

## Conclusion



In the previous chapters, we have examined the biographies of three archaic philosophers, Empedocles, Heraclitus, and Democritus, tracing the direct and correlative relationship that exists between the biographical data in the work of Diogenes Laertius and the extant fragments of these philosophers. The new approach to philosophical biography explained in the preceding chapters yields three important results besides the new methodology introduced.

First, throughout this work, we have seen how the biographers such as Diogenes Laertius, and their sources, for good or ill, have created lives for their subjects out of the whole cloth of their subject's work. Within this specific genre of philosophical biography and commentary, certain themes or *topoi* arose early on and were later used and reused to fit individual lives when philosophical statements could be used to shape them to fit the philosopher in question. Within the framework of the life and in the use of *topoi*, however, a favorable or unfavorable tradition grew, based on readers' reactions to the philosophical work of the subject. What is admirable in one philosopher can be damnable in another: the refusal to rule, for

instance, is favorably transmitted in Empedocles' case and unfavorably in that of Heraclitus.

The absence of hard data, and the separation by centuries of time further allowed, or perhaps encouraged, the biographers to use what was at hand—the subject's extant philosophy—to write the lives of the philosophers, coupled with the strong belief that all philosophical statements were inherently autobiographical. This entrenched belief allowed abstract philosophy to become concrete anecdotes that were used to illustrate the philosophy and to reward, or punish, or simply satirize the philosopher. Given the general concerns of the archaic philosophers, a shared pursuit of higher truths and the desire to establish a moral system in keeping with the cosmic or universal system, many anecdotes and *topoi* were transferred from philosopher to philosopher. Their experience with politics or with tyrants or at the games, became favorite themes, used favorably or otherwise, through incidental detail arising from secondary sources (comedy, for example, was a prime resource), as well as from individual philosophic statements. Rhetoric, too, contributed greatly to biographies as set themes, such as the comparison between philosophers and their school. Letters to and from philosophers and kings, also became the source for representational anecdotes and narration.

Quite often, these anecdotes take on a punitive edge; Heraclitus, for example, is punished in his death story, while Empedocles, in one version, commits suicide (neatly refuting his erstwhile claim to have become a god), and Democritus is threatened with poverty and a lack of burial. But occasionally the philosopher triumphs, as when Democritus staves off death and his sister by inhaling the vapor of hot breads or corners the olive oil market because of his extraordinary knowledge of the elements, or when Empedocles is rewarded by the people of Acragas in spontaneous worship. Stories such as these show a more favorable reading of the subject's work and, if still satiric, at least lend themselves to a less punitive tradition.

Standard and famous arguments of later philosophers also influence the lives of the archaic philosophers. Aristotle's definition of the human as a political figure is used to show the madness and misanthropy of Heraclitus, who chooses to live instead, solitary and bestial, in the mountains rather than among the Ephesians. Plato, too, plays a part in the tradition and biography of the early philosophers, clearly seen in his caricature of Heracliteans as men with catarrh and in his alleged desire to burn Democritus' books.

What also clearly, and surprisingly emerges, is just how good the biographers were and especially how good their knowledge of the archaic philosophers was, not so much in the formal, if sometimes sketchy description of the philosophy, which Diogenes Laertius provides at some point in his lives, but in the detailed knowledge of the philosophical statements that go into the creation of the anecdotes and *topoi* that make up the lives themselves. The best example of this thorough knowledge of the subject's work, if not, perhaps, a full understanding of it, is to be found in the death of Heraclitus, with its meticulous and detailed use of Heraclitean statement to build the whole of his death. The knowledge, also, of atomic theory, as reflected in the stories of Democritus among the tombs, or in his death story, argue that the biographers were extremely well read in their subject's work. Whether or not they always understood that work, their familiarity with the work was painstaking and remains most impressive.

