

Poetry and Prose: Xenophanes of Colophon*

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SUMMARY: When most of the new intellectuals of the sixth and fifth centuries adopted the new medium of literary prose to express their opinions about natural philosophy, theology, and history, the philosopher Xenophanes of Colophon continued to voice his new ideas about divinity and nature in verse. Xenophanes does not remain bound to verse through habit or through his inability to compose serious work in the new medium of prose or through his dependence upon the Muses for his information. He is an enthusiastic reformer who is committed to correcting the Greeks' beliefs about divinity and nature, and during his time verse still provided advantages over prose for reaching a mass audience, in large part, because of its age-old performative nature.

THE SIXTH CENTURY MARKS THE EMERGENCE OF LITERARY PROSE AMONG THE GREEKS. Written prose had been around for some time, in the form of letters, treaties, legal inscriptions, dedications, and graffiti,¹ but prior to the sixth century verse provided the medium of all serious literature or formal

* I should like to express my gratitude to the editor of *TAPA*, Paul Allen Miller, and its anonymous referees for helpful suggestions. I am also grateful for the comments I received from the audience at a presentation of an earlier version of this paper before the Department of Classical Studies at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

¹ For the wide variety of media of the earliest Greek prose, Harris 1989: 45–64. Goldhill 2002: 1–9 finds the early authors use Greek prose in a “provocative” way, but he seems to limit this motive to the fifth century, which is the period in which he locates the “revolution” in serious literary form. For early legal documents, see Gagarin 1986. Unless otherwise noted, the texts of and references to the Presocratic philosophers are those of Diels-Kranz 1956–59. In the case of Pindar the text and references, unless otherwise noted, are those of Bowra 1947. For ease of reading iota subscripts replace iota adscripts. I am responsible for all translations, although my translations of Pindar and Theognis are respectively after those of Race 1997 and of Gerber 1999 in the Loeb series.

composition intended for preservation and designated for an audience beyond a city or a small circle around the author.² The emergence of literary prose coincides with the emergence of the new intellectuals of the sixth century, who took up prose for their medium and contested one facet or another of the tradition embodied in the poetry of Homer and Hesiod. The thought of these new intellectuals is marked by a growing capacity for critical analysis, free from the poets' dependence upon the Muses for their opinions about history, geography, anthropology, theology and the natural world humans and gods inhabit together. This development of human critical judgment helps explain the preference of these authors for prose over verse. The immortal Muses confer their epistemic benefits in the form of verse, and once mortal reason usurps the authority of the Muses one important motive for limiting the expression of serious work to verse is removed. In these circumstances, prose would provide a signal of the author's independence of mind and his rejection of the authority of the Muses. Prose would then be essential to the message of these authors as a declaration of their intellectual independence. Not every philosopher, however, among the new intellectuals of the sixth century turned to prose, and there are important exceptions among the philosophers in the fifth century. Most finds these philosophical poets' adherence to verse to be one of "the most grievous scandals of early Greek philosophy" (1999: 350). Long, however, believes that there is no good reason to think that these philosophical poets would have "surprised" their contemporaries in their refusal to take up prose, since the tradition of philosophical prose was recent (1985: 245). Osborne (1997) argues that prose is in fact the exception among the early Presocratic authors and that verse is the normal medium for expression in this earliest period of philosophy, which includes the early fifth-century philosopher-poets, Parmenides and Empedocles.³ The verses of these philosophers only appear to be exceptional, Osborne contends, when they are considered from the vantage point of a century and a half after their composition, during the time of Plato and Aristotle, when prose had clearly come to dominate philosophical literature. Xenophanes is a sixth-century philosopher who remains with verse. Since he does not appear to rely upon

² On the nature of archaic Greek literature, see West 1971: 4; Dover 1997: 21–25.

³ The contention of Wright 1997: 9 that Parmenides and Empedocles, as well as Xenophanes, wrote in the conventional medium of verse so that they might make their unconventional doctrines more appealing to a conventional audience lacks cogency. It is hard to imagine an audience dull enough to be eased into finding these three philosophers' startling views more acceptable simply by being expressed in traditional hexameters.

anything but his own critical capacities for his opinions, in contrast with the other philosopher-poets, Parmenides and Empedocles, his adherence to verse raises a special problem for the proposal that in the early days of philosophy there is a significant correlation between an author's adoption of prose and his abandonment of the Muses.

The peculiarity of Xenophanes' adherence to verse and the reasons for his doing so may be appreciated with the establishment of the following points. First, it is important to recognize the significant role the early poets down to Pindar play as the purveyors of important factual truths that lie beyond the reach of ordinary humanity. The authority of the poets lies in their special relationship with the Muses, who provide them with divine revelations about the gods, the exploits of the heroes of old, and the features that go into the natural world and its generation. The traditional epistemic authority of the poets and the Muses contributes to the plausibility of the contention that the new intellectuals of the sixth century adopted the new medium of literary prose at least in part as a reaction to the poets as divinely inspired sources of truth when their reliability fell generally into disrepute among intellectuals. Second, it is important to recognize the significant growth in literary prose in the sixth century among the new intellectuals, since the growth of this new medium among these intellectuals makes more plausible Xenophanes' adherence to verse as something unusual among the new intellectuals, of whom he provides a significant example. Third, there is a significant parallel between Xenophanes and his contemporary among the new intellectuals, Hecataeus of Miletus, in the reasons they give for finding fault with the stories of the poets. This parallel gives a further reason for finding Xenophanes' adherence to verse peculiar. Hecataeus and Xenophanes do not rely on the Muses, but upon their highly developed critical faculties, yet Hecataeus, in contrast to Xenophanes, writes in the new medium of prose. Fourth, for understanding Xenophanes' adherence to verse it is important to recognize, what few students of Xenophanes have fully appreciated, that he was the first of the new intellectuals to desire to reach a large, popular audience, and that verse is especially useful in educating a mass audience. Verse is especially helpful in reaching a large, dispersed audience because of its traditional nature as a performative art, in which performance is tantamount to publication. Therefore, Xenophanes does not remain bound to verse through habit or through his inability to compose serious work in the new medium of prose or through his dependence upon superhuman agents for his information. Instead, he adopts verse, even though he shuns the Muses, because he is an educator and an enthusiastic reformer who is committed to correcting ordinary Greek beliefs about divinity and nature, and because he found that

verse still provided during his lifetime significant advantages over prose for reaching a largely illiterate mass audience.

THE MUSES AND EARLY POETRY

In early poetry, the Muses provide the poets with a number of “gifts.” Outstanding among their largesse are poetic proficiency and information. Poetic proficiency would include a permanent capacity for fluent composition in metrical forms, especially in the heat of performance, with the deft exploitation of pleasing words and images (e.g. *Od.* 8.44–45), as well as the momentary inspiration that moves the poet to sing upon a certain topic in particular circumstances (e.g. *Od.* 8.73).⁴ The information the Muses provide contributes to the content of the poet’s verse and goes beyond the scope of what humans may normally collect for themselves. Memory plays a significant role in the bestowal of each of these benefits. In the one case, the Muses enhance the powers of recall of the oral poets for the formulas and word-groups that the poet often calls upon in his improvised oral composition.⁵ In the other case, the daughters of Memory draw from their own memory of the past the information that lies beyond the range of the poet, but which he needs to fill in the content of his composition (*Il.* 2.491–92). Poets do not always make a claim upon the Muses for both their poetic ability and their knowledge. Homer in his narration of the *Iliad* invokes the Muses only for information (Murray 1981: 90),⁶ whereas in the *Odyssey* he depicts poets who depend for their poetic proficiency on the Muses or on their close associate, Apollo.⁷ Demodocus, “whom the Muse had loved greatly,” receives from her the power of “sweet song” (8.62–65), and Phemius, although “self-taught,” acknowledges that Apollo “implanted in my heart the song-ways of every kind”

⁴Murray 1981: 89–90 argues cogently that the “inspiration” of the Muses may endow the poet with information, as well as poetic proficiency, and she illustrates the two sides of proficiency, permanent poetic ability and temporary inspiration, with the examples cited from the *Odyssey*. Allen 1949: 65 argues that from early on, and not merely in the Hellenistic period, the Muses were the patrons and inspirers of all forms of knowledge. For an especially helpful account of the relationship between Muse and poet, see Harriott 1969: 34–49, 52–77.

⁵Notopoulos 1938: 468–73 makes clear the importance of memory in the creation of improvised poetry.

⁶Thomas 1992: 115 asserts that both Homer and Hesiod call upon the Muses only for information.

⁷For the close relationship between Apollo and the Muses, see e.g. Homeric *Hymn to Hermes* and the *Hymn to Apollo* 189–203.

