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NOTES ON THE DERVENI COMMENTATOR

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## NOTES ON THE DERVENI COMMENTATOR

The unknown Orphic poem which was discovered in 1962 at Derveni in Macedonia yields important confirmation of reports which quoted little and were of no verifiable antiquity<sup>1</sup>; the commentary that accompanies the poem is, if anything, a discovery of still greater magnitude<sup>2</sup>. Among the Presocratics only Gorgias has left us works of comparable length; and Gorgias is the harbinger of an age in which the war between philosophy and rhetoric rendered both camps deaf to the authority of myth. Studies on the papyrus have concluded that it cannot have been written later than the fourth century B.C.<sup>3</sup>; a dating of the author to that century is suggested by the fact that he is not at the beginning of the interpretative tradition (since he mentions rival expositors) and also by his style, which is devoid of rhetorical amplitude, and would have a concise simplicity, had he not from time to time, in the ingenuous belief that it is elegant to differ, made unnatural variations in the ordering of his words<sup>4</sup>.

The ungainly style, together with the lacunose condition of the surviving text, have occasioned much disagreement as to the commentator's allegiance in philosophy: he is put to school with Thales, with Democritus and Leucippus, with Anaxagoras and with Diogenes of Apollonia, though Heraclitus of Ephesus is the only Presocratic whom his own words unequivocally reveal him to have read<sup>5</sup>. The conclusion of each of the four brief notes that follow is inimical to an estimate of him as one who was primarily a philosopher: I shall

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<sup>1</sup> On the discovery see C.I.Makaronas, *Archaeologikon Deltion* 18 (1963) pp. 193-6; W.Burkert, *Orpheus und die Vorsokratiker*, *Antike und Abendland* 14 (1968) pp. 93-4; M.L.West, *The Orphic Poems* (Oxford 1983) pp. 75-6. West's chief interest is in the poem, which he reconstructs with the help of the "Rhapsodic" theogonies on pp. 82-111.

<sup>2</sup> In the absence of a full critical edition, I have used the text in ZPE 47 (1982) \*1 -\*12. Articles which I have consulted frequently include: Burkert (1968) pp. 93-114; R.Merkelbach, *Der Orphische Papyrus von Derveni*, ZPE 1 (1967) pp. 21-32; P.Boyancé, *Remarques sur le Papyrus de Derveni*, REG 87 (1974) pp. 90-110; J.B. Rusten, *Interim Notes on the Papyrus from Derveni*, HSCP 89 (1985) pp. 121-40.

<sup>3</sup> The consensus of Merkelbach (1967), Burkert (1968), Boyancé (1974) and West (1983). This follows the demonstration by S.G.Kapsomenos, *The Orphic Papyrus Roll of Thessalonica*, *Bulletin of the American Society of Papyrologists* 2 (1964) pp. 3-14, with subsequent discussion by an audience of distinguished papyrologists. Like Rusten (1985) I have no direct cognizance of the papyrus.

<sup>4</sup> On dating see West (1983) p. 77; on the use of the Ionic-Attic dialect see W.Burkert, *Der Autor von Derveni: Stesimbrotus περὶ τελετῶν?*, ZPE 62 (1986) p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> For the text of the columns citing Heraclitus, see ZPE (1982) \*1, and K.Tsantsanoglou and G.M. Parassoglou in *Studi e Testi per il corpo dei papiri filosofici greci e latini*, Vol 3 (Florence 1988) pp. 125-133. For recent appeals to Presocratic antecedents of the commentator see notes 20-24 below.

argue that his true status is that of a critic, to whom no philosophical system has contributed more than was needed for the advocacy and exegesis of a recalcitrant text.

## I

The commentator cites two lines in which the father of Zeus is said to engage in prophecy:

*Ζεὺς μὲν ἐπεὶ δὴ πατρὸς ἐοῦ πάρα [θέ]σφατ' ἀκούσα[ς]*

*οὔτε γὰρ τὸ εἰ ἤκουσεν, ἀλλὰ δεδήλωται ὅπως*

*ἤκουσεν, οὔτε ἢ Νύξ κελεύει κτλ. (IX. 1-3).*

The commentator's clause is a didactic aside, and we cannot join Rusten in taking it as an intimation of doubt regarding the provenance of the line<sup>6</sup>. The poet has the Oracle proceed from a masculine deity, and is therefore not refuted by the statement that it did not proceed from Night. The second of these assertions is a corollary of the first, and hence does something to confirm it; our difficulty is the previous citation of a line which is all but identical in formulaic character:<sup>7</sup>

