

# The Presocratics (Classical life and letters)

60 THE CLASSICAL REVIEW

for *urbanitas* (*Fam.* 7.31.2) comes from the pen of one attacked as an *alienigena* (Quintilian 12.10.14, in an oratorical context), and as 'homini Arpinati, . . . agresti ac rustico' (*Cic. fr. orat.* XIV.20 Schoell). Urbanity, in fact, is a good deal more subjective than Ramage sometimes makes it sound.

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## THE PRESOCRATICS

EDWARD HUSSEY: *The Presocratics*. (Classical Life and Letters.) Pp. ix + 168; 3 maps. London: Duckworth, 1972. Cloth, £4.95 (paper, £1.50).

As an introduction to the study of the Presocratics the present work is entirely excellent and deserves the warmest welcome. Discreetly up to date in its presentation, it goes beyond the familiar descriptive accounts of the views of individual thinkers, which are the usual stuff of elementary handbooks. By its clear presentation and controlled analyses of doctrines, most notably in the case of the key figure of Parmenides, it invites the new-comer to think hard as well as to absorb all those of the essential facts which it is possible to convey in the restricted compass of a general survey.

One general point, and one only, it seems to me possible to query. The emphasis throughout is on the importance of the Presocratics as promoters of theories, as men conscious of what may be called at least proto-philosophical problems. While the sources of their thinking in Greek mythology and in non-Greek speculations are freely acknowledged, 'yet between Hesiod and even the earliest Presocratics there is a great gulf, created by a revolution in thought.' This revolution was the conscious and deliberate attempt to set up a standard of what was or was not 'reasonable', i.e. the gulf for Hussey is between myth and reason. This way of presenting things is a welcome corrective to some exaggerated attempts to reduce the Presocratics to primitive thinkers. Also detailed derivation from oriental sources, although fashionable at the moment, remains undemonstrated. Certainly, the most important of all, it is their rationalism and nothing else which constitutes the historical importance of the Presocratics. But gulf? Many students would surely still prefer to see a progressive transition rather than an abrupt change—only so, for example, can the 'mythological' elements in Presocratic cosmology after cosmology be adequately accounted for.

A clear picture emerges of the tradition of cosmology amongst the Presocratics, given the limitations of space. Two points may however be queried. Empedocles' cosmology seems to be treated as cyclical along fairly traditional lines—at least a hint should perhaps have been given that the traditional view is now subject to fairly serious attack by a number of contemporary scholars. Secondly number-atomism is entirely omitted. It appears that this is accepted by Hussey (p. 127) as something that did go back to the later part of the fifth century. It is first dismissed on the ground that its propounders 'were of small originality and depth, and remote from the important developments of the time'. This is not quite consistent with the admission (p. 144) that they may have hit upon the idea of unit-separating void before the Atomists did.

The treatment of Parmenides is of very great interest and deserves the attention of scholars long familiar with the problems involved. The basic progression of

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