(22.347–48). Archilochus, a seventh-century iambic poet, never calls upon the Muses for his knowledge in what little survives of his poetry, although he does declare himself to be not only the “servant of lord Enyalios,” the war god Ares, but someone who “is skilled in the lovely gift of the Muses” (Μουσέων ἐρατον δῶρον ἐπιστάμενος, Fr. 1 West 1972). Archilochus would have no reason to depend upon the Muses for more than his poetic skill, since the subject-matter of his poetry, which may be largely autobiographical, does not call for any special knowledge that lies beyond the range of its author. Mimnermus, Solon, and Theognis are the only elegiac poets of the seventh and sixth centuries whose remains leave any trace of any sort of reliance upon the Muses, but so little is left of the work of the other early elegists that any judgment about their lack of any link with the Muses would be rash (Harriott 1969: 47). The moralizing proverb-like elegies of Phocylides do not call for any supernormal knowledge, and thus Phocylides, like Archilochus, has no reason to call upon anything other than his own resources for the information that goes into his poetry. Phocylides also leaves no record of his dependence upon the Muses for his poetic ability, although Solon assures us that every poet depends upon the Muses for his capacity (Fr. 13.51–52 West 1972). The lyric poets never fail to mention the Muses somewhere in their remains (Harriott 1969: 48). The renowned lyric poet Pindar of the early fifth-century calls upon the Muses for assistance in poetic adeptness (*N.* 3.1–9), as well as for knowledge (*Pae.* 6.50–58), while, as someone who in his wisdom “knows many things by nature” (*O.* 2.86), Pindar remains well aware of what his own talents contribute to the quality of his artistry (cf. *O.* 7.7–9). Pindar clearly sees himself as in collaboration with the Muse, when, for instance, he points out how the Muse is at his side as he “found a newly shining way” to celebrate his subject (*O.* 3.4–6).

The epistemic reliance upon the Muses is especially evident in Homer who in the *Iliad* often invokes the Muses to fill important gaps in his narrative: “Tell me now, you Muses who have your homes on Olympus, / who was the first to come forth and stand against Agamemnon?” (11.218–19). In the invocation that opens the way to the famous Catalogue of the Ships in the second book of the *Iliad* the poet depicts the Muses as goddesses who know all things because they were the eye-witnesses of those events, ὑμεῖς γὰρ θεαὶ ἐστέ, πάρεστέ τε, ἵστέ τε πάντα, whereas humans like himself know nothing and on their own rely on “rumor” alone for the important events of the past, ἡμεῖς δὲ κλέος οἶον ἀκούομεν οὐδέ τι ἴδμεν (2.485–86). Bacchylides, a contemporary and rival of Pindar, calls upon the Muse with a question worded in the fashion of Homer, “Muse, who first began the righteous plea?” (Fr. 15.47 Maehler 1970), and many of the Homeric hymns open with a call upon the Muses

for information about the deity who is their subject of praise: “Muse, tell me the deeds of golden Aphrodite” (5.1); “Muse, tell me about Pan, the dear son of Hermes” (19.1). In many cases, however, the Homeric poet does not put his request explicitly as a call for knowledge, but merely for a song about the deity, “Muse, sing of Hermes, the son of Zeus and Maia” (4.1), although the Muse in singing of the deity would be presumed to reveal important facts about the deity. Those who hear the *Hymn to Hermes* have a right to think that they are acquiring new details about the encounter between Hermes and Apollo and the development of their friendship. Theognis, in addition to characterizing the poet as the “servant” of the Muses, also describes him as their “messenger,” who should not keep his “wisdom” to himself, “if he should know something extraordinary” (εἴ τι περισσὸν εἰδείη); for “what use would it be for him if he alone knows it?” (τί σφιν χρήσεται μούνος ἐπιστάμενος, 769–72). This knowledgeable messenger of the Muses would presumably draw his extraordinary knowledge from them, and Pindar too picks up this image of the “messenger” of the Muses in his characterization of the poetic exercise.⁸ He hopes “with his truthful words” (ἀλαθέσιν λόγοις) to escape any shameful charge, since his chorus and its leader are “a true messenger, a message-stick of the fair-haired Muses” (O. 6.87–91).⁹ Pindar in praising the value of the “good messenger” (ἄγγελος ἐσλός), who “brings the greatest honor to every affair,” places the Muses within the circle of those who communicate truthful reports, since he says that “the Muse too gains distinction through true reporting” (δι’ ἀγγελίας ὀρθῶς, P. 4.279).

In the proem of his *Theogony*, Hesiod records much of what we know about the Muses. Central to his recitation is his encounter with the Muses upon Mount Helicon, in which they bestowed the power of poetry upon him when they “breathed” into him the “divine voice to celebrate things that shall be and things that were aforetime” (31–32). In addressing Hesiod the Muses confess that “we know how to speak many false things that are like realities, / we know yet, if we should wish, how to utter true things” (27–28). The “conventional interpretation” of this curious confession takes it to be

⁸ Pindar also exploits the image of the poet as the “herald” of the Muses in *Dith. Oxy.* 2.19–20.

⁹ “Message-stick” translates σκυτάλα, and Pindar’s choice of this word deserves comment, since it would suggest a message of a cryptic or ambiguous nature. The Spartans used the σκυτάλα for sending secret dispatches (e.g. Th. 1.131). It consists of a strip of leather rolled slantwise around a staff, upon which the script is written lengthwise. The script is unintelligible when merely unrolled from the staff, and the message is readable only if it is unrolled upon a staff of the same width. LSJ s.v. σκυτάλη 1.

a contrast the Muses make between the truthful poetry of Hesiod and the plausible falsehoods of Homeric epic.¹⁰ A few scholars demur and insist that the Muses in their confession declare that no poet under their tutelage is in a position to judge the truth-value of their stories. The stories may be true, they may be false, but they are always credible, and thus the poet could not but fall into scepticism over the truth-value of what the Muses teach him.¹¹ Hesiod and his audience, however, are perhaps assured that the stories he tells about the gods are true because the Muses provided him with a “scepter” (29–31), traditionally a sign of authority,¹² which may indicate that the Muses have authorized him to “celebrate” the truth on this occasion about “things that shall be and things that were aforetime” (32). Therefore, despite the confessed mendacity of the Muses, Hesiod would retain his faith in the ultimate reliability of the Muses. Hesiod does express a desire to report the truth, when in his *Works and Days*, again under the tuition of the Muses, he exclaims emphatically to his brother, “And I, Perses, would relate realities” (ἐτήτυμα μῦθησάμην, 10). In the same poem, he gives every appearance of speaking with an authority drawn from the Muses when he assures his audience that “I will tell you the mind of Zeus who holds the aegis; / for the Muses have taught me to sing most marvelous song” (*Op.* 661–62).

Even so, the Muses charge themselves with lying in Hesiod’s report. Pindar may be appreciated as addressing this charge of mendacity when, instead of the Muses, he makes Homer, whose “wisdom beguiles with misleading stories” (σοφία δὲ κλέπτει παράγοισα μύθοις), responsible for an exaggerated rendition of the suffering of Odysseus (*N.* 7.23). In one of his *Olympian Odes* Pindar confesses that he must speak “against my predecessors” when it comes to the cannibal dinner-party in the story of Pelops, which Pindar reshapes

¹⁰ Murray 1981: 91 identifies this interpretation as the “conventional view,” which she concurs with and defends. West 1966: 162 rejects the “conventional view” because no Greek believed that the Homeric epics were “substantially fiction,” but he argues that Hesiod believes that he is narrating the truth under the authority of the Muses. Harriott 1969: 113 takes the Muses’ comment to be a warning to Hesiod that if he were to offend them, he would no longer recount true but false stories.

¹¹ Clay 2003: 58–72 defends a version of this unorthodox reading of verses 27–28, and she also provides references to and comments on those interpretations that defend Hesiod’s belief in the truth of his narration.

¹² For the authority traditionally associated with σκῆπτρον, see West 1966: 163–64, who also takes the scepter to indicate Hesiod’s authority to proclaim the truth. Nagy 1989: 23 also puts stress on the gift of the scepter as a sign of Hesiod’s authority from the Muses to announce the “absolute truth.”