*Ζεὺς μὲν ἐπεὶ δὴ [πατρὸς ἐ]οῦ πάρα θέ[σ]φατον ἀρχὴν*

*[ἀ]λκὴν τ' ἐγχείρεσσι ἔ[λ]αβ[ε]γ καὶ δαίμον[α] κυδρόν.*

It has frequently been argued that either the paternal oracle or the gift of power is a false reading, that the commentator has either failed to notice the corruptions in his manuscript or is citing one version only to reject it. As we have seen, he is not rejecting the first, and no evidence can be advanced for his rejection of the second. Before we blame the commentator's judgment, we must nonetheless consider that he may be: (a) passing over many verses of his text in order to bring together two related difficulties; or (b) adducing lines from a different Orphic poem in order to corroborate the conclusion which he has reached concerning his own.

The assumption that the commentator has annotated all the lines of his poem in their order is untenable. Every scholar who wishes to retrieve the poem finds himself obliged to fill lacunae<sup>8</sup>; and even if we argue that these might have been supplied in missing portions of the

<sup>6</sup> Rusten (1985) p. 126.

<sup>7</sup> See West (1983) pp. 85-6, where a restoration of the original is attempted; Rusten (1985) pp. 125-6.

<sup>8</sup> See e.g. the copious insertions into West's reconstruction (1983) pp. 114-5.

commentary, we cannot reconcile the sequence of the extant lines with the surviving fragments of any Orphic poem<sup>9</sup>.

The assumption that the commentator quotes only from his chosen text would be demonstrably false, since in the final column he quotes Homer to corroborate his reading of a word (XXII. 2ff). Two unplaced fragments devoted a long exposition to a sentence from the philosopher Heraclitus:<sup>10</sup> the commentator, therefore, is either treating a variety of authors or is prepared to make long digressions in the vindication of his critical judgments. In either case we cannot premise that every verse which he cites from Orphic writings is of the same provenance: why should he not, for example, be an Epigenes, who is reported (Clement, Stromateis I.21.131.5), to have written a dissertation on Orphic Poetry, rather than a study of any single Orphic poem?

## II

The commentator has been much disparaged for his supposed misunderstanding of the line describing the egress of Protogonos from the aether:<sup>11</sup>

*αἰδοῖον κα[τ]έπινεν, ὃς αἰθέρα ἔχθορε πρῶτος*

On this he writes:

*ἐν τοῖς αἰδοῖοις ὁρῶν τὴν γένεσιν τοὺς ἀνθρώπους*

*νομίζο[ντας εἶ]ναι τούτῳ ἐχρήσατο ἄνευ δὲ τῶν*

*αἰδοίων [οὐ γίν]εσθαι, αἰδοίῳ εἰκάσας τὸν ἥλιο[ν]. (IX. 8-9)*

Had the commentator been deceived, as West and others imagine, into taking the word αἰδοῖον as the noun which was discreetly formed from the adjective αἰδοῖος to denote the penis, then he could hardly have reconciled it with the masculine pronoun ὃς. He need not have been ignorant of his own tongue to believe that a word may carry the semantic associations of its homonyms, even when the homonym itself could not be employed without solecism. That the word αἰδοῖου undeniably bears the adjectival sense of

<sup>9</sup> Thus the commentator's order is not preserved in G.S.Kirk, J.E.Raven and M.Schofield, *The Presocratic Philosophers* (Cambridge 1984) pp. 31-2. West (1983) p. 85 offers no justification for the claim that "we must accept that the poem began with Zeus' s rise to power".

<sup>10</sup> See n. 5. The quotation corresponds to fragments B3 und B 94 DK.

<sup>11</sup> So West (1983) p. 83, Rusten (1985) p. 125. Kirk, Raven and Schofield (1984) pp. 30-3 continue to take the word as a noun. This has also been at some time the position of Burkert and Rusten: see Rusten (1985) p. 125 n. 9.

"venerable" in a subsequent line, where it functions as an epithet of Protogonos<sup>12</sup>, is no evidence against the commentator; his claim would appear to be that the "venerable one" is so called because of his possession of the masculine genitalia. All Greeks knew that the noun is nothing more than an expression of the shame that is inspired by sexual intercourse, and at least one Orphic poet takes account of the etymology when he speaks of Aphrodite as a παρθένος αἰδοίη issuing from the amputated genitals of Uranus when they are cast into the sea (Fr. 127. 4 Kern).