Two further points emerge from this realization. The first is that we can no longer ignore the setting in which the work of the archaic philosophers' fragments have come down to us, as indeed Osborne so convincingly argues. While I do not agree with all that Osborne suggests, I do strongly share her conviction that we must use, and take advantage of, all the sources at hand. A similar appraisal of Diogenes Laertius emerges in my work, reestablishing Diogenes Laertius as an important source for the biographical and philosophical scholar alike. To dismiss Diogenes Laertius and other compilers and commentators as we have done thus far is to lose a valuable source of information for early philosophers. We can no longer, I think, simply use and abuse the biographers as suits our purpose, that is, we cannot simply sift through the "chaff" of biographical evidence to gather the whole kernel of philosophical statements embedded in the text. I do not, like Osborne, argue that the interpretations offered by ancient commentators are our best means of philosophical interpretation to the subject's work, but rather that closer attention to the text, the favorable or hostile tradition, and the use of anecdotes and *topoi* for illustration, punishment, and reward will bring us to a better understanding of the subject's philosophical work. Lives that seem haphazard or ill organized, under close scrutiny, betray their underlying connective themes, and anecdotes illustrate, at the very least, popular reaction to the subject's work and, at best, a clearer view of the work itself.

Second, and more important, we can no longer allow the biographers and their lives to color our interpretation of the subject's work. Philosophical interpretation, like poetic interpretation of the past, pre-Lefkowitz era, commonly falls prey to the same misleading tendency that finds in the

subject's biography a justification or interpretation of the subject's work. In fact, there is a real need to examine the relationship that exists between the philosophical biography and the philosophical writings themselves, as Alice Riginos' 1976 *Platonica* attests and as I have tried to show here.

Heraclitus is the worst, or most fully illustrative, example of this tendency; there is scarcely a commentary or text that does not subscribe, however subtly, to notions of misanthropy or melancholy that have crept into philosophical interpretation. Of equal, if not greater concern, is the recent and quite disturbing tendency of some scholars to reshoulder West's and Bernal's burden of importing eastern beliefs and origins to western philosophers such as Empedocles. Empedocles is not a mystic, a magician, or, God help us, a shaman; to suggest that Empedocles is other than a philosopher is to discredit the western, Greek tradition of philosophical thought and speculation and to find the absolute worst in biographers like Diogenes Laertius. Suggesting that Empedocles actually performed resurrections or believing that he laid claims to stopping the wind verges on the farcical, especially when used to support otherwise untenable convictions, such as that Empedocles was an eastern mystic. Empedocles always has been, and always should be, recognized as a Greek philosopher whose work and beliefs are part of the larger archaic Greek world of thought, that is, of a particular time and place, which cannot be falsely placed in the eastern tradition to suit one's own idiosyncratic version of eastern philosophy. No one denies the vitality and importance of the east in the early history of Greece; no one should deny the vitality and importance of the early philosophers of Greek thought.

On the other hand, a scholarly review is in progress, appropriately led by scholars such as Osborne, Riginos, and Waugh, of the text and context in which ancient thought is couched. These authors argue convincingly of the importance of reading archaic philosophers and Plato in and through their original form and format, Empedocles in epic poetry and Plato in dialogue form. Hitherto, the mode has been, again, to sort through the literary chaff (poetry and dialogue) to sift out philosophical formula, definition, and conclusions, and to ignore the setting in which all these occur. Plato's writing is dismissed and diminished as a skillful but still somewhat clumsy precursor to the Aristotelian treatise, Empedocles' epic poetry patronized and overlooked or seen in opposition to his philosophic thought.

For those engaged in the study of ancient biography, the implications of this work will be clear: if, as Lefkowitz has shown, the lives of the poets,

as they have come down to us, are suspect, it raises questions about how we read our texts and what we may safely infer from them. At the very least, it makes it imperative that we do not accept any text at its face value, but that we seek to reconcile our interpretation of it with interpretations of other classical texts.

I will leave to the philosophers to draw the implications for their own field, except to state the rather obvious one: one cannot read the biographies of the philosophers as providing evidence for interpretation of early philosophical texts. A less obvious but equally important implication, at least in my view, is that philosophers recognize that the texts they label as archaic philosophy are at the same time a specimen of literature and history. As such they must be treated with the same careful handling that classical scholars use in talking about Homer, Hesiod, Pindar, and Sappho: archaic philosophy should be read as archaic, not classical, literature. We must read the work of Empedocles, Heraclitus, and Democritus as we would any other literary effort, as conveying its meaning through all the literary devices we have come to appreciate for early Greece.

Fortunately, more scholars have now seen the importance of context, and text, in the work of these early philosophers, and perhaps a new scholarly trend of reading within context is not too much to hope for. If so, Diogenes Laertius should join the lists of those to be re-read and reconsidered; that he has much to tell us is, I hope, clear from the preceding work.