into a “most orderly feast” (O. 1.35–38). He points out that “in men’s talk stories are embellished beyond the true account / and deceive by means of elaborate falsehoods.” Yet in this ode Pindar does not lay the responsibility for the falsehoods directly upon the poets who recited these stories, but rather upon the goddess Charis, “who fashions all things gentle for mortals, / by bestowing honor, makes even what is unbelievable / often believed” (28–32). The Charities or Graces are often associated with the Muses (e.g. Theognis 15–18), but in charging Charis with the poets’ capacity for embellishment, Pindar carefully avoids accusing the Muses of any falsehoods. Pindar never gives up his reliance on the Muses for important truths that are difficult to get at. Men cannot know through their own efforts from what cause “strife” began between the gods over the Trojan War, but “it is possible for the gods / to entrust that to wise men,” and after this declaration Pindar calls upon the “virgin Muses” for information, and gives as his reason that they are all-knowing, *παρθένοι γάρ ἴστ[ε] <γε> Μο[ῦ]σα[ι] πάντα* (*Pae.* 6.50–58¹³), in language reminiscent of Homer’s words for the omniscience of the goddesses, *ὑμεῖς γὰρ θεαί ... ἴστέ τε πάντα* (*Il.* 2.485). Accordingly, in another poem we find Pindar praying to the Muses for what appears to be epistemic and not merely artistic assistance, when he adds, “for blind are the minds of men, / if anyone without the Heliconians / seeks the deep path of wisdom” (*Pae.* 7b1–5). Pindar describes himself when calling upon Apollo as “the tuneful prophet of the Pierians” (*Pae.* 6.1–6), and in one well-known fragment he describes his relationship with the Muses in Pythian fashion: “Give an oracle, Muse, and I shall be a prophet” (*μαντεύεο, Μοῖσα, προφατεύσω δ’ ἐγώ*, Fr. 150 Maehler 1975). Pindar is not alone in characterizing himself in his poetic enterprise as a prophet, and his competitor Bacchylides also fancies himself to be “the divine prophet of the violet-eyed Muses” (Fr. 9.1–6 Maehler 1970). When Pindar places the inspirations of the Muses on a par with the enigmatic oracles of the Pythian Apollo, he is in a position to explain why poets who depend equally upon the Muses for their knowledge of precious topics may compose poems that in some cases are true and in others false. Delphic oracles are never false, as Plato’s Socrates assures us (*Ap.* 21b), and only their interpretations may be true or false. Similarly, the inspirations of the Muses in their oracular nature always yield what is factually true about their subject-matter, and it is only the poets who may misunderstand them

¹³ For my understanding of *Pae.* 6.50–58 I adopt the reading of Maehler 1975 and of others who fill in the lacuna in verse 50 so that it may read, *καὶ πόθεν ἄθαν[άτων] ἔρις ἄ]ρξατο*, which may be rendered as, “And from where strife arose among the immortals.”

as they render them into verse. Pindar relies confidently upon his ability to interpret the inspirations of the Muses correctly, while other poets have failed to do so. Accordingly, Pindar, in contrast with Hesiod, absolves the Muses of any guilt in misinforming humankind, and he continues to place his confidence in their truthfulness.

The Muses are for the early poets an important source of truth about topics that humans may not learn for themselves through the ordinary course of observation: knowledge of the gods; ancient history; the commencement of the world-order. Accordingly, the Muses are even credited with information that goes well beyond what they can draw from their memory of their own observations made during their immortal lives. Hesiod calls upon the Muses for knowledge of the birth of the gods, events that in many cases it would not have been possible for the Muses to witness.¹⁴

It is important for versifiers to keep an eye upon the truth in their versifying, since they wish to keep their audience's interest in their words. The power of truth for attraction is vividly displayed in Homer's story of the Sirens, who attract passers-by and keep them bound to their words until they perish through their forgetfulness of food and water (12.39–46). The Sirens maintain that their songs please their audience and provide them with knowledge, because the Sirens know "all things that happen upon the fruitful earth," including the feats of the Argives and the Trojans and the ills they suffered at the hands of the gods (12.188–191). The Sirens belong to the same circle as the Muses. They are daughters of the Muse Terpsichore (A. R. 4.896), and share some of the Muses' powers. The seventh-century lyric poet Alcman treats the Sirens as if they were Muses or as at least on a par with them (Fr. 1.96–98 P. M. G.), and in one fragment he even identifies the Muse as a Siren (Fr. 30 P. M. G.; cf. Pindar Fr. 94b.11–15, Maehler 1975). Humans have always been entertained by interesting stories, be they true or false, but they find interesting stories even more riveting if they believe them to be true. The audience of the poets expects truthful stories about the gods and heroes, and the poets endeavor to recite stories of an artistic and a truthful nature with the help of the Muses. Accordingly, once the stories of the poets began to lose their claim to credibility, the pathway is opened for the challenge of the poets by the new intellectuals and for the abandonment of the Muses and the verse they bestow by those who value the truth. Plato is right, and commits no anachronism, when he puts the "ancient quarrel" between poetry and philosophy in terms of a dispute over truth (R. 10.608a).

¹⁴ The knowledge the Muses bestow includes morality. Allen 1949 has, for example, argued convincingly that Solon in his *Prayer to the Muses* calls upon them for the moral wisdom required for his permanent possession of "prosperity."

EARLY AUTHORS OF LITERARY PROSE

Ionic prose provides the earliest literary prose. In the second half of the sixth century the Milesian natural philosophers, or *physiologoi*, wrote their books on nature and divinity in prose, instead of the hexameters that furnished Hesiod with the medium for his highly influential theogony. Thales probably never produced a written document, since Aristotle has no book by him (*Metaph.* 984a2).¹⁵ Our one sure fragment from Anaximander's book is in prose, and the comment by Simplicius, or perhaps that of Theophrastus, that the language of the fragment is "rather poetic" (*Ph.* 24.17 [A9]), probably expresses nothing more than the commentator's judgment that Anaximander writes metaphorically when he uses the language of the courtroom to describe the interaction between the cosmic opposites. Anaximander, however, probably intends for his words to be taken literally. Instead of the partiality of the capricious Olympians, he declares that the objectivity of disinterested justice holds sway in the cosmos (B1, A9). The report of Diogenes Laertius, which perhaps also has its origin in Theophrastus (or in Apollodorus), that Anaximenes "used simple and unremarkable Ionic speech," λέξει ἰόδι ἀπλῇ καὶ ἀπερίττῳ (2.3), does not rule out his writing in a plain form of verse, as Osborne points out, but it encourages the conviction that he wrote in prose (Osborne 1997: 29). Furthermore, if Anaximenes had written in verse, the doxographers, like Diogenes, would have made a special note of it, since they were accustomed for many generations to the predominance of prose among philosophers. Diogenes indicates his interest in this sort of literary fact when in his life of Parmenides he points out that Parmenides is among those philosophers who wrote in verse, and, besides Parmenides, Diogenes includes among the philosopher-poets only Hesiod, Xenophanes, and Empedocles (9.22). The doxographical tradition designates Pherecydes of Syros as the author of the first Greek book of prose with the publication of his theocosmogony. Only the testimonium of Themistius might be thought to hold otherwise, when he maintains that Anaximander "was the first among the Greeks to bring forth a written doctrine concerning nature" (*Or.* 36.317 [A7]). Themistius's observation, however, concerns the priority of the topic of Anaximander's book, and, although both Pherecydes and Anaximander concern themselves with the origin and constitution of the world-order, Pherecydes might be mistaken for just another theologian who contends about the gods, whereas Anaximander might be thought to deal exclusively with nature for the first

¹⁵ Thales is credited with a *Nautical Star-guide* (Ναυτική ἀστρολογία) in verse (Plu. *Pyth. or.* 18.402E), which Diogenes reports is also ascribed to Phocus of Samos (1.23).

time. The preponderance of the evidence favors Pherecydes as anticipating the Milesians in the turn from verse to prose for serious literature sometime in or before the middle of the sixth century.¹⁶ The remains of the book of Heraclitus of Ephesus, who flourished towards the end of the sixth century,¹⁷ provide us with our first substantial samples of early prose, and they indicate that he is a master of this new medium, which he shapes into a “poetic prose” that draws skillfully upon stylistic features from traditional poetry. Other authors may share his so-called “gnomic style,”¹⁸ but his poetic style of prose is probably largely his own, if not unique, in his subtle use of word-play, imagery, assonance, and sentence-construction.¹⁹

Other authors, besides Pherecydes and the natural philosophers, made contributions to literary prose in the sixth century. Especially noteworthy is Hecataeus of Miletus, who is famous for his wise advice recorded by Herodotus to the Milesians in the ill-fated revolt of the Asiatic Ionians in 499 against the Persians.²⁰ At the time of his counsel Hecataeus was probably a well-known author. His advice would not be called upon if he were not already noted for his wide experience, an indication of which is his warning the rebellious Milesians of the extent and power of the Persian empire (5.36.2–4, 125). His

¹⁶ The doxographical tradition designates Pherecydes as the author of the first Greek book of prose: *Suda*, s. v. Φερεκύδης; *Suda*, s. v. Ἐκαταῖος Ἠγησάνδρου; Plin. *H. N.* 7.205; App. *Flor.* 15; Isid. *Orig.* 1.38.2; Str. 1.2.6. Jaeger 1947: 66–71 gives the credit to Anaximander, and so too does Kahn 1960: 240, who further notes that the Hellenistic chronologists put Anaximander’s *floruit* thirty years before Pherecydes’. The advocates of Anaximander’s priority in publication argue that Pherecydes’ doctrine depends upon his, but this begs the question, since their similarities could be due to the influence in the reverse direction or of a common agent upon both of them. Schibli 1998: 4 argues cogently that there is no good reason to overturn the judgment of antiquity. Kahn 2003: 142 has recently conceded that Pherecydes may have written the first prose literary book, since he considers Anaximander’s book to be in the genre of a technical treatise rather than literature.

¹⁷ The evidence of our doubtful sources would place Heraclitus’s *floruit* in the 69th Olympiad (504–501), during the reign of Darius (D. L. 9.1, *Suda*, s. v. Ἡράκλειτος).