On another occasion (Fr. 99 Kern), the adjective αἰδοίη is used of the goddess Night, who is the daughter of the elder Night and Phanes: the fact that she is not only "venerable", but the first being of either gender who results from copulation will not have escaped the poet or his audience, for whom the most absurd of etymologies could serve as pliant tools. Another poet candidly employs the word αἰδοίων as a noun, and the presence of the verb ἔκθορε betokens an account of cosmic origins closely akin to the one that is rehearsed in our papyrus:

τὸν δὲ πόθος πλέον εἶλ', ἀπὸ δ' ἔκθορε πατρὶ μεγίστωι  
αἰδοίων ἀφροῖο γονή κτλ.,

(Proclus, In Cratylum 406c, p. 110. 23 Pasquali = Fr. 183. 1-2 Kern).

In all these cases, the Orphic poets play on the derivation of the neuter noun αἰδοῖον from the adjective, though the being of whom they speak is merely qualified by the adjective, and cannot be the referent of the noun. When the commentator states that Orpheus has likened the sun to a phallus, he alludes to an association latent in the idiom of such poetry, and here reinforced by the use of the verb ἔκθορε, which seems to bear in the Orphic poets the connotation of "issuing from a source" (cf. Fr. 60 Kern and 183. 1 as above).

In Plato's time, a critic was prepared to look in poetry, not only for emblematic correspondences - for allegory in the true sense - but for more oblique intimations, such as scholars might derive from etymology. Homer, for example, is supposed to have used a word that would insinuate a likeness between the heart of man and a lump of wax:

τὰ ἰόντα διὰ τῶν αἰσθήσεων, ἐνσημαινόμενα εἰς τοῦτο  
τὸ τῆς ψυχῆς κέαρ, ὃ ἔφη Ὀμηρος αἰνιττόμενος τὴν  
τοῦ κηροῦ ὁμοιότητα κτλ. (Theaetetus 194c)

Homer's word, of course, is κέαρ not κηροῦ, but the critic takes the latter to be implied. The ground of likeness is then not so self-evident as it would have been in one of

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<sup>12</sup> West (1983) pp. 85-6. Protogonos is Ouranos, as West shows in his discussion of contents of the poem and its relation to other theogonies.

Homer's similes, and requires the interpretation of philosophy. Something of this kind it is that the commentator detects in the Orphic poem: a comparison which transpires through etymology, but only such a comparison as bequeathes a deeper riddle to the wise.<sup>13</sup>

### III

The use of the verb ἐκθορέω to govern a direct object (an object of the place left, not the place arrived at) is first attested in this Orphic fragment; if we allow that the commentator availed himself of the same construction, his scribe can be acquitted of an "obvious mistake" in the following sentence:<sup>14</sup>

...ἐχθόρηι τὸν λαμπρότατόν τε [καὶ λ]ευκό[τ]ατον  
χωρισθὲν ἀφ' ἑωυτοῦ. τοῦτον οὖν τὸν Κρόνον  
γενέσθαι φησί (X. 1-3).

The preceding words are lost beyond recovery, but if we posit φῶς as the noun to be qualified by χωρισθὲν, and αἰθέρα as the antecedent of λαμπρότατόν we need not emend the article to τό. The commentator will then be maintaining that, when the poet makes Ouranos leap forth from the aether, the true subject of this leaping was the emanation of him known as Kronos, who stands to him as a ray stands to the sun; there follows an explanation which does not have quite the clarity that is promised by its length:

τοῦτον οὖν τὸν Κρόνον  
γενέσθαι φησὶν ἐκ τοῦ Ἥλιου τῆι Γῆι, ὅτι αἰτίαν ἔσχε  
διὰ τὸν ἥλιον κρούεσθαι πρὸς ἄλληλα...  
κρούοντα τὸν Νοῦμ πρὸς ἄλληλ[α] Κρόνον ὀνομάσασα...

What does the commentator understand to be the subject of the poem? Are Kronos and Ouranos merely bold disguises for the action of the sun, or is the sun itself a poetical sign, of which the true, the hidden signification is a still more abstract quality? The answer in the passage above is sufficiently clear: since Kronos is a mythical appellation, Helios and Earth are but his mythical progenitors, and the commentator believes that they, like Kronos, are

<sup>13</sup> On the Homeric critics of the period and their notion of ὑπόνοια see N.J.Richardson, *Homeric Professors in the Age of the Sophists*, Proc. Camb. Phil. Soc. 21 (1975) 68-81.

<sup>14</sup> Citing Rusten ad loc. For the translation of ἐχθόρηι see *Anthologia Palatina* IX. 371, where the object is δίκτυον. The verb is rendered differently by Rusten (1985) p. 125 n. 9; but in human experience aether is the source, not the recipient of light.

merely part of the integument of symbol in which the author has cloaked his teaching<sup>15</sup>. The compression of the elements by the sun is a physical theory<sup>16</sup>, and no doubt one that the commentator holds, since he is willing to ascribe it to his venerated author, but the theory is incidental to the metaphor, and is not itself the doctrine which the metaphor was chosen to expound.

