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# Alcméon de Crotone. Fragments: traité scientifique en prose ou poème médical?

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## Review by

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## Preview

In his *Lois de l'imitation* (1890), Gabriel Tarde famously claimed that “a society is a group of people who manifest between them many similarities produced by imitation or by counter-imitation”:

For men counter-imitate each other a great deal, especially when they have neither the modesty to imitate purely and simply, nor the strength to invent; and, by counter-imitating each other, that is, by doing or saying the very opposite of what they see being done or said, as well as by doing or saying precisely what is being done or said around them, they assimilate more and more. [...] Every strong assertion, while drawing in the average and sheepish mind, provokes somewhere in a brain born rebellious, which does not mean born inventive, a diametrically opposite negation of about equal strength. [...] But both have the same content of ideas and designs; they are associated although or because they are adversaries. [...] Is it not clear that in every age, among peoples in frequent relations, especially in our age, because international relations have never been more multiple, the agenda of social and political debates [this applies to academic and scientific debates, too] is everywhere the same? About any idea put forward by the media, every day, I repeat, the public is divided into two camps: those who “are of this opinion” and those who “are not of this opinion”. But these, no more than those, do not admit that one can be preoccupied, at this moment, with anything other than the question that is thus put to them and imposed.

Having drawn this devastating and humbling portrait of our life in society, which you can safely apply to the field of Classics (suffice it to mention such “questions” as gender, race, violence, mobilities, identities, ethnicity, decolonization, etc.), Tarde adds these beautiful lines:

Only a few wild minds, foreign, under their diving bell, to the tumult of the social ocean in which they are immersed, ruminate here and there on strange problems, absolutely devoid of topicality. And they are the inventors of tomorrow.

Magali Année is one of these “inventors of tomorrow”. She does not belong to any *chapelle* nor works in any institutionally preestablished (and therefore professionally rewarding) intellectual program. She is endowed with the most impressive qualities of mind that I have encountered in my generation of classicists specializing in ancient Greek poetry and philosophy: the rigor and the ever tenacious questing spirit of the true philologist; a breathtaking command of the diverse disciplines and currents of scientific tradition (from classical philology to historical linguistics, from the anthropological comparativism of the *école de Paris* to the *école de Lille* hermeneutics, from metrics to grammar, etc.), from which she always draws the best; a constant clarity of purpose; a firmness of design, that goes with a fresh, frank and engaged dialogue with the *autorités*; and, at the bottom of everything, a profound theoretical and enduring questioning, served by a wonderful intellectual creativity, that evokes at times an artist or a poet, were it not that every single sentence is always footnoted with further and accurate arguments as well as relevant and updated references. In a word, I have no hesitation whatsoever to say I consider her a genius. And let me hasten to add, for the record, that I am not a friend of hers: we barely met once, briefly, for a coffee years ago. I am only a reader of hers.

With all these exceptional qualities, Magali Année has never been offered an academic position. She keeps working and publishing, though, in the midst of the excruciating material difficulties familiar to so many young, jobless scholars. She is certainly not the first great Hellenist to be treated unfairly. Suffice it to mention the names of Reiske, of Henri Weil or of Hermann Diels, who struggled so long and so unjustly. But in her case I suspect the reason lies not only in the all too familiar myopia of the academy, but maybe, also, in the fact that ancient philosophy, as a beacon of the “sacred history” of Western “rationality”, is not welcoming to young, daring female scholars. The bitterness and the unfairness one feels in some reviews of her work seem to testify to the routine and mindless dogmatism that often mar the field of the history of ancient philosophy. It has to change.

This admirable edition of Alcmaeon of Croton’s Fragments, published in 2019, is already her fourth book, preceded by a highly innovative commented edition of Parmenides, aiming at deconstructing the doxic ontological reading of his fragments (2012)<sup>[1]</sup>; her monumental, revolutionary thesis on ancient paraenetic songs—1360 pages pervaded with deepness of thought and an almost artistic sensibility (2017)<sup>[2]</sup>; and a dense essay on Plato’s *Meno* that convincingly demonstrates the necessity of a “musical” reading of his dialogues (2018).<sup>[3]</sup>

Alcmaeon’s fragments are preceded by what she modestly calls a “long introductory commentary”, that is in reality a fully-fledged essay on Alcmaeon’s thought.