¹⁸ Thesleff 1966: 90–92 and 1990: 112 holds that the so-called “gnomic style” of Heraclitus was commonly used for the prose of natural philosophy until the “treatise” of Anaxagoras. For more on the nature of Heraclitus’s book, see Granger 2004a.

¹⁹ Heraclitus’s writing style attracted attention in antiquity: e.g. Arist. *Rh.* 1407b11–18, Demetr. *Eloc.* 192, D. L. 2.22, 9.5–6, *Suda*, s. v. Ἡράκλειτος.

²⁰ The *Suda*, s. v. Ἐκαταῖος Ἠγησάνδρου, puts Hecataeus’s *floruit* in the 65th Olympiad (520–516), and Heidel 1943: 262 judges his birth to be in 560. Strabo makes Hecataeus, along with Anaximenes, a pupil of Anaximander (14.1.7).

prose geography of the Mediterranean world and of Asia Minor incorporated his perfected rendition of Anaximander's map, which provided "a thing of wonder" (Agathem. 1.1), and he may have made use of a geographical report, which could be a prose antecedent for his own genre, by Scylax of Caryanda who explored the Indus upon the orders of Darius (Hdt. 4.44.1).²¹ In his prose mythology Hecataeus relates the genealogies of the descendants of Heracles and Deucalion and of other families, including his own, who claim a divine heritage, and in his investigations he undertakes a rationalization of the stories of the heroes handed down by the poetic tradition. Acusilaus of Argos is another early mythographer, probably a younger contemporary of Hecataeus, who renders the stories of the epic poets into prose, sometimes making what he takes to be corrections, which in some cases could count as rationalizations of mythical material.²² The physician Alcmaeon of Croton wrote in Doric prose what may be the first medical book in Greek literature. He came to maturity in the old age of Pythagoras, as Aristotle reports,²³ and thus his book would more likely be the product of the early fifth century.

Kahn is a prominent proponent of the view that technical handbooks in prose emerged in the middle of the sixth century "for specialists in astronomy, geometry, architecture, sculpture and music" (2003: 148–52). Practical manuals of this sort did exist beforehand, although they were composed in verse.²⁴

²¹ Warmington and Salles cite *FGrH* 1 F 295 and F 296 as Hecataeus's use of material from Scylax. F 295 makes a reference to Caspatyrus, a city in the land of Gandara, from which Scylax's exploration began. Athenaeus 2.82.70 places F 296, which is a comment on the occurrence of artichokes in the Indus river, alongside a comment on the same subject by Scylax. For testimonia about and fragments of Scylax, see *FGrH* 3C.709.

²² For example, the Fleece is not golden, but "dyed purple by the sea" (B29); the bull that ferried Europa across the sea is not Zeus but a real bull, whose capture was Heracles' seventh labor (B15). On the whole Acusilaus leaves the fabulous in the legends untouched. See Fränkel 1975: 347–48; for a more recent evaluation of Acusilaus, see Morgan 2000: 66. When Dionysius of Halicarnassus enumerates the earliest historians, he places Acusilaus just after Hecataeus (*Th.* 5), and Fowler 1996: 63 suggests that the list is "partly chronological."

²³ A contested passage from Aristotle states that Alcmaeon came to maturity "in the old age of Pythagoras" (*Metaph.* 986a29–30); for the difficulties over this passage and the date of Alcmaeon, see Guthrie 1962: 341–42.

²⁴ Kahn 2003: 148–49 gives the titles of these works, and maintains that these verse compositions form a part of the genre we find exemplified in Hesiod's agricultural manual included in his *Works and Days*. Kahn also tries to expand the pool of sixth-century prose by calling upon Heraclitus's use of *syngraphai* in B129, when he accuses Pythagoras of drawing upon these "compositions" for his "wisdom." Kahn argues that the word *syngraphai* is restricted to "compositions" in prose, and, besides the prose works we know

Kahn maintains that these technical handbooks in prose possessed a “narrowly pragmatic use” and would provide notes for “practicing, improving, and teaching a technical specialty” (2003: 146). For evidence Kahn cites Vitruvius’s observation that the sixth-century architects of the temple of Hera in Samos and that of Artemis in Ephesus are among those architects who published works about their buildings. Vitruvius, however, says nothing about the medium of these sixth-century authors (*De Architectura*, 7. praef.12).²⁵ Should there be any sixth-century technical manuals in prose, Kahn contends that they should not count as prose literature, since they would be solely of practical interest and intelligible only to the practitioners of the trade that provides their subject. Kahn’s assimilation of Anaximander’s book to the genre of practical prose appears misguided, since the physicalist speculations of Anaximander would be directed to an audience, albeit small, that has interests well beyond practical and narrow professional applications. A handbook may also serve as a mere *aide-mémoire*, and Anaximander’s book under such an interpretation would be on the level of lecture notes, which its author may elaborate on in public presentations.²⁶ A remark of Diogenes upon Anaximander’s book encourages this popular interpretation: τῶν δὲ ἀρεσκόντων αὐτῷ πεποιήται κεφαλαιώδη τὴν ἔκθεσιν, which may be rendered as, “He made the exposition of his resolutions in a summary fashion” (D. L. 2.2). But κεφαλαιώδη τὴν ἔκθεσιν could reasonably be rendered with “the exposition in headings,”

of by Pherecydes and the Milesians, Heraclitus could be referring to unknown technical treatises, of the sort Kahn takes to be the works composed by the sixth-century architects Vitruvius mentions. Kahn supports his understanding of the meaning of *syngraphai* by appealing to the study of the word by Dover 1997: 183–84, but Dover includes among his citations Plato’s use of συγγράμματα in the *Laws* to cover both poetry and prose (858d). It is difficult to share Kahn’s confidence about the meaning of *syngraphai* in the time of Heraclitus. Hawke 2003 expresses scepticism over Kahn’s interpretation of Heraclitus’s use of *syngraphai*. If Kahn is right about Heraclitus’s narrow use of *syngraphai*, then his use of the word in B129 could not be meant to include the Orphic poems. There is, however, reason to think that Pythagoras does depend upon Orphic beliefs, and that he would be so perceived by his ancient critics. See e.g. Granger 2004b: 241–48.

²⁵ The context for Vitruvius’s reference: *Postea Silenus de symmetriis doricorum edidit volumen; de aede ionica Iunonis quae est Sami Rhoecus et Theodorus; ionice Ephesi quae est Dianae, Chersiphron et Metagenes . . .* (*De Architectura* 7. praef.12).

²⁶ Kahn 2003: 146 undertakes this sort of assimilation. Thesleff 1990: 112 and 1966: 90–101 offers a similar interpretation of Anaximander’s “book” as “memoranda for his pupils.” For criticisms of this interpretation, see Laks 2001, who defends the importance of literary prose for the early Greek philosophers.

and Anaximander may have divided up his exposition into the kinds of topics that come to frame the treatises of natural philosophy.²⁷

When Osborne argues that verse is the standard medium of the early Presocratic philosophers, she does not take adequate note of the adoption of prose among the larger group of the new intellectuals of the sixth and fifth century, of which the Presocratic philosophers are just one important subdivision. The philosopher-poets, Xenophanes, Parmenides, and Empedocles, certainly appear exceptional against the wider background of these new intellectuals. A good case, however, can be made for Parmenides and Empedocles' having made a choice to use hexameters and that their choice is essential to their message.²⁸ In contrast with Xenophanes, they may be in sympathy with the old poetic tradition and its reliance upon the Muses. After a supernatural journey under the guidance of the daughters of the Sun, an unnamed youth, whom readers reasonably take to be Parmenides, receives his learning from an unnamed goddess (B1). Empedocles has been said to have the eccentric example of Parmenides before him to guide his choice of hexameters,²⁹ but what is more pertinent is that he calls upon the "much-remembering" (πολυμνήστη) Muse for knowledge (B3) and in one instance calls for assistance specifically upon Calliope (B131, cf. B4), the Muse of epic poetry, whom Hesiod names the "eldest" of the Muses (*Th.* 79). The divine and supernatural features of Parmenides' poem could be allegorical, as many scholars have contended,³⁰ and may not have any sort of religious or theological conviction behind them, or at least none that depends upon the institution of the Muses. Even so, Parmenides may plausibly choose verse as a rejection of the new medium of prose that had come to be associated with

²⁷ Laks 2001 offers this reading of Diogenes' comment; see also Thesleff 1966: n5. Kahn 2003: 145–46 also argues that Anaximander's book provided the standard topics of natural philosophy and the order of their presentation. Heidel 1943: 262 holds that Diogenes' comment is not upon Anaximander's book, but upon his opinions, and Heidel argues that the doxographical authors were only interested in reporting on Anaximander's cosmological views, which might have been brief in comparison with the contents of the rest of his book, which could have been devoted to topics of the sort that Hecataeus takes up in his geography.

