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Chapter Author(s): Alberto Jori

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Book Editor(s): Jessica Elbert Decker, Jennifer Ferriss-Hill, Heather L. Reid

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Alberto Jori¹

Empedocles and the Birth of Rhetoric in Sicily: *Logos between Magic and Therapy*²

Philosopher of nature or shaman?

Empedocles of Akragas has a central position in the development of Greek culture: he marks the crucial moment of transition from the archaic to the classical era.³ His belonging to both of these two epochs and worlds can explain his apparent contradictions.⁴ He sought to solve the philosophical problems opened up by Eleatic ontology, and with this purpose he inquired into the “elementary” structure of reality. He was thus a philosopher of nature, a *physikos*.⁵ Empedocles also practiced medicine,⁶ and composed, among other works, an extensive poem on medical topics.⁷ These facts might lead us to consider him a “scientific” thinker, devoted to rational reflection. Instead we discover that Empedocles was *also* a kind of shaman who practiced magic and

¹ Alberto Jori is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Tübingen (Germany) and Professor of the History of Ancient Philosophy at the University of Ferrara (Italy). He is the author of more than 400 scientific publications. His book *Aristotele* won the prize of the “International Academy for the History of Science” (Paris, la Sorbonne) in 2003.

² This essay is dedicated to Arnaldo Sabbioni M.D. (Mantua) with warm friendship, esteem, and gratitude. Let me also thank Professor Heather Reid, *Emerita* at Morningside University in the USA and Scholar in Residence at Exedra Mediterranean Center in Siracusa, Sicily, both for the kind invitation to participate in the conference “Empedocles in Sicily” and for the fruitful exchange of ideas.

³ On Empedocles’s life see Diogenes Laertius *Lives*, VIII, 51ff. = 31 A 1 DK.

⁴ For a suggestive picture of the “tragic” age in which Empedocles is placed, see Friedrich Nietzsche, *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks* (*Philosophie im tragischen Zeitalter der Griechen*), trans. M. Cowan (Chicago: Gateway Books, 1996), and Giorgio Colli, *Empedocle*, ed. Federica Montevicchi (Milan: Adelphi, 2019).

⁵ Aristotle *Poetics* 1447b17 (=A 22 DK) explicitly points this out, despite the fact that the Sicilian philosopher expounded his thought in verse.

⁶ See Diogenes Laertius VIII, 58 (here he quotes Satyrus, who called him an “excellent physician,” *iатros aristos*). See also Diogenes Laertius VIII, 61.

⁷ Diogenes Laertius VIII, 77, cites a *Iatrikos logos* consisting of 600 verses.

incantations.⁸ He proudly proclaimed not only that he could cure mortal diseases with his “healing word,” but also that he could bring the dead people back to life:

And thou shalt learn all the drugs that are a defense against ills and old age; since for thee alone will I accomplish all this. Thou shalt arrest the violence of the weariless winds that arise to sweep the earth and waste the fields; and again, when thou so desirest, thou shalt bring back their blasts in return. Thou shalt cause for men a seasonable drought after the dark rains, and again thou shalt change the summer drought for streams that feed the trees as they pour down from the sky. Thou shalt bring back from Hades the life of a dead man.⁹

In light of this aspect, Empedocles’s predilection for using verse¹⁰ and, in parallel, his extensive use of metaphors are not surprising.¹¹ Indeed, these are expressive resources endowed with a great suggestive power, characteristic of both shamans and oracles. How, then, should we interpret Empedocles? Is it possible for us to understand this figure in a unified way, or should we split him into a “rational” Empedocles and a “mystical” one? On the one hand, we have a “scientist,” on the other, a “holy man,” or even a charlatan.

Into this already intricate picture comes an additional element, which seems to make the enigma even more dense. We are told that Aristotle considered Empedocles the inventor of rhetoric, while Zeno was the inventor of dialectic.¹² This testimony unfortunately does not provide details; however, it appears to be worthy of faith, given the

⁸ See Diogenes Laertius VIII, 59.

