Empedocles' hymn to Apollo

FRIEDRICH SOLMSSEN

Although ancient testimonies credit Empedocles with a larger number of works, editors and other scholars have been unanimous in dividing the preserved fragments between two, the physical poem and the Katharmoi. Diels' decisions in particular have enjoyed great authority; for while on the sequence of fragments within each of these two works debate was bound to continue, his distribution of the material between the two poems has by and large gone unchallenged. The main exception is B131-134 which Diels placed in the Katharmoi, even though B134 is definitely attested for Book III of περὶ φύσεως. Actually of the forty-two fragments which Diels assigned to the Katharmoi only one (B112) is explicitly identified (by Diogenes Laertius, 8.62) as a passage of this work, and it must be admitted that the revolutionary efforts of N. van der Ben who proposes to shift more than two-thirds of these fragments to the proem of περὶ φύσεως do not conflict with any item of ancient evidence.

The very limited objective which I am pursuing excludes a scrutiny of van der Ben's arguments. I must content myself with expressing my conviction that the great majority of the fragments in question have found their rightful home in the Katharmoi. Yet B131-134, the passages bearing on the true nature of the deity, continue to present a serious problem — or, to put it more precisely, two problems. For Tzetzes quotes B134 from the Third Book of περὶ φύσεως, which means that if we accept his testimony we must not only transfer B134 and the three other fragments to the physical poem but must admit for this work the existence of a Third Book in opposition to Diels who was adamant about limiting it to two.

The arguments which Diels used to discredit Tzetzes' attribution are rather subjective. After the well reasoned protests of Bignone, Kahn and Zuntz we may as well admit the existence of a Third Book of περὶ φύσεως; but it is essential to realize what this amounts to. For regardless of what view we take of the original "publication" and later transmission of Empedocles' poems — subjects on which we might as well confess our abysmal ignorance — no author of the fifth century B.C., whether man or god (see B23.11; 111.4), produced an authoritative or standard edition of his own works and settled once for all their division into Books. Generally speaking, such divisions were fixed by the Alexandrians. Whether
Alexandrian scholars worked on the text of Empedocles, whether one or several editions were produced either by them or elsewhere in the Hellenistic era, and whether any ancient edition of his poems enjoyed a special reputation and authority are questions which we are in no position to decide. All that a Byzantine reference to Book III suggests is that in late antiquity there existed one or several editions of περὶ φύσεως in three Books.

The same fragment (B134) concerning the true nature of the deity which Tzetzes on one of the three occasions where he quotes it ascribes to τὸ τρίτον τῶν φυσικῶν is also preserved in Ammonius Hermeiou’s commentary on Aristotle’s de interpretatione. The words by which he introduces it deserve close attention: . . . ο Ἀρχαγαντῖνος σοφὸς . . . (after castigating the μῦθος of anthropomorphic gods told by the poets) ἐπήγαγε προηγουμένως μὲν περὶ τοῦ Ἀπόλλωνος περὶ οὗ ἦν αὐτῷ προςεχῶς ὁ λόγος, κατὰ δὲ τὸν αὐτὸν τρόπον καὶ περὶ τοῦ θείου παιντὸς ἀπλῶς ἀποφαινόμενος.

Diels and Wilamowitz8 insisted on accepting the information about Empedocles’ special concern with Apollo, but although they refer to a tradition crediting him with a hymn to this god, neither they nor, to the best of my knowledge, any other scholars think of this hymn as a work in its own right. Yet Empedocles’ authorship of a “proem,” or (what comes to the same) “hymn” to Apollo appears in the testimonia,9 and B131, one of our four fragments:

would fit a proem to the celebration if not of Apollo in particular yet of τὸ θεῖον in the sense suggested by Ammonius.10 That our four passages, B131-134, actually belong to this hymn is a possibility which deserves close examination.11 For the arguments in favor of this attribution are far from negligible.

In the first place, the remarkably specific indications contained in Ammonius’ testimony are apt to inspire confidence. I do not wish to decide whether he himself read the “hymn” or whether he owes his knowledge to the earlier Neoplatonists whom he was in the habit of using12 and among whom Porphyry certainly was familiar with Empedocles. If the reasons for trusting Ammonius are good, those for crediting Empedocles with a hymn to Apollo are even better. The special significance which Apollo had for Pythagoras13 was probably shared by all those devoted to his βίος. Moreover for Empedocles seers, physicians, poets and political leaders