In the introduction, Magali Année explains in a most pellucid way the ambitions of her edition. In today’s academic literature, Alcmaeon of Croton is traditionally viewed as “the inventor of scientific medicine” or “the first philosopher-cum-doctor” (*dixit* Kouloumentas). As such—so runs the doxa—he cannot but have composed *in prose*. The groundbreaking take of Magali Année is to challenge this very assumption. Drawing on her earlier monumental work on

paraenetic elegies, but also on the recent trends in scholarship aiming at demonstrating the unfoundedness of the traditional dichotomy between “poets” and “philosophers” in the archaic period, she intends to show that Alcmaeon’s treatise was essentially composed in verse, and that this changes everything. For “in the regime of soundful speech that surely obtained in ancient Greece” (p. 104), rhythm—and, more generally, sound and music—constituted the very texture of the world (she talks of a “sound-textured world” at the end, p. 104).

In other words, her book is not only a new and masterful edition of Alcmaeon’s fragments. It is also, and most importantly, a case study for her method, which is nothing less than “a new philology”: “phonico-pragmatic, interested in the first instance in the pragmatic and communicative effects of the materiality—both rhythmic and sonorous—of the Greek language” (p. 16).

The first chapter deals with the famous incipit of Alcmaeon’s treatise, which was transmitted to us through Diogenes Laertius (VIII, 83). In the limited space of a review, it is simply impossible to follow Magali Année in her dense and acute discussion of the text: its establishment, its construction, its variously proposed emendations, its extremely sophisticated metrics, its literary and archaeological parallels, its grammar, etc. What a reviewer has to do instead is, I think, to identify the hand, so to speak, of her method: her “way”, her “twist”. Contrary to most interpreters, she refuses to correct a text “that probably appears difficult only to moderns such as ourselves.” (p. 19) Her stunning familiarity with archaic poetics (and, remarkably enough, its epigraphic monuments) enables her to understand the text just as it was transmitted by all Laertian codices: a prose sphragis is followed by three irregular verses.

Ἀλκμαίων Κροτωνιήτης τάδε ἔλεξε Πειρίθου υἱὸς Βροτίνῳ καὶ Λέοντι καὶ Βαθύλλῳ·

περὶ τῶν ἀφανέων | περὶ τῶν θνητῶν

σαφήνειαν μὲν / θεοὶ ἔχοντι,

ὥς δὲ ἄνθρωποις | τεκμαίρεσθαι·

Alcmaeon of Croton, son of Peirithous, said these things to Brotinos and Leon and Bathyllos:

About the invisible things, about which (they being mortal),  
the gods retain clear certitude,  
let us humans conjecture!

Année’s translation is based on a different view of the grammatical function of each τῶν: in περὶ τῶν ἀφανέων, this presentative adjective assumes “the deictically neutral function that is usually its own”, while in the second, “it is likely to play the role of a genuine relative pronoun as is in use, in archaic times, in a large number of dialects – including Western Greek – and as is also frequently encountered in Ionian prose” (p. 32). In other words, the first περὶ τῶν is constructed with the final infinitive τεκμαίρεσθαι, while the second introduces the proposition of the central verse, where the adjective θνητῶν is understood as “an anaphoric of the substantive adjective ἀφανέων, which it represents within the relative while coming to specify it” (ibid.).

The second chapter explores the consequences of this reconstitution of the versified nature of the incipit. It is rooted in the archaic “song-culture” dominated by Sparta. In other words, one cannot understand Alcmaeon without Tyrtaeus and Kallinos. Their paraenetical poetics alone can illuminate what has puzzled the modern interpreters—the repetition of *περί*, the nominal phrase, the highly refined construction of the dative, the infinitive—and their pragmatics: a first enunciation before a restrained audience (the three characters mentioned at the beginning of Laertius’ quotation) was doubled by a public performance, maybe in front of the whole civic community of Croton. Two more fragments are adduced, one from Clement of Alexandria, one from the Aetiana, both of which reveal a civic content (viz. on the friend/enemy distinction and on the analogy between the human body and the body politic) as well as a metrical structure that harmonizes with the incipit.

