, the burden of a discours that, in deceiving others, is not ‘itself


10) Cassin’s translation ‘jugement’, singled out by Frère seemingly as something of an exception, is none other than the translation of Parmenides’ use of the word (fr. 8.61i) to be found in Liddell, Scott, Jones, A Greek-English lexicon, 9th edn (Oxford, 1940), s.v., III, 1, a: ‘judgement, opinion’ (p. 354).
deceived’, and that, though never described as such, is therefore a γνώμη ‘fondée en raison, celle de Parménide’.

Memory plays strange tricks, and it is perhaps not merely coincidental that those last words are heavily reminiscent of words to be found in the poem (fr. 7.5-8.1): ‘Judge by reason (κρῖναι δὲ λόγῳ)’ the much-disputed ‘proof’ (ἔλεγχον) ‘that is uttered by me (ἐξ ἐμέθεν ῥηθέντα)’. But Parmenides’ two verses do not introduce the account that will be given of the phenomenal world in the second part of the poem, as they would have to do if they were to support Frère’s thesis. They are immediately followed by a reference to the first ‘way’ (fr. 8.1-2) and the ensuing demonstration continues until a second use of logos announces the end of the ‘trustworthy logos’ that has ‘truth’ for its object (fr. 8.50-1). The long stretch of argument that runs from the first use of logos (fr. 7.5) to the second (fr. 8.50) is the only part of the poem that could properly be described, not as a ‘judgement’ or ‘opinion’ (γνώμη), but as a ‘proof’ or ‘refutation’ (cf. fr. 7.5: ἔλεγχον), ‘fondée en raison, celle de Parménide’.11

I could easily carry on. But the editor warns me that I have to stop. The errors listed have been taken, almost without exception, from Frère’s first two chapters. Much of the remainder of the volume is given over to Frère’s earlier, still more impressionistic thoughts on the same topics, published at intervals over the last thirty years, including a chapter repeated from a publication (Agonistes, 2005), which it would be unseemly on my part to criticise. Let me therefore conclude by warning the reader that, in the Greek text printed at the end of Frère’s volume, there are literally dozens of errors: false accents and false breathings galore, impossible punctuation, letters inverted (fr. 1.23) or missing (fr. 6.8), even whole words that are missing, adding to the number of verses that, for one reason or another, do not even scan (fr. 1.6 and 14, fr. 7.2, fr. 8.36). One-off errors include a change of mood (indicative for optative, fr. 1.1), and an adverb of time substituted for an adverb of place (fr. 8.57). The angular brackets that have been taken over, without explanation, from the text published by Vrin, where they indicate ‘des lettres ou des mots ajoutés au texte’, have been reproduced erratically: a word printed without angular brackets is only very doubtfully, if at all, to be found in the manuscripts (fr. 1.3), and conversely a word present in the manuscripts is put

11) The ‘me’ in the opening verse (fr. 8.1: ἐμέθεν) is of course not Parmenides, but the unnamed goddess who delivers the speech, and the ‘you’ she addresses in concluding her ‘trustworthy logos’ (fr. 8.50: ἐν τῷ σοι παύω πιστὸν λόγον...) is the youthful Parmenides. For simplicity’s sake, I have adopted throughout this article the convention, also adopted by Frère, of supposing that the words of the goddess are to be taken as the expression of Parmenides’ own ideas.
between angular brackets as though it was missing from the manuscripts (fr. 8.36). All in all, not a text to be used as the basis for a serious study of the poem.

The bibliography (pp. 163-4) is likewise a shambles. Publisher and place of publication are added or omitted seemingly at random. Change of font from roman to italic is erratic, as is the use of capitals. Misspellings are occasionally hilarious: C. H. Kahn is given as the author of *The verb « B » in ancient greek*. And one error is serious. The compiler (presumably someone other than the author) ascribes to Jean Frère and myself joint authorship of an ‘edition’ of Parmenides. Not true, and hardly possible.12

Denis O’Brien

*Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Paris, France*

plotinus@wanadoo.fr

---

12) See footnote 1 above. Some of the numerous errors in the body of the book I have charitably supposed to be misprints: faulty syntax (fr. 8.8: οὐδὲ translated by ‘et’, p. 17), inconsistency between the Greek text printed at the end of the volume (fr. 8.4: ἀτέλευτον) and the Greek text adopted as the basis of the commentary (p. 8: ἀτέλευτον), misleading transliteration (p. 8 and elsewhere: eôn for ἐόν, p. 9: ἐόσθεν for πρόσθεν), meaningless intrusion (p. 16: ‘le dieu sphérique de Xénophane, Xénophon’), and many others. I do even wonder whether I should have seen in ‘présent’ (p. 153) a misprint for ‘futur’ or ‘avenir’. Would it have been kinder to replace nonsense by a cliché?