²⁸ Aristotle does not think Empedocles' verse is essential to his message (*Po.* 1447b17–20), although Diogenes reports that Aristotle praises Empedocles' poetry, which he characterizes as "Homeric" (*D. L.* 8.57). Barnes 1979: 155 laments Parmenides' choice of hexameters, and Most 1999: 350 regrets the philosopher-poets' choice of verse.

²⁹ A common conjecture, e.g. Kahn 2003: 158 and Goldhill 2002: 4, which goes back to Theophrastus, according to Diogenes Laertius (8.55).

³⁰ E.g. Bowra 1937; see also Mourelatos 1970: 32–33, 39–40.

the new intellectuals, who engage in empirical inquiry, and some of whom undertake a study of nature. Parmenides judges these activities to be utterly useless (B7), and he may choose the hexameters of Hesiod's didactic epics to underscore his rejection of natural philosophy and the authority of perception. Xenophanes differs significantly from Parmenides and Empedocles. He does not rely upon, or make any pretense of relying upon, a superhuman authority for his opinions. He merely calls upon his own human capacities for his judgments.

XENOPHANES AND VERSE

Xenophanes provides Osborne with the best evidence for her contention that early Presocratic philosophers used verse for their standard philosophical medium. He stands squarely among the new intellectuals of the sixth century, and yet he wrote in verse: elegies, hexameters, and iambics (D. L. 9.18).³¹ Xenophanes lived a long life, and we know from his own verses that sixty-seven years had passed since he left his home at the age of twenty-five (B8), probably in the year 546/5 when the Medes took control of Colophon. This would put the composition of these verses in c. 478. Accordingly, scholars are more confident about Xenophanes' dates than about those of any other early philosopher.³² His long life may even have allowed him the opportunity to read the younger Heraclitus's criticism of him (B40), and also to have outlived this critic and even to have pondered the poem of Parmenides, his alleged pupil.³³ His long life would have plausibly provided him with the opportunity to note the growing trend towards prose among the new intellectuals, but even if Xenophanes were in no position to appreciate that such a trend was underway, he was still in a position to consider the choice of prose over verse, since so many of his near-contemporaries had done so and had opted for prose. Accordingly, what kept him from succumbing to the charms of prose, after the fashion of Pherecydes, Anaximander, Anaximenes, Hecataeus, Acusilaus, or Heraclitus? Xenophanes lived so long it would not have been surprising to find some of his remains in verse and some in prose. There is certainly nothing about the content of his work that restricts it to verse, and

³¹ Xenophanes is also credited with developing *Silloi*, "lampoons," which are in hexameters (A35).

³² There are, however, confusions in the doxography about the dates of Xenophanes; see e.g. Guthrie 1962: 362–63.

³³ Aristotle reports that Parmenides is the pupil of Xenophanes (*Metaph.* 986b22), and many scholars suspect that Aristotle's judgment is based on Plato's probably playful comment at *Sph.* 242d.

its content is easily abstracted from poetic diction. There is nothing obvious that makes verse essential to his message.

Xenophanes has always presented difficulties for historians of philosophy, from antiquity to modern times. Aristotle was not comfortable in treating him as a *physiologos* with full credentials. When Aristotle undertakes his inquiry into causality he dismisses Xenophanes, along with Melissus, “as being a little too rustic,” ὥς ὄντες μικρὸν ἀγροικότεροι, to warrant much attention (*Metaph.* 986b26–27). Cherniss is even harsher when he says of Xenophanes that he is “a poet and rhapsode” who found his way into the history of philosophy “by mistake” (Cherniss 1951: 335). Yet whatever Xenophanes’ exact status might be, he is without doubt one of the new intellectuals. He chides Homer and Hesiod for their scandalous depictions of the gods’ behavior, which is well below the moral standards the Greeks had come to expect of one another (B11). Xenophanes discredits the anthropomorphic conceptions Greeks and barbarians have conceived of the divine nature by his pointing out how their different conceptions conflict with one another (B15–16), and he develops a new conception of the divine nature in which he endeavors to free human thought from its anthropomorphic bias (B23). Although Xenophanes puts his effort into his new theology, he hardly neglects natural philosophy. He possibly specializes in showing how natural “wonders,” the rainbow (B32) and St. Elmo’s fire (A39), could be explained as the workings of ordinary sorts of phenomena, such as clouds, in certain circumstances, so that he may show that the divinities of the poetic tradition could be dispensed with in explanations of otherwise intractable natural phenomena. Xenophanes’ naturalism would have no place for omens, and two testimonia bear witness to his repudiation of divination (A52).

Nagy takes a different tack from Osborne when he argues that Xenophanes writes in verse because he is a poet who remains solidly among the traditional poets (Nagy 1989: 29–35). Xenophanes goes beyond the older poetic tradition, to be sure, but, like Homer and Hesiod, he also relies upon the “pan-Hellenic model of absolute poetic truth imparted by the all-knowing gods.” For direct textual evidence Nagy appeals only to B18, the first verse of which he takes to indicate Xenophanes’ acknowledgement of human reliance upon divine revelation: “not at all from the beginning did the gods reveal everything to mortals” (οὔτοι ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς πάντα θεοὶ θνητοῖς ὑπέδειξαν). At the same time the verse indicates that Xenophanes recognizes the limitations of divine revelation, and Nagy takes the verse to mean something to the effect that “truth has in the past been only partially revealed by the gods.” The second verse of B18 addresses how these limits may be surpassed by human inquiry over time: “but in time seeking they discover better” (ἀλλὰ χρόνῳ ζητοῦντες

ἐφευρίσκουσιν ἄμεινον). Nagy, however, has more to offer in support of his position than his reading of B18, which over the years has gone through a number of conflicting interpretations.

Nagy contends that once poets became mobile in the practice of their art they moved toward a pan-Hellenic rendition of their stories, and they began to give accounts of the gods that would be acceptable to the greater Greek community. The “crisis in variants” from the multiple renditions of the same events found in stories across the Greek world enhanced the poet’s “critical faculty” because in his pan-Hellenic practice he was compelled to select from the variations, to smooth out the incompatibilities, and to pull together those features from different locales that tended towards convergence and to neglect those that tended towards divergence. The poet becomes then the “master of truth,”³⁴ of what holds universally of the gods, and all the variations from this “absolute truth” are relegated ultimately to the status of “myth,” of what is merely idiosyncratic to a particular locale (e.g. Pi. O. 1.28–29). Xenophanes, Nagy argues, is a part of this same pan-Hellenic movement of poetic thought towards universal, absolute truth. The Ethiopians and the Thracians portray their gods in accord with their own ethnic features (B16), just as the Greeks portray their gods after their own features, and if horses and oxen could make representations of the gods, they too would depict them after their own beastly nature (B15). The incompatibility of these conceptions of the divine nature persuades Xenophanes to pass beyond them to a conception that owes nothing to the idiosyncrasies of any provincial conception, and which yields the idea of a single supreme god beyond full human apprehension, “not at all like mortals in body or in thought” (B23).³⁵

Contrary to Nagy’s allegations, the “pan-Hellenic impulse” should not be what keeps Xenophanes within the circle of the poets. Rather, it should be the very thing that flings him from it. The “critical faculty” pan-Hellenic poetry fosters would not promote dependence upon the Muses for knowledge but rather would stimulate independence, because it would encourage the development of a mortal analytic skill that may stand very much on its own. Pan-Hellenic poetry, as Nagy depicts it, contains the conditions for its own overthrow, and the development of its “critical faculty,” when it addresses the

³⁴For the description “master of truth,” which Nagy adopts, see Detienne 1967.

³⁵Jaeger 1947: 49–50, 92 and others have taken Xenophanes’ astonishing propositions about the divine nature to be the *dicta* of a mystic because of the lack of any surviving argumentation for his theological statements. Leshner 1992: 116 finds that he must accept Jaeger’s verdict, if judgment is restricted to the fragments. Barnes 1979: 84–94 argues that Xenophanes arrives at his theological statements through metaphysical argumentation, and he labors heroically to reconstruct these arguments.

“crisis of variants,” contributes to its own displacement by independent critical analysis. Hecataeus of Miletus, who is a contemporary of Xenophanes, provides a clear instance of someone whose advanced “critical faculty” frees him from the epistemic dependence on the Muses we find among the poets.

Hecataeus does not find fully credible the stories of the heroes as Hesiod and the poetic tradition report them. He opens his prose mythography upon the genealogies of the descendants of Heracles and Deucalion with this remarkable declaration of epistemic independence: “Hecataeus of Miletus says this: These things I write, as it seems to me to be true; for the stories of the Greeks are many and absurd, as it appears to me” (*FGrH* 1 F 1a). When Hecataeus says that he writes what “seems to me to be true,” this is not a humble confession of his epistemological limitations, of someone who can only speak from his narrow perspective upon the truth. Rather, this is the proud statement of someone who is voicing in an emphatic way that he *alone* is responsible for the opinions in his book, as what he takes to be the probable truth of the matter, and thus there is no need for him to call upon the Muses for any information.

