CRITICAL NOTICE

The Presocratics in Context

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"This book is intended to be the starting-point from which new work on the Presocratics will derive impetus and inspiration" (p.vii). It stands . . . as the beginning of a new programme of reading and interpretation of the Presocratics" (p.13). It pretends "to justify a new method of approach to the reading of the Presocratics" (p.183).¹

Audacious claims, iconoclastic and ambitious. The title is itself something of a boast. The argument is uncompromising. There is a swashbuckling vigour of thought, and a willingness - an eagerness - to address folly by its proper name.

And is there really room for a new approach to the Presocratics? Can we really set about rethinking early Greek philosophy? "Humph", the sceptical reader will mutter, "such pretensions can only puff themselves into falsehoods - or else deflate into familiar truths".

Not so, not so. The boast is firmly grounded, the audacity a proper pride. This is - to be blunt - the best book on the Presocratics I have seen for years. I am minded to rank it alongside Reinhardt's Parmenides - and is there higher praise? Dr Osborne says some new things. She says some true things. She says some interesting things. She says some important things.

And therefore for most of this review I shall growl and grumble.²

² And why not take a pot-shot at the publisher? I have noticed a few misprints (e.g. p.9 1.18: for "we are" read "are we"; p.235 1.20: for "rest" read "root"; p.283 12 up: for "illegitimate" read "legitimate"). But the Greek is vile. It comes in different forms: by xerography from old texts, from 'camera ready' typescript, in transliteration, and (occasionally) set anew. And yet with modern machinery Greek is as simple to set as English.
There is an introductory chapter expounding the new methodology, and preferring it to the traditional approach. The new method is to be tested on Hippolytus' account of the Presocratics. The procedures and habits of Hippolytus are first examined in the controllable cases of Aristotle and Simon Magus. Then, at the heart of the book, come detailed analyses of Hippolytus' discussions of the philosophies of Empedocles and Heraclitus. Substantial appendixes deal with Book I of the Refutatio, and with the Apophasis Megale of Simon, and offer an English translation of Refutatio IV-X opposite a reprint of Wendland's Greek text.

I shall pass some comments first on the new methodology, then on Dr Osborne's appreciation of Hippolytus, and finally on her interpretation of Heraclitus. Many of her most interesting and challenging pages will perforce be passed by.

The approach to the Presocratics which Dr Osborne regards as traditional consists essentially in this injunction: Distinguish as carefully as you can the ipsissima verba of the Presocratics (the fragments sensu stricto); base your interpretation primarily upon them; call upon the other texts only when the fragments do not suffice – and then with the greatest caution.

The new approach offers a new injunction: Read the 'fragments' if you will, but read them in context; attend to the interpretations of those ancient authors who quote the Presocratics; found your own interpretation on their interpretations.

The orthodox say: Free the fragments from their false contexts. The heretic says: Take the whole texts – fragments and contexts and all.

I discern three arguments against the traditional method.

(1) If we focus on the fragments, we blinker ourselves. For the selection of those fragments which survive was determined by "the same interested and biassed readings as the notorious doxography" (p.3); it is a foolish optimism to believe, with Barnes, that "these fragments preserve the most

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3 A pity that she could not use the new text by Miroslav Marcovich: Hippolytus: Refutatio Omnium Haeresium [Patriistische Texte und Studien 25] (Berlin, 1986). This edition, to which all students of the Presocratics must henceforth refer, marks a notable advance. (Wendland's text, published posthumously, was the work of a dying man: for a sharp judgement on it see Marcovich, p.7.)