The third chapter establishes a link between the “paraenetic coloration” of the incipit and Alcmaeon’s epistemology: the “strong, opening enthusiasm,” the “ardor” (*un certain entrain initial, un élan positif*, p. 47) impressed by the rhythm harmonizes in fact with a conception of human capacities much more optimistic than usually thought.

Alcmaeon’s conjectural method has long been traced back to the early historiographers, but Magali Année argues that between the “ethnographical inquiry of the historiographers” (p. 47) and archaic medicine, “influence is necessarily reciprocal, as it is the expression of a fundamental competition” (p. 48). One of the fields of this competition was the intellectual debate addressing the socio-political upheavals that took place in almost all Greek cities “between the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup>” (ibid.). There she spots the real *locus* of Alcmaeon’s treatise. Directed toward Crotone’s citizens, it was intended not so much to convince them of Alcmaeon’s political principles as to transmit into them his trust in human epistemological capacities to find the right way amidst the obscurity of political ἀφανέα. And in Alcmaeon’s world the paraenetic poem was just the form to convince the audience. Citizens are “exhorted” to observe, to accumulate knowledge, to make conjectures.

This “current of thought, at once empirical, conjectural and paraenetical”—and this is Année’s second point—precedes early historiography. In one of the most rich and fascinating sequences of the book, she puts in evidence the relationship between Alcmaeon’s and Xenophanes’ epistemology and early Greek Spartan poets, in particular Alcman’s “cosmogonic fragment” (of which she offers a very welcome discussion, after G. W. Most’s mythological reading tried to deprive it of its theoretical content<sup>[4]</sup>) and, again, Tyrtaeus: his poetic “diction” of course, but also his epistemology, relying, as with Alcmaeon and Xenophanes, on experience and experimentation, which, Année suggests, characterized “the Spartan spirit of the 7<sup>th</sup> century” (p. 58): “Experience is the beginning (ἀρχή) of knowledge,” said Alcman, in a fragment Année rescues from the philological *limbo*, some scholars having decided that one should read “Alcmaeon” instead of “Alcman” in the scholion on Pindar that quotes it; in consequence, it was edited but not translated or commented in Claude Calame’s edition.

The fourth chapter explores something that haunts the book from its opening: the “Spartan Mediterranean” (Irad Malkin), that is, the enormous cultural and political *rayonnement* of Spartan culture in the 7<sup>th</sup> century “and still more in the age of Alcmeon” (p. 67), all over the Greek world but especially in Southern Italy. Here Année definitely makes her case: given the close relationships between Croton and Sparta, Spartan “song culture” was obviously part of Alcmaeon’s mindscape.



The fifth chapter turns back to Alcman’s fragment on experience (πεῖρα). Not only does Année show that there is no reason whatsoever to doubt its authenticity, but in a highly detailed and technical demonstration she also daringly (and convincingly) shows that its content as well as its metrical structure fit perfectly into the strophic incipit. Here is how it would go:

περὶ τῶν ἀφανέων | περὶ τῶν θνητῶν  
σαφήνειαν μὲν / θεοὶ ἔχοντι,  
ὥς δὲ ἄνθρωποις | τεκμαίρεσθαι·  
< πεῖρά τοι / μαθήσῃς ἀρχά >

About the invisible things, about which (they being mortal),  
the gods retain the clear certitude,  
let us humans conjecture!  
Experience is the beginning (ἀρχά) of knowledge.

The last chapter deepens further what would have been the double context of Alcmaeon’s performance: a first audience represented by the three characters named at the beginning of Laertius’ quotation, and Croton’s civic community. As she writes, “everyone knows that in the archaic period public spaces did not only host political debates but also performances by the various *sophoi*: poets, orators, *kosmologoi* or physicians, eager to diffuse and give authority to their knowledge” (p. 96). The physiological-medical content of the treatise does not exclude a political dimension. Indeed, the injunction to τεκμαίρεσθαι and the high valuation of corporal *isonomia* “avaient des visées, non pas démocratiques avant l’heure, mais du moins certainement modératrices et rassembleuses”(p. 96). To the political pragmatics of the treatise belongs another highly interesting fragment rescued from oblivion by Année, whereby Isidore of Seville attributes to Alcmaeon the invention of fables; it featured in the Diels-Kranz edition of the Presocratics, but was discarded by Laks and Most, like too many other Presocratic fragments that lacked what the Loeb editors oracularly enough call “intrinsic interest<sup>[5]</sup>.”