Hecataeus gives two reasons for discrediting the “stories” of the Greeks. In the first place, the stories are “many.” The “stories” of the poets provide multiple versions of the same event, and in their multiplicity they discredit one another, since they are incompatible, and cannot all be true. The rational criterion of consistency stands in the background as the ruling principle of analysis. Nagy argues that the “crisis of variants” had already been faced by the poets. In fact, Hesiod’s *Theogony* may provide the oldest evidence for this crisis when the Muses are reported as telling Hesiod that they know how to speak credible falsehoods, as well as “true things,” if they so wish (27–28). This confession of the Muses could be the symptom of an effort to explain the inconsistencies among the stories, all of which the Muses have inspired, as due to the Muses’ own capacity for telling lies. A fragment of a Homeric *Hymn to Dionysus* provides an outstanding poetic acknowledgement of variation in stories. The poet ticks off five locations that “some” have named as the birthplace of Dionysus, “but they are lying” (ψευδόμενοι), as the poet concludes, before he goes on to name his own candidate of the mountain Nysa, which will provide a sixth variant (1.1–6). This Homeric poet does not charge the Muses with lying, unlike Hesiod in his *Theogony*, but rather the unnamed story-tellers who report the different locales for Dionysus’s birth, just as Pindar makes the poet Homer, and not the Muses, responsible for his false tales (*N.* 7.23). The Homeric poet and Hesiod face the “crisis of variants,” not by exercising any “critical faculty” upon the variants themselves, but by declaring dogmatically their version of events to be the true one among all

the false ones. When Xenophanes offers his new conception of the divine nature, he does not offer what might count as “the least common denominator,” as Nagy would put it, across the many anthropomorphic convictions of the Greeks and barbarians about the gods, but rather a conception of the divine nature which attempts to transcend any form of anthropomorphism or theriomorphism. The variations in the stories of the gods and of ancient history by the poets who call upon the Muses for their authority would most naturally and reasonably provoke the rejection of the poets as “masters of truth” and generate distrust in the institution of the Muses. And this is just what we see happening in the case of Hecataeus.

The second reason Hecataeus offers for discounting the “stories of the Greeks” is that they are “absurd” (γελοῖοι). This critical standard of assessment is especially significant, since it discredits a story because of *the story itself*, and not merely because it is just another story among many other stories, all of which cannot be true, but anyone of which might be true. This standard concerns the coherence or the likelihood of the story; it cannot by its very nature be true. Hecataeus often does not reject outright the stories he inherits from the poets, but rather purges them of their absurdities. A good example is a story, which Hecataeus finds in Hesiod, of Aegyptus and the number of his sons: “Aegyptus himself did not come to Argos, but his sons: Hesiod formulates fifty, but I not even twenty” (*FGH* 1 F 19). Hecataeus finds it absurd that a man might have fifty sons, and, although he is willing to concede that Aegyptus might have a large number of sons, he finds it more likely that the number is something short of twenty, instead of the fifty Hesiod reports. Hecataeus openly disagrees with his source, the venerable poet Hesiod, who relies on the Muses for his information, and Hecataeus relies instead upon his own judgment for the truth.

Xenophanes discredits the anthropomorphisms of Greeks and barbarians because of their multiple renditions of the gods, just as Nagy points out, and in like fashion Hecataeus discounts the stories of the Greeks because of their conflicting multiplicity. Xenophanes discredits the poetic renditions of the gods for an additional reason that has much in common with Hecataeus’s second criterion of “absurdity.” Some poets ascribe features to the divine nature that are simply “not fitting,” which we might plausibly gloss as “improper,” such as the gods’ flitting about from place to place, οὐδὲ μετέρχεσθαι μιν ἐπιτρέπει ἄλλοτε ἄλλῃ (B26.2), and presumably from this supposition about divine propriety Xenophanes infers the stability of the supreme deity of his theology. If cast against a certain conception of divine dignity, many of the features of the gods the poetic tradition ascribes to them are “improper,” just as Hecataeus finds the stories of the Greeks “absurd” in the light of his

conception of the coherent and the probable. This criticism Xenophanes formulates is part of his effort to disengage the divine nature from the distortions of anthropomorphism, as he undertakes to purify it of what plausibly could count as human shortcomings, physical, moral, and intellectual, which the poetic tradition has attributed to the divine nature.

Like Hecataeus, Xenophanes has a well-developed “critical faculty,” and each man exercises this faculty in criticizing the poetic tradition. Hecataeus finds his critical faculty sufficient for achieving his task. He does not call upon the Muses. Accordingly, he does not write in verse, but in prose. Xenophanes also does not call upon the Muses, as far as what can be gathered from his fragments and the testimonial record. The first verse of B18, which Nagy takes to support his view that Xenophanes believes that humankind receives some knowledge from the gods, can plausibly be read in just the opposite way. This verse, “not at all from the beginning did the gods reveal everything to mortals,” could just as well mean that the gods made no revelations whatsoever to mortals³⁶ and, as the second verse of B18 indicates, it is only through their own efforts over time that mortals come to improve their epistemic state, which is none too good in any circumstance, as Xenophanes would seem to indicate in B34. He denies that knowledge can ever be achieved “about the gods,” as well as about some other unspecified topics he has discoursed upon beyond the content of the fragment, and he concludes that “opinion is wrought over all” (δόκος δ’ ἐπὶ πᾶσι τέτυκται, B34.4). The half-sentence that makes up B35 may mean that humans must be satisfied only with credible beliefs, which are more probable than their alternatives: “let these be accepted as like the realities” (εὐκίᾳ τοῖς ἐτύμοισι), which is language remarkably close to the words of the Heliconian Muses when they describe to Hesiod the falsehoods they are capable of speaking as “like realities” (ἐτύμοισιν ὁμοῖα, *Th.* 27).³⁷ Xenophanes may be thought to be offering a caution against the enthusiasm of those new intellectuals who like Hecataeus strike out on their own, free of the tutelage of the Muses in their epistemic adventures, and who rely for their opinions upon what seems to them to be true. Xenophanes may be warning those among them who fail to appreciate that they may achieve at most credible beliefs, which would fall short of knowledge: “for even if

³⁶ For this reading of B18.1, see Leshner 1992: 153–54.

³⁷ In turn, the words of the Muses are close to those used to describe the “many falsehoods” the disguised Odysseus regales Penelope with: ἵσκε ψεύδεα πολλὰ λέγων ἐτύμοισιν ὁμοῖα (*Od.* 19.203). For this and other parallels to *Th.* 27, see West 1966: 163. For a detailed account of B34 and 35 and the various interpretations of them, see Leshner 1992: 155–76.

someone happens to say most especially what has happened, / nevertheless he himself does not know" (B34.3–4). Xenophanes' new conception of the divine nature may also bar him from calling upon the Muses. His conception of the supreme god may have consequences for the traditional forms of communication between divinity and humanity, and his rejection of the authority of the Muses might be of a piece with his rejection of divination. He still urges humans to pray to the gods for the power to do what is just (B1.15–16), and a prayer as a request is a human effort to communicate with divinity. After all, the supreme god can hear (B24), but may be so far beyond full human conception, "not at all like mortals in body or in thought" (B23), that divine communication is not possible.

Xenophanes' position on the epistemic condition of humankind has much in common with that of his younger contemporary Alcmaeon of Croton, who is also a westerner, as Xenophanes had become in his exile. In the proem of his book Alcmaeon maintains that the gods possess the "clear and certain truth"³⁸ about everything unseen and mortal, but men can only "judge from tokens," τεκμαίρεσθαι, concerning these same things (B1).³⁹ Alcmaeon may mean that the unknown character of things, which the gods know through direct apprehension, humans may conjecture about through inferences based upon what is known from their observation. Some scholars take this fragment to be the statement of Alcmaeon's commitment to empirical research,⁴⁰ and "reasonable conjecture" could provide a plausible gloss for the activity of τεκμαίρεσθαι.⁴¹ Alcmaeon's procedure is compatible with Hecataeus's stated practice of adopting only what "seems to me to be true," of his accepting only what he takes to be the probable truth of the matter, and also with Xenophanes' recommendation to accept credible beliefs (B35). Like the poet Homer (*Il.* 2.484–92), Alcmaeon allows that the gods enjoy superior epistemic circumstances over those of humans, whose circumstances would appear to yield something less than knowledge about certain crucial subjects. Yet, unlike Homer, Alcmaeon, when left to himself, is not helpless and hopelessly dependent upon "rumor" for important facts (486), since he may call upon his own human resources for whatever understanding he may

³⁸ This rendering of σαφήνεια follows the suggestion of Leshner 1992: 156–57 in his analysis of Xenophanes' use of τὸ σαφές in B34, in which Leshner considers a number of authors' uses of similar words, and in which he finds a correspondence between Xenophanes' use of σαφές and Alcmaeon's use of σαφήνεια.

³⁹ For difficulties over the text of Alcmaeon B1, see Guthrie 1962: 344–45 with nn1–2.

⁴⁰ Fränkel 1975: 340 offers this reading of Alcmaeon B1.