⁹ Fr. B 111 DK, trans. John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy* (London: A. & C. Black Ltd, 1920³). All translations of Empedocles are from this edition.

¹⁰ See Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1407a31 (=A 25 DK).

¹¹ Precisely because of Empedocles’s use of metaphors, Aristotle (*Rhetoric* 1407a31) accuses him of intentional obscurity, saying metaphors are “legitimate” in poetry, but too ambiguous in the philosophy of nature.

¹² See Diogenes Laertius VIII, 57 (= fr. 65 Rose = A 19 DK). Aristotle spoke of Empedocles as “inventor” of rhetoric in his lost *Sophist* (see also Sextus Empiricus, *Adversus Mathematicos*, VII, 6).

authority of its source. In my view, it is precisely the news concerning Empedocles as the *father of rhetoric* that allows us to compose a unity out of the various aspects of his personality, and to interpret it in a coherent way. The philosopher's fragments can point us in the right direction. In what follows, I will show that within the framework of Empedocles's reflection, and even more so his public activity, rhetoric—the art of speech—played a very important role that was political, social, religious, and even cosmogonic.

Logos as a pacifying power

Let us consider a couple of the philosopher's fragments. First, the opening invocation of his poem *On Nature* (B 3 DK):

But, O ye gods, turn aside from my tongue the madness of those men. Hallow my lips and make a pure stream flow from them! And thee, much-wooed, white-armed Virgin Muse, do I beseech that I may hear what is lawful for the children of a day! Speed me on my way from the abode of Holiness and drive my willing car! Thee shall no garlands of glory and honor at the hands of mortals constrain to lift them from the ground, on condition of speaking in thy pride beyond that which is lawful and right, and so to gain a seat upon the heights of wisdom.

Go to now, consider with all thy powers in what way each thing is clear. Hold not thy sight in greater credit as compared with thy hearing, nor value thy resounding ear above the clear instructions of thy tongue; and do not withhold thy confidence in any of thy other bodily parts by which there is an opening for understanding, but consider everything in the way it is clear.

And now Empedocles's solemn declaration in the opening of his poem *Purifications* (B 114 DK):

Friends, I know indeed that truth is in the words (*logoi*) I shall utter, but it is hard for men, and jealous are they of the assault of belief on their souls.

In both passages, the philosopher wants to emphasize and enhance on a pragmatic level the communicative and—as we would say today—*performative* function of *logos*, as a symbol and “ritual” that seals concord among men. Language has the function (and capacity) to reconcile human beings, to give them common and beneficial goals, to counter tyranny, violence and arbitrariness.¹³ In doing so, it mirrors at the level of the human microcosm the dialectic involving the macrocosm, that is, nature in its totality. In Empedocles’s system, in addition to the four elements (the “roots”) that constitute reality—air, water, earth, and fire—there are two divine “forces” that act on these elements, one as an aggregating factor, the other as a separating agent, namely, Love (*Philotēs*, *Philia*) and Strife, or Hate (*Neikos*):

I shall tell thee a twofold tale. At one time it grew to be one only out of many; at another, it divided up to be many instead of one. There is a double becoming of perishable things and a double passing away. The coming together of all things brings one generation into being and destroys it; the other grows up and is scattered as things become divided. And these things never cease continually changing places, at one time all uniting in one through Love (*Philotēs*), at another each borne in different directions by the repulsion of Strife (*Neikos*). (B 17, 1-8 DK)

For Empedocles, the function of *logos* is analogous to that of Love: it gathers men into unity.¹⁴ Despite his aristocratic origins, Empedocles fought tyranny with all his might.¹⁵ In his perspective, tyranny had an absolutely negative meaning, not only on the political level, but

¹³ See B 112, 1-4 DK: “Friends (*philoî*), that inhabit the great town looking down on the yellow rock of Akragas, up by the citadel, busy in goodly works (*agathôn meledēmones ergōn*), harbours of honour for the stranger, men unskilled in meanness, all hail.” Empedocles here extols concord’s positive effects among the *philoî*, who pursue common goals.

