CRITICAL NOTICE

Coxon’s Parmenides

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I

A.H. Coxon has a remarkable record of publications on ancient philosophy. In CQ 1934 there appeared the early and much respected article “The Philosophy of Parmenides”. Then in CQ 1968 [not as Fragments p. 158 alleges CR] came a brief note reporting Coxon’s shaming discovery that the puzzling ἄφρη usually printed in Fr. 1, 3 has no manuscript authority, coupled with a report on his re-examination of those portions of the manuscripts of Simplicius which bear on the establishment of Parmenides’ text. Now in 1986 we have a full critical edition of the fragments, with introduction, translation, a much fuller selection of the ancient testimonia than in Diels-Kranz, and a commentary.¹ So far as I know these are Coxon’s only published writings on our subject.

II

Fragments was well worth waiting for. Scholars have been spinning interpretations of Parmenides in ever greater numbers, year in year out, during the last two and a half decades in particular. The process has become self-defeating: none of us reads more than a fraction of the output, nor do we remember much of what we read. Certainly Coxon refers to very little of it (I count one reference each to only Hölscher, Mourelatos, Owen and Tarán among Parmenides scholars writing since Diels, all on technical points of text, language, etc.), although he has no doubt absorbed more. What he has given us is something much more useful than another interpretation: the text freshly presented and garnished with innumerable detailed observations of every conceivable kind on its diction and literary


and philosophical affiliations; supplemented in the introduction by a sketch of Parmenides interpretation in antiquity, and in the testimonia by the materials for a history of it. Reading *Fragments* is like listening in on a series of conversations: Parmenides’ conversation with Homer, Hesiod and his philosophical predecessors; the conversation of subsequent writers in the Greek philosophical tradition with Parmenides; and Coxon’s own conversation with all of them. Coxon naturally has an interpretative stance and firm suggestions for philosophical interpretation, but there is seldom much attempt to argue all other interpretations out of court. *Fragments* constitutes rather a basis – from now on an indispensable basis – for making up one’s own mind about Parmenides. The book is a pleasure to read. The prose is workmanlike and lucid, and a brisk pace is sustained. Throughout one has the sense of an alert and independent mind enjoying the mastery of a rich subject matter. I conclude these introductory remarks with a particularly engaging extract (from the note on Fr. 6, 5 DK, pp. 183-4):

δόξανον: This is certainly an allusion, though it has escaped notice, to the fabulous small snake called ἄμφισβανα, which was two-headed and dull-eyed (cf. τυφώοι, 1.7) and, as its name indicates, moved in either direction indifferently; see Nicander, *Ther.* 372 sq, with Gow and Scholfield’s note, especially τὸν δὲ μετ’ ἄμφισβαναν ὀλίζωνα βραδύθουσαν δῆλος ἄμφισβάνην, αἰε γλύγην ἄμφισβάνην.

The amphisbaena is mentioned in the fifth century by Aeschylus (Ag. 1233) and Aristophanes (fr. 18 Dem.). Parmenides makes it the paradigm of empiricist philosophers, because their movement also is παλιντροπος (1.9) and their vision obscure (7).

This is perhaps an appropriate point to congratulate Van Gorcum on their elegant and accurate production of a typographically complex text.

III

Perhaps the most interesting and important general conclusion Coxon draws from his study of the manuscript tradition of Parmenides is the proposition (contra Diels) that Parmenides’ diction is uniformly epic and Ionic. He therefore argues (p. 8): “The evidence of the manuscripts, if combined with that of Parmenides’ general dependence on Homer, amply justifies the restoration of epic and Ionic for tragic and Attic forms in the few places where the manuscripts present only the latter”. So he prints e.g. δοκεύοντα for δοξούντα (Fr. 1, 31), comparing φορεύοντα (Fr. 6, 6: MS. E); ἀντίς for ἂνθις (Fr. 5, 2), comparing Fr. 12, 5; τωτόν, τωτῷ (Fr. 6, 8-9, Fr. 8, 29, 34), comparing Fr. 8, 57-8. Scarcely a dramatic advance in