⁴¹ LSJ, s. v. τεκμαίρομαι 2.1.

claim for himself.⁴² Neither Xenophanes nor Hecataeus nor Alcmaeon calls upon the Muses for epistemic assistance, and for each of them their epistemic condition is their own responsibility.

Xenophanes might well have believed that he had some good reasons to write in prose. His developed critical judgment and his criticism of the poets' reliability would suffice for his abandoning the Muses as repositories of knowledge. In addition, his new conception of the divine nature may provide a deeper reason for his shunning the institution of the Muses. His intellectual independence at any rate appears certain. Why then did he stay with verse? Verse is traditionally the gift of the Muses (Sol. Fr. 13.51–2 West), and an author's use of verse gives his audience the right to presume that he is dependent upon the Muses for his poetic proficiency and for any claim he may make to knowledge of an extraordinary order. Xenophanes does have interests in topics out of the ordinary, above all, the nature of divinity, the kinds of topics the Muses traditionally would have within their purview, but he does not call upon the Muses for assistance of any kind. Even though he may have made his living as a rhapsode, as Diogenes Laertius has sometimes been taken to indicate (9.18),⁴³ Xenophanes still has substantial reason to abandon verse for prose. But evidently he did not find it compelling. Was it merely a matter of his not being able to think in any other way than in meter about serious topics (Osborne 1997: 26)? But others of his time and before were able to do so; then why not he?

Not all of Xenophanes' verse is theological; B2 does not demand a theological context in its condemnation of the Greek infatuation with Olympic victors. One cannot then plausibly maintain that Xenophanes writes in verse from pious motivations alone. His poetry does take a hymnal quality when he says of his supreme god, "whole he sees, whole he thinks, and whole he hears" (B24), with its solemn, anaphoric repetition of "whole" and the symmetry of the three phrases.⁴⁴ Besides, piety is perfectly expressible in prose, even in a "poetic" manner, as we can clearly see from the poetic prose of

⁴² For recent investigations into the epistemic conceptions of the early Greeks, see Leshner 1981, 1994, 1999; Hussey 1990.

⁴³ Diogenes writes of Xenophanes, ἀντὶς ἐρραψώδει τὰ ἑαυτοῦ (9.18). Since Xenophanes is such a severe critic of Homer, Bowra 1938a: 261–62 finds it improbable that Xenophanes was a rhapsode who made his living reciting Homeric poems. Burnet 1930: 115 also does not believe that Xenophanes was a rhapsode, but rather an elegist who recited his poems among fellow gentlemen at symposia. Guthrie 1962: 364 is of a like opinion.

⁴⁴ Deichgräber 1933 identifies the hymnal qualities of prose by examining the fragments of Anaxagoras and of his probable disciple Diogenes of Apollonia, and at 360 he cites B24 of Xenophanes as an example of hymnodic verse.

Heraclitus, in which he expresses his adoration for the deity of his eccentric theology: “The god day-night, winter-summer, war-peace, satiety-hunger” (B67). These grand, but conflicting, expressions, which “name” the deity, are broad in their span and range over cosmic and human phenomena. In their stately progression they take a chiastic arrangement, abba, in which the negative and positive pair, “winter” and “summer,” is the inverse of the positive and negative pair, “day” and “night,” and the same arrangement holds for the second two pairs of expressions. The chiasmus has its origin in verse, but it is a common stylistic feature of the early authors of prose.⁴⁵ Plausibly, Anaximander’s book may even have had its hymnodic dimension. When Aristotle reports Anaximander’s views on his first principle, the divine Apeiron, he says that it “encompasses all things and all things pilots,” καὶ περιέχειν ἅπαντα καὶ πάντα κυβερνᾶν (*Ph.* 203b11–12, [A15]). This phrase too has a hymnodic ring to it in its close repetition of “all things,” and it is also in the form of a chiasmus, in which the phrase’s two transitive verbs match, just as their plural objects correspond. These ostensible hymnal and artistic features of the passage argue for Aristotle’s reporting something close to the words of Anaximander.⁴⁶

In one important respect Xenophanes differs from the Milesian cosmologists and from Hecataeus. He wishes to reform the customs and beliefs of the ordinary Greek. He is not just interested in influencing a few intellectuals about cosmology or in entertaining a few readers with descriptions of faraway places and people. Because of his ambition for reform on a large scale, he would count himself among the would-be educators of the Greeks. This is true not only in his undertaking to change the Greeks’ beliefs about the gods, but even in his more-modest goal of changing the behavior of the Greeks at their banquets. He urges them to be mindful of the gods in their entertainment by recounting stories of a reverent and pure nature (B1.14), and also not to overindulge in their drink (B1.17–18). In another fragment he criticizes his fellow citizens of Colophon for their effeminate practices, “the unprofitable luxuries,” they picked up from their Lydian overlords (B3). Xenophanes even is critical of the Greeks’ adulation of the athletic prowess of the Olympic victors, whose strength is of no profit to the Greeks at all, and he upbraids them for their neglect of the practical power of his own “good wisdom” (B2). The popularity of athletic competition cuts across all classes,⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Lilja 1968: 133 reports that the chiasmus is so common in the fragments of the earliest prose authors that it is appropriate to “speak of the chiastic bias of the earliest prose.”

⁴⁶ See Jaeger 1947: 30–31 with n43 on the hymnodic quality of this passage and the “hierarchical repetition” of the phrase “all things.”

⁴⁷ For the broad popularity of athletic competition, see Bowra 1938a: 264–65.

and we find it praised in Homer (*Od.* 8.147–48). Xenophanes' criticism of such a widespread enthusiasm is on a par with his criticisms of religion, because they strike at the important beliefs of practically everyone.

Whatever Homer may have thought of himself, subsequent generations of Greeks took him to be their teacher, the poet who "educated Hellas," as Plato's Socrates reports (*R.* 10.606e), and Xenophanes himself says as much, "from the beginning all have learned from Homer" (B10). In *Works and Days* Hesiod is more explicit about his pedagogic mission in his efforts to persuade his delinquent brother Perses to improve his conduct, a thinly disguised effort on Hesiod's part to instruct every Greek, and Heraclitus declares that "the teacher of most is Hesiod" (B57). Herodotus brackets Homer and Hesiod as those who are responsible for the theogony of the Greeks, the names of the gods, their honors and arts, and the various forms the gods may take (2.53.2). Aristophanes puts into the mouth of Aeschylus praise for the poets of old for their instruction, and he ticks off the teachings of Orpheus as mystic rites, of Musaeus as oracles and cures for disease, of Hesiod as agricultural skills, and the teachings of the "divine Homer" as those of "tactics, virtues, the weaponry of men" (*Ra.* 1030–36). Verse is the medium of the great public educators of Hellas, and in the early days of literary prose their poetry retains a central position in broad public education. In large part primary education consisted in the memorization of "the poems of good poets" (*Pl. Prt.* 325e). Since Xenophanes is competing with the teachers of Hellas for the attention of a great Hellenic audience, he may have decided to remain with verse as the traditional medium of public instruction. By writing and performing in verse he would also meet his opponents upon their own territory, and his competition with them would thus appear all the more explicit.⁴⁸ The standard explanation scholars give for verse as the medium of the earliest literature is the ease with which it may be memorized (*Pl. Phdr.* 267a), and thus the ease with which it may be recited to, and retained by, an illiterate audience (e.g. Thomas 1992: 114). Memorization is important for an oral people who in their illiteracy rely upon their memory, rather than a written document, in their communication, record-keeping, and their accumulation and distribution of information. Illiteracy would still be fairly extensive in the time of Xenophanes. Accordingly, verse would still be attractive to an author who wished to reach a large audience of diverse intellectual abilities and education, even during the period in which there is a growth in literacy and an increase in written prose.

⁴⁸ This appears also to be the view of Long 1985: 245–46.

Verse may have recommended itself to Xenophanes in another way as an especially convenient vehicle for gaining access to a mass audience. Arguably, Xenophanes “publishes” his opinions through the performance of his poems, and their dissemination arises from the re-performance of his poems by himself and by others. Xenophanes may have embraced verse over prose, despite the growing popularity of prose among the new intellectuals, because at his time verse still provided the best way to get his opinions to the largest audience in the shortest amount of time.⁴⁹ The age-old tradition of verse-performance provided a ready-stage for the publication of ideas, even in the sixth century when books of prose were becoming available. Pan-Hellenic religious festivals and games at Delphi, Olympia, and at other significant sanctuaries had for ages provided venues for the performance of various forms of verse.⁵⁰ The conversation between Plato’s Socrates and the rhapsode Ion discloses that the poets whose poetry might be performed at these sorts of venues would include not only Homer and Hesiod, but also Archilochus (*Ion* 531a). If Plato’s *Ion* can be trusted, rhapsodes at least in the time of Socrates may have provided some kind of commentary on the verse they recited. Ion boasts about how no one other than himself, not even Metrodorus of Lamp-sacus, who published allegorical interpretations of Homer (D. L. 2.11), “had so many and fine comments on Homer,” ἔσχεν εἰπεῖν οὕτω πολλὰς καὶ καλὰς διανοίας περὶ Ὀμήρου (530c-d). Xenophon has some of his characters, including Socrates, speak ill of the intelligence of the rhapsodes, as those who had little understanding of the Homeric poems they recited (*Smp.* 3.5–6, cf. *Mem.* 4.2.10). Possibly, rhapsodes had the opportunity when reciting a poet’s work to provide in certain circumstances a commentary on the work. Despite the doubts of many students of Xenophanes, he may after all have recited Homer and Hesiod in competitions, and at these performances he may have had the opportunity to recite in the form of a commentary some of his verses that were critical of these renowned poets. Perhaps even more important for quick dissemination of ideas were the smaller venues sympotic parties would provide where, in addition to drinking-songs, elegies and iambics would be recited and would find a place for their re-performance over the years.⁵¹ An elegy of Theognis bears witness to the belief that verse has the power not only to give “fame” to the person who provides its subject and to make him

⁴⁹For the circumstances of poetic performances, see Herington 1985; Thomas 1992: 117–23.