¹⁴ See B 17, 23, where the philosopher emphasizes the unifying action of Love: “It is she that makes them [=mortals] have thoughts of love and work the works of peace (*phila phroneousi kai arthmia erga telousi*). They call her by the names of Joy and Aphrodite.”

¹⁵ See Diogenes Laertius VIII, 51, 66, and 72.

even more so on the “ontological” one, as an expression of shattering, opposition, and tearing apart. Tyranny imposes the will of a single individual over that of the multitude; indeed, it pits them against each other. In this sense, its effects are analogous to those of Strife.¹⁶ In tyranny, *logos* does not persuade as it does in its rhetorical use; it only threatens and commands.

But specifically, how does *logos* act according to Empedocles? He speaks of his “healing word.”¹⁷ This expression refers not only to the healing power of speech as a verbal incantation, but also to the capacity of *logos* to mend the lacerations that run through our world of experience, and to lead us back to our authentic origins. Indeed, *logos* is meant to unveil the Truth (*alētheia*), to show what the deep structure of being is.¹⁸ Empedocles thus sets himself the task of restoring an organic relationship between *being* and *appearance*, reality and phenomenon, after Parmenides sanctioned the tragic split of the two dimensions.¹⁹ Only the authoritative word of the sage, that is, of Empedocles himself—illuminates what is hidden from the sight and senses of mortals, and enables us to grasp reality undeceived:

Just as when painters are elaborating temple-offerings, men whom wisdom hath well taught their art—they, when they have taken pigments of many colors with their hands, mix

¹⁶ See Diogenes Laertius VIII, 72: tyranny, according to Empedocles, arises from contentions (*staseis*) among citizens; equality (*isotēs*) is therefore necessary to neutralize it. See also B 21, 7-8 DK: “When they are in strife all these are different in forms and separated; but they come together in love, and are desired by one another.” And B 121 DK: [there where Contention dominates, there is] “the joyless land, where are Death and Wrath and troops of Dooms besides; and parching Plagues and Rottennesses and Floods roam in darkness over the meadow of Ate.”

¹⁷ B 112, 11 DK: *euēkea baxin* (Burnet translates: “the word of healing”).

¹⁸ See B 2 DK, where Empedocles contrasts his own truth, which is *the* Truth, with the dark experiences of mortals, and especially see B 131 DK: “If ever, as regards the things of a day, immortal Muse, thou didst deign to take thought for my endeavor, then stand by me once more as I pray to thee, O Kalliopeia, as I utter a pure discourse (*agathon logon*) concerning the blessed gods.”

¹⁹ See Parmenides fr. 28 B 2 DK and 28 B 6-7 DK.

them in due proportion, more of some and less of others, and from them produce shapes like unto all things, making trees and men and women, beasts and birds and fishes that dwell in the waters, yea, and gods, that live long lives, and are exalted in honor—so let not the error prevail over thy mind, that there is any other source of all the perishable creatures that appear in countless numbers. Know this for sure, for thou hast heard the tale from a goddess.²⁰

The most dazzling discovery made along this cognitive and moral itinerary is that death does *not* exist, except from the inadequate point of view of those who fall victim to sensory perception. Death, Empedocles explains, is mere appearance, a deception; in reality, life continues uninterrupted, and birth and death “are only a mingling and interchange of what has been mingled.”²¹ The philosopher confirms this point with an episode, reported by multiple sources, of the “lifeless” (*apnoun*) woman, that is, a woman in catalepsy whom he brought back to life after thirty days of apparent death.²² By “awakening” those who seemed lost forever, Empedocles shows how his sacred *logos* succeeds in reversing what seems to be the ordinary course of nature.²³

Here is the truth in which we are constantly immersed, but for that very reason unable to understand. We need the divine teaching of Empedocles to explain it:²⁴ life, *our* life, is always there, as an uninterrupted cycle of rebirths,²⁵ a constant flowering of

²⁰ B 23 DK, see also B 3 DK.