This doctrine is that the mind brings together its objects, as the solar body brings together those of the physical world. Like the observations on the meaning of the word ἄδυτον in the passage on the oracles of Night<sup>17</sup>, the etymologies here are exegetic, and have no other purpose than to reveal the grammatical sense. The more profound intention of the poet is discovered by the substitution of intellect for the visible sun, no less than for such divine figures as Ouranos, Kronos and Zeus.

#### IV

Orpheus, our commentator tells us, is apt to express himself in allegories, to write a literal falsehood as a prudent intimation of some great or dangerous truth. He says of one of his predecessors that "Heraclitus, changing the sense of common words, puts forth an obscure sense, as though he were speaking in a sacred discourse"<sup>18</sup>. He is proud of his capacity to divine the hidden meaning which the vulgar do not perceive in their own oblations (XVI. 1-12), and is evidently not one of those whom Plato speaks of as blind to the elusive ὑπόνοια of the poets (Republic 378d). This is a deficiency of which some of his modern readers are not so easily absolved:<sup>19</sup>

εὐδὴλον ὅτι Ὀκεανός ἐστιν ὁ ἀήρ, ἀήρ δὲ Ζεύς...

οἱ δ' οὐ γινώσκοντες τὸν

<sup>15</sup> For the union of Gaia and Ouranos see Fr. 32a.6, 32b.3, 63.2 Kern etc. The equation of Ouranos and Helios in an Orphic poem would be singular, but perhaps the commentator is inferring it from the fact that Ouranos is ἀστερόεις: cf. cited passages and 49.72, 57.3.

<sup>16</sup> See Rusten (1985) pp. 127ff, where he regards himself as an expositor of the commentator's "own philosophical beliefs".

<sup>17</sup> See Rusten (1985) pp. 131-2 on XVIII. 1ff.

<sup>18</sup> Ἡράκλ[ε]ιτος με[ταθέμενος] τὰ κοινὰ κατ[αστέλλει] τὰ ἴδ[ι]α. Since, in the commentator's view, such words as Erinyes are "common", I do not think that the sense is rightly grasped by A.V. Lebedev, Heraclitus in P. Derveni, ZPE 79 (1989) p. 41, who seems to think that Heraclitus is credited with substituting idiosyncratic for common terms. The difficulties of reading this fragment are evident from comparison of Lebedev's text (which is that of Tsantsanoglou) with that of M. Mouraviev, The Heraclitean fragment of the Derveni Papyrus, ZPE 61 (1986) pp. 131-2.

<sup>19</sup> The equation of Zeus with Ocean might certainly be explicit in the poem, as, to judge by column XV.1, is that of Zeus with air.

Ἵκεανὸν ποταμὸν δοκοῦσιν εἶναι ὅτι εὐρὺν ῥέοντα  
 προτέθηκεν. - ὁ δὲ σημαίνει τὴν αὐτοῦ γνώμην  
 ἐν τοῖς λεγομέν[ο]ις καὶ νομιζομένοις ῥήμασι.

(XIX. 3ff).

Here it might be concluded that the commentator stands with the Milesians in his derivation of all things from a single, physical element, which stands in place of deity as efficient, final and material cause<sup>20</sup>. From other passages (XV. 3-4, XVII. 2-4) it is inferred that, like Anaximenes, or his own contemporary, Diogenes of Apollonia, he posits as sole divinity the circumambient air<sup>21</sup>.

Such conclusions follow from the abuse of an unintended ambiguity: the author himself informs us that he is speaking of the usage of a word in a Orphic poem. He knows that there is also a physical element to which men apply this name, and so he warns us against the error of the vulgar, who miss the cryptic sense which the theologian has, in this case, made it bear. His exegetic principle forbids us to assume that, where the copula is used to assert identity of nomenclature, it signifies a unity of substance: it is in the poem, not (for all he tells us) in the world, that air or mind or anything is Zeus.

It is true that our author makes some use of the physical theories prevalent in his epoch. In one place (XV. 3-4) he declares that air "holds sway over all things", a tenet which can be traced to Diogenes of Apollonia; his reference in another place to particles suspended in the finer element brings to mind the atoms of Democritus and Leucippus<sup>22</sup>. That his physics is so eclectic is an indication, however, that it was not the primary object of his studies. It is necessary only to elucidate the premisses which govern the use of air, the sun and Ocean as Orphic symbols; but premiss and symbol alike are mere ancillaries to the learned, though custodians of secrecy to those who read with undiscerning eyes.