Next comes the inevitable discussion of Alcmaeon’s links to the Pythagoreans, in which Année, following the path of many scholars, rightly emphasizes his independence. The last sentence deserves to be quoted in full, as it encapsulates Année’s results:

In this “sound world”, the influence of Spartan “song culture” on a *poète-savant* like Alcmaeon could not have been less important than the influence of Ionian cosmology, contemporary historiographical approaches, or local socio-cultural practices.

This long “introduction” is followed by a copious bibliography, reflecting the richness of the scholarship attended to by Année.

Then comes the edition proper of the fragments, each of which is translated and accompanied by an exhaustive presentation of the sources as well as a rich and carefully thought apparatus criticus: they are divided in three sections: “Rhythmical Fragments” (F), “Paraphrastic Fragments” (Fp) and “Testimonial Fragments” (T). There has been a long discussion about the cogency of such arrangements, going on since Diels divided his *Vorsokratiker* into two sections,

“testimonia” (A) and “fragments” (B), to which a third section was sometimes added, “imitations” (C). It is true that it is not always easy to disentangle a testimony from a fragment. [6] The solutions proposed by G.W. Most and A. Laks, sorting the sources into those that provide biographical (P), doctrinal (D) then reception (R) information, as interesting as it sounded at first, resulted in a kind of sausage *Vorsokratiker*, where desperate scholars at times must search their way in all three sections to collect the minced slices of a single source. Année’s proposal is not only more sound; it is also an improvement on Diels’ disposition and should be used by every editor of other Presocratic *poietai*.

Then comes a (more than welcome to the lay reader) “glossaire indexé de métrique et de prosodie”, where all technical terms used in the commentary are explained and accompanied by the page numbers where they appear; a concordance of Diels-Kranz, Laks-Most and Année’s editions; an *index verborum*, an index of ancient proper names, an index of modern authors, and an index locorum.

This magisterial and groundbreaking edition of Alcmaeon of Croton is more than a must read for anyone interested in Presocratic thought in particular and archaic Greek culture and knowledge more generally. It is also a wonderful introduction to the innovative work and new philology of a remarkable young woman: a giant in our field, nothing less.

## Notes

[1] *Parménide. Fragments. Poème, précédé de « Énoncer le verbe être »*, Paris, Vrin, 2012.

[2] *Tyrtée et Kallinos. La diction des anciens chants parénétiqes (édition, traduction, interprétation)*, Paris, Classiques Garnier.

[3] *La musique linguistique de la réminiscence: le Ménon de Platon entre réinvention cratyléenne de la langue commune et réappropriation de l’ancienne langue parénétiqes*, Grenoble, Jérôme Million, 2018.

[4] G.W. Most, “Alcman’s “Cosmogonic” Fragment (Fr. 5 Page, 81 Calame)”, *CQ* 37, 1987, 1-19. The cogent refutation of this reading by Maria Michela Sassi (« Poesie und Kosmogonie : der Fall Alcman », in G. Rechenauer (ed.), *Frühgriechisches Denken*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, p. 63-80), did not receive the reception it deserves probably for being published in German.

[5] Laks & Most, *Early Greek Philosophy*, I, 2016, p. 11 : “the testimonia on the doctrine in the D sections and the critical reactions, interpretations, and appropriations in the R sections have been selected *with an eye toward their intrinsic interest or representativeness*”. A strange eye indeed, if I reckon with the fact that c. 20 % of the evidence I used in a 2017 *Kernos* article challenging the traditional view of the Ionian school, and which I had found in the DK *Vorsokratiker*, has been made to disappear in the Laks-Most edition.

[6] See e.g. the interesting text by André Laks, “Du témoignage comme fragment” in G.W. Most (ed.), *Collecting Fragments. Fragmente Sammeln*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1997, p.237-272.