²¹ See B 8 DK: “And I shall tell thee another thing. There is no birth of any of all the things that perish, nor any cessation for them of baneful death. They are only a mingling and interchange of what has been mingled. Birth is but a name given to these things by men.” (I modify Burnet’s translation of *physis*: see Plutarch, *Adversus Colotem* 1112a).

²² See Diogenes Laertius VIII, 60-61 and 67.

²³ Empedocles proclaims his own ability to bring back to life those who have died, and is willing to teach it to his disciple Pausanias. See B 111, 9 DK: “Thou shalt bring back from Hades the life of a dead man.”

²⁴ See B 23, 11 DK, and B 114 DK.

²⁵ See B 115, 7-8 DK: “... being born throughout the time in all manners of mortal forms, changing one toilsome path of life for another.”

manifestations that are always new and at the same time essentially the same. The Sage is aware of this permanence: in him consciousness of the present expands to past existences (“For I have been ere now a boy and a girl, a bush and a bird and a dumb fish in the sea,” B 117 DK).

Parmenides had highlighted the ambivalence of language. He explained that on the one hand, it performs a fundamental function of logical and ontological guidance for philosophical inquiry.²⁶ On the other hand, however, it can be a vehicle of deception, in connection with the sphere of *doxa*.²⁷ For Empedocles, too, language has a dual role. It can generate, when connected to perceptions, the false belief that birth and death are real. This is what happens when we hypostatize pure names. In reality, “birth,” “death,” and “change,” are mere conventions (31 B 9 DK). Language can also serve a different function, however. It can awaken in men who would otherwise remain victims of their senses, an awareness of their divine condition, their ancient fall and transcendent destination (B 115 DK):

There is an oracle of Necessity, an ancient ordinance of the gods, eternal and sealed fast by broad oaths, that whenever one of the daemons, whose portion is length of days, has sinfully polluted his hands with blood, or followed strife and forsworn himself, he must wander thrice ten thousand seasons from the abodes of the blessed, being born throughout the time in all manners of mortal forms, changing one toilsome path of life for another. For the mighty Air drives him into the Sea, and the Sea spews him forth on the dry Earth; Earth tosses him into the beams of the blazing Sun, and he flings him back to the eddies of Air. One takes him from the other, and all reject him. One of these I now am, an exile and a wanderer from the gods, for that I put my trust in senseless Strife.²⁸

²⁶ This is the “way of Truth”: see Parmenides fr. 28 B 2, 1-4 DK.

²⁷ See Parmenides fr. 28 B 1, 30 DK, on the *doxai* “in which there is no true certainty,” and 28 B 6 DK.

²⁸ See also Hippolytus’s picture of the human condition according to Empedocles in Hippolytus, *Refutationes* VII, 29.

Language, when used by the philosopher for teaching and prophecy, is no longer an expression of resignation and passivity toward fate, but can and must become an instrument of liberation:

For if, supported on thy steadfast mind, thou wilt contemplate these things with good intent and faultless care, then shalt thou have all these things [*tauta ... panta*] in abundance throughout thy life, and thou shalt gain many others from them. For these things grow of themselves into thy heart, where is each man's true nature. But if thou strivest after things of another kind, as it is the way with men that ten thousand sorry matters blunt their careful thoughts, soon will these things desert thee when the time comes round; for they long to return once more to their own kind; for know that all things have wisdom and a share of thought. (B 110 DK)

In this passage, the expression "all these things" (*tauta ... panta*) indicates the teachings imparted by Empedocles through his "good speech" (B 131 DK: *agathos logos*), i.e. his upright speech, revealing the truth, and through the "pure stream" [*sc.* of veridical words] (B 3 DK: *katharēn pēgēn*) that the thinker begs the Muse to make flow from his lips. Veridical speech, the philosopher explains, develops from itself, self-feeding and empowering itself, as it were, in the very heart of man ("For these things grow [*auxei*] of themselves into thy heart"). At the same time, the listener must beware of giving credence to the misleading opinions of men, otherwise the contents of truth conveyed to him by the philosopher will desert him ("soon will these things desert thee"). The "good speech" is thus a means to produce a radical transformation of consciousness, and even to bring mankind and the whole of reality into a new cycle, that of Love. Empedocles's *logos* is not a trivial and deceptive communication, but a message of *redemption*, of true rebirth, and is thus charged with mystical significance. It has the power to shape reality.