## V

Writing only a little after the heyday of the sophists, our commentator avails himself promiscuously of two devices in order to invade the latent meaning of his text. One is etymology, the scholar's tool; the other is analogy, which he takes to be the poet's. By hinting at etymology, he can widen the semantic range of such a word as αἰδοῖον, but

<sup>20</sup> I am not sure whether A.Finkelberg, *On the Unity of Orphic and Milesian Thought*, HTR 1986, pp. 322-35, ascribes this view to the commentator, as he certainly ascribes it to the poet.

<sup>21</sup> See Merkelbach (1967) pp. 24-5 on Diogenes of Apollonia Frs B2-B5 DK.

<sup>22</sup> On XVII. 2-4 see Merkelbach (1967) pp. 26-7, Burkert (1986) p. 4.

without neglect of accident; anticipating later discriminations between the levels of allegory, he distinguishes two kinds of indirection in the poem:<sup>23</sup>

1. Scientific assumption: certain expressions cannot be understood, even superficially, unless we are acquainted with the theories of philosophers regarding the particulate nature of matter, the place of air or the action of the sun.

2. The investing of the names of gods and elements with an occult significance fathomable only to the learned, who apprehend the likeness between the attributes of these beings and those of mind.

The chief peculiarity of this scholar is that, unlike his present subject or his predecessors, he relegates cosmogony to a place of subordinate interest. He does indeed retain the line in which it is said that all things were fashioned by Zeus (XIII. 12); he does indeed allow that there is more than one body in heaven dispensing light (XX. 3-10). Yet he will never see distinction where distinction can be avoided: he maintains that Ge, Demeter and Hera are all the same divinity (XVIII.9), and insists that such a locution as μη[τρ]ῶς ἐστὶ cannot signify "his mother" (and thus imply a separation of masculine and feminine) but "Mother of good things" (XXII. 2-9). The mothering god, no less than Zeus, is Mind (XXII.1).

To this all gods and elements can be made to offer poetical analogies, but analogy does not imply identity, which indeed it rather precludes. Our author is not a Milesian. since he does not believe that all proceeds from the element which men denominate water; he cannot be said to espouse the beliefs of Anaxagoras, for whom mind creates the universe, merely because he reduces all cosmogony to an analogue of thought<sup>24</sup>.

That is to say, this author is a critic, not a philosopher, and his subject is a poem, not the world. One could only wish that his reading were more lucid than his text, but as it is all paraphrase is conjecture. Perhaps the following abstract would not belie him: "Just as the rays must issue from the sun to perform its work of generation, so the cognitive action of the intelligent subject requires a separation of thought from mind. The intellect in its infancy the poet styles Ouranos; the emerging thought he calls Kronos, because it brings together impressions to form the objects of cognition; as a result, it excites the reflective powers which are able to embrace, not only all contents of the intellect, but the intellect itself. As the poet has it, all is swallowed up in Zeus".

If this is not philosophy (and it seems to represent no one philosophy), what is it? It appears to be the inversion of a device employed by Gorgias, who was prematurely

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. Sallustius, *De Mundo et Deis* 4 on theological, physical and other forms of allegory. Of allegory in the sophistic period we appear to know little more than that it existed; cf. West (1983) p. 79. Some profitable study might have been devoted to this question by M.Henry, *The Derveni Commentator as Literary Critic*, TAPA 116 (1986) pp. 149-64.

<sup>24</sup> See Burkert (1986) p. 5 where the commentator is designated "ein Anaxagoreer".

contrasted with our author at the outset of this essay. The Defence of Helen (8-14) takes the abstraction *logos* and invests it with the characters of a sorcerer, an orator and a prince of diminutive stature who achieves the most onerous tasks. The purpose of our commentary is more sincere and modest: to give such an account of Orphic poetry as will rob it of the caprice which must awaken incredulity and the horrors which can only inspire disgust. To this task he was moved, we may imagine, by the strictures of Xenophanes and Plato<sup>25</sup>, in deference to whom he does not touch upon the obscene except to attenuate the obscenity, and reproves the vulgar notion of succession among the gods. The vindication of Orpheus he seeks to achieve by taking the violent figures in succession and reducing them to the most intangible of human faculties; he thus produces, half by inadvertence, his own personification of that faculty, meeting Plato's censure with the tools that the great philosopher had belittled and forsworn.

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<sup>25</sup> See Xenophanes Frs B11 and B16 DK; Plato, *Euthyphro* 5e.