⁵⁰Diogenes reports that a rhapsode by the name of Cleomenes recited Empedocles’ *Purifications* at Olympia (8.63).

⁵¹Herington 1985: 38 presumes that from the beginning the symposium provided the “natural habitat” of elegiac poetry. See also Bowie 1986.

immortal, but that it can spread his name across great distances with great speed. Theognis brags not only of how he has with his elegies made his lover Cynus, the subject of his songs, immortal, “as long as earth and sun exist,” but also how his verse gives Cynus “wings” so that he may “fly, soaring easily over the boundless sea and all the land” and be present wherever men gather for “dinner and feast” (237–54, cf. Pi N. 5.1–5).

At some point prose authors began to make public presentations of their works or at least selections from them.⁵² But the evidence we have for these presentations concerns authors later in the fifth century, well after the time of Xenophanes. When Gorgias of Leontini descended upon Athens as an ambassador in 427, he won immediate admiration from the Athenians for the oratorical skill he exercised in his extravagant antithetical prose (D. S. 12.53.1–4 [A5]), and he was conspicuous for his oratorical presentations at Greek festivals (Philostr. VS 1.9.4 [A1]). Yet what is more significant is that there are reports from antiquity that Herodotus gave public readings from his *Histories*. In his essay on Herodotus, Lucian maintains that Herodotus gave a recital of his *Histories* at the games in Olympia and was the first to use the Olympic Games as a platform for promoting prose compositions.⁵³ There is in fact some internal evidence indicating that Herodotus did give public recitals or lectures, when, for instance, he refers in his text to the Greeks’ sceptical response to the story about the Persian debate, after the ouster of the Magi, over the feasibility of instituting democracy as their form of government (3.80.1, 6.43.3⁵⁴). Thucydides may allude to these sorts of public presentations when he contrasts his work, as something of lasting value, with those that are composed for the sake of temporary acclaim (1.22.4).⁵⁵

⁵² For prose presentations, see Evans 1991; Thomas 1992: 125–26.

⁵³ *Herodotus or Aëtion* 1–2. Herodotus could not have read the whole of his history before any audience, as Flory 1980: 14 also stresses. Other ancient authors testify to Herodotus’s reading from his history at other sites: cf. Plu. *De malign. Hdt.* 862a–b (Athens), D. Chr. 37.7 (Corinth). Flory 1980: 26 also argues that Herodotus never expected to have a large, popular audience, of the sort the poets might have, because of the mere bulk of his book, and thus his book would have had the same sort of audience as Thucydides’ shorter, but intellectually more demanding, book.

⁵⁴ Cf. Herodotus’s comment at 1.193.4 on the height Babylonian millet and sesame may reach.

⁵⁵ There is dispute over exactly what Thucydides meant by, κῆμά τε ἐς αἰεὶ μᾶλλον ἢ ἀγώνισμα ἐς τὸ παραχρῆμα ἀκούειν ξύγκειται, and one conjecture taken seriously by scholars is that the authors Thucydides is critical of were not competing for a prize, but were reading from their books at a “booth” they set up at some ἀγών, whether it be Olympia, Delphi, Panathenaea, or wherever, so that they may gain some publicity for their book: Davison 1962: 155; Flory 1980: n10; Evans 1991: 99.

Herodotus, or some unknown prose predecessor,⁵⁶ had to forge these new venues for the “pre-publication” of prose literature through performance, whereas Xenophanes need only step forward and exploit the age-old venues for the “publication” of verse.

Xenophanes is the first philosopher to take an interest in influencing a large audience. He probably served as “the ruler of the drinking” at sympotic evenings,⁵⁷ and possibly he performed as a rhapsode. At the very least he recited his own poems (D. L. 9.18), presumably at symposia. He is a public figure, whose public activity would place him before large audiences, and in his own words Xenophanes confesses to having traveled extensively over Hellas for many decades (B8, B45). He failed to have a significant popular influence. But he had an influence on Euripides (*HF* 1341–6, Fr. 282 Nauck), and Plato’s theology reflects important features of Xenophanes’ (*R.* 379a–82c). The Milesian cosmologists wrote for a public, both literate and illiterate, since one person might read aloud a book to many, but the Milesians would not expect their refined speculation to attract a large audience, and in fact our earliest record of any mention of Anaximander and Anaximenes comes from Aristotle (Guthrie 1962: 72). Pythagoras is a pedagogue, but secretive and exclusionist, and he produced no books. Heraclitus is even more severe than Xenophanes in his criticisms of the Greeks and their ways. He is an accomplished prose stylist, whose graceful words are memorable and have attracted and puzzled many readers over the centuries, and he appears to have had a certain vogue in Plato’s youth in the time of Cratylus (Pl. *Tht.* 179e–180c). It is not difficult to imagine oral presentations of Heraclitus’s words, since they are attractive to the ear. Yet he is no Xenophanes. Heraclitus was evidently a private person who never left his hometown of Ephesus. He is cryptic in his style of expression, and not interested in making it easy for his audience to appreciate his teaching. His statements call for careful contemplation over many close readings.⁵⁸ He has no reason to call upon a more public or popular medium for the expression of his views. This is underscored by his “publication” of his book, if Diogenes may be believed (9.6), through deposition of his book at the great temple of Artemis in Ephesus in his dedication of his book to the goddess.

⁵⁶ Evans 1991: 130 presumes that Herodotus would have had predecessors who performed from their prose histories at interstate festivals.

⁵⁷ For this view of Xenophanes as possibly serving as “the ruler of the drinking,” see Bowra 1938b: 356–57.

⁵⁸ Kahn 1983: 117–18 and 2003: 155 stresses that Heraclitus intended his book for readers, not merely for auditors.

Xenophanes is in a position to give reasons for his composing in verse beyond habit or the inability to compose seriously in prose or his dependence upon the Muses (cf. Osborne 1997: 26). In the first place, he was a reformer devoted to educating the Greeks about the nature of divinity. Second, the public educators of the Greeks, Homer and Hesiod, composed in verse, and traditional public education is immersed in verse through the students' memorization of the poems of these and other important poets. Third, verse was easier to memorize than prose and therefore provided a medium more conducive to the retention of the opinions it expressed and to their dissemination among the illiterate. Fourth, and of particular interest, verse was the medium of public broadcasting because of its long history of public performance. Verse, however, was not essential to Xenophanes' message, but the medium best suited to his pedagogical aspirations. When Xenophanes appropriated the prerogative of verse, which the Muses bestowed upon their favorites, for his own analytical projects that owe nothing to the intervention of the Muses, he was, in effect, trying to demythologize verse so that its use would not announce its author's debt to the Muses for his skill or his information.

Xenophanes, however, was not followed by the Greek philosophers in his appropriation of verse for critical enterprises, not even by the philosopher-poets Parmenides and Empedocles, who plausibly have different motives for their adoption of verse. The new medium of prose becomes the standard medium for the new ideas,⁵⁹ in part because it frees its authors from any appearance of an obligation to the Muses or any superhuman agent.⁶⁰ Prose would be essential to the message of these early authors of prose, since it underscores their break with tradition. But after a time this aspect of their message became lost, and most philosophers, scientists, and historians would come to write in prose because that is what they learned from their teachers and all that they know how to do.

⁵⁹ Philosophers, scientists, and historians of antiquity would still find reasons to write in verse. Lucretius lays out his epicurean philosophy in Latin hexameters; Lucan writes a verse history of the Roman civil war; Aratus published an astronomical treatise in Greek verse.

⁶⁰ Other reasons are available, not least of which is liberating the thought of the author from the restrictions of verse. Aristotle comments on the dignity of hexameters, but their "lacking in the harmony of conversation" (λεκτικῆς ἁρμονίας δεόμενος), in contrast with iambic, which is the "language of the many" and of all the meters is most often found in ordinary speech (*Rh.* 1408b32–5). Apuleius praises Pherecydes of Syros for being the first to dare to write in prose and to reject "the bond of verse" (*Flor.* 15), and Barnes 1979: 155 complains how the "exigencies of metre" render Parmenides' thought more obscure.

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