Let us now consider two "miraculous" episodes of which Empedocles was reportedly the protagonist. In one case, an account is given of unhealthy water from a river in Selinunte causing a plague and decimating the population. Empedocles engineers more

salubrious water from two streams to flow into the river (at his own expense): this intervention causes the pestilence to cease and restores conditions favorable to life and fertility.²⁹ The initial situation suggests that the “tyrannical” domination of a single factor—in this case, unhealthy water—generates disease and death. Empedocles highlights the positive effects of proportionate dosing of water, or, to put it better, of the *balancing* of its qualities. He creates, using different streams of water, a harmonious, and therefore life-giving, mixture in which no single component dominates. In this way, he becomes the healer and benefactor of an entire community.³⁰ The lesson that emerges is that when *physis* manifests imbalances or deficiencies and is consequently harmful to human beings, human *technē* can (and must) intervene, introducing proportionate mixing where previously there was the pathogenic dominance. Echoed here is the message of Pythagoreanism, hinging on *harmony* and *measure*.

And now a second episode attested by multiple sources. Here too the philosopher-demiurge successfully defends the survival and smooth functioning of a community from the bullying of a seemingly irrepressible natural factor, creating a newfound harmony between man and environment. The testimony reports an extremely violent wind that causes miasmas, harmful to the health and life of an entire population. This wind is restrained and neutralized by Empedocles with a kind of barrier made of leather wineskins.³¹ Similar to the case of the unhealthy waters, we find a single factor—the raging wind—that overpowers and spreads death and destruction. In fact, the wind blew “violently” (*sphodrōs*). The adverb *sphodrōs*, like the adjective *sphodros* and the noun *sphodrotēs* (indicating violence, vehemence, impetuosity), refers to that which *exceeds measure*. It also has an ethical-political meaning: in this case, it designates the arrogance of

²⁹ See Diogenes Laertius VIII, 70.

³⁰ Indeed “the citizens of Selinunte, after he had saved them in this way, worshipped him and addressed prayers to him just as to a god.” (Diogenes Laertius VIII, 70, translation mine).

³¹ See Diogenes Laertius VIII, 60; this episode is reported by various sources (see also A 2 DK and 14 DK).

that which goes beyond its limits.³² Environmental factors, including wind, which is a manifestation of air—one of the “roots” of reality—are seen by Empedocles as living forces endowed with a certain will. As such, they too, when *Neikos* (“Strife”) dominates, tend to overwhelm one another. And in the same way that the tyrant violently imposes himself on other men, sinning by *hybris*, similarly, the excessively impetuous wind that afflicted Agrigento, destroying everything that stood in its way and spreading disease and death, behaved “tyrannically.” A natural element left to itself would exterminate men if the philosopher-magician did not intervene to “harness” it. In a metaphorical sense, one can therefore attribute to the destructive wind a form of *hybris*, if we understand by this the going beyond one's limits, the claiming of a share that exceeds one's due. The original impetuosity of the elements is again neutralized by human *technē*.

Rhetoric is likewise a saving *technē* and, in a way, a form of engineering—*social* engineering, not ecological. The power of *logos* is beneficent and healing precisely because by imposing a limit on what is excessive and too violent—such as the human passions that generate conflict—it introduces *proportion* and *moderation*.

Empedocles's theophany

Empedocles is also a rhetorician because self-celebration is functional to his role. He is a spiritual leader who needs to incessantly emphasize and exalt—even verbally—his own sacred function. He proclaims everywhere a message of universal pacification, travelling the length and breadth of Sicily worshipped by the crowds as a god on earth:

I go about among you an immortal god, no mortal now
[*theos ambrotos, ouketi thnētos*], honored among all as is meet,
crowned with fillets and flowery garlands. Straightway,
whenever I enter with these in my train, both men and
women, into the flourishing towns, is reverence done me;
they go after me in countless throngs; asking of me what is

³² See Plato, *Republic* 580 a-d: the tyrant is characterised by the *irrepressible violence* (*sphodrotēta*) of his desires.

the way to gain; some desiring oracles, while some, who for many a weary day have been pierced by the grievous pangs of all manner of sickness, beg to hear from me the word of healing. (B 112, 4-12 DK)

His authority imposes itself without conflict, weapons, violence. Unlike tyrants, he does not need to issue orders, much less threats. His august presence and speech suffice to draw veneration from endless multitudes of followers.³³ On the one hand, Empedocles certainly possesses the qualities of a spiritual leader (today we would say a *guru*), and he emphasizes in his attire and bearing his superiority, which gives him a kind of superhuman ability to intellectually enlighten the people.³⁴ On the other hand, the passionate soteriological expectations of the Sicilian people focus on him: they see in him the man who can liberate them from the brutality of tyranny. He feels like a god but, despite his proud claim to his role, he is also “humble” in that he does not want political power, moral authority is enough for him.³⁵

The episode of his death in Mount Etna, variously recounted and sometimes maliciously presented as suicide disguised for “propagandistic” reasons,³⁶ confirms his paradigmatic role as a political reformer, messianic prophet, inaugurator of the kingdom of justice, persuader of the masses, and above all, the initiator of a new cosmic cycle. Empedocles *sacrifices himself* so that the new era of universal concord may be born from the purifying fire of Etna. He attributed a particular role to *fire*. According to Hippolytus, he in fact assigned to this element the task of marking out the phases of the cosmos: “The intelligent fire of the monad (*to tēs monados noeron pur*) is god (*theos*) and all things are constituted by fire and will resolve themselves in fire.”³⁷ Indeed, Hippolytus draws a precise parallel between the conception of fire attributed to Empedocles and the Stoic

³³ See Diogenes Laertius VIII, 66.

³⁴ See A 2 DK and A 18 DK.

³⁵ See Diogenes Laertius VIII, 63 (see also the opinion of the historian Timaeus, in Diogenes Laertius VIII, 66).

³⁶ See Diogenes Laertius VIII, 66.

³⁷ See Hippolytus, *Refutationes* 1 3 = A 31 DK; translation mine

doctrine of universal conflagration. According to this testimony, therefore, fire, as a creator and at the same time destroyer, seems to have primacy over the other elements: in addition to constituting the deepest essence of reality, it marks with its outburst the beginning and above all the *end* of a cosmic cycle.³⁸ To fire, therefore, and to that grandiose manifestation of it which are the flames of Etna, Empedocles entrusts his body, throwing himself into the mouth of the volcano to destroy his own individuality and annihilate his empirical existence.

In this way, among other things, Empedocles reinterprets and re-actualizes the ancient ritual of the *sacrifice of the shaman-king*. The latter, as Sir James Frazer explains,³⁹ could be chosen to suffer and atone for his people by becoming the designated victim of a human sacrifice. Empedocles, as a shaman and spiritual leader of the Greek world, throws himself into Mount Etna to sacrifice *on his own initiative*, but without that shedding of blood for which he felt horror.⁴⁰ He has now fulfilled his mission to proclaim the truth and the way of redemption everywhere. The sacrifice that crowns his existence is then his apotheosis, in the sense of an ascent to the divine level,⁴¹ and at the same time it is the announcement of the beginning of a *new* cosmic phase, placed under the sign of *Philia*, that is, of universal peace and concord. After him, and thanks to him, mankind will no longer be the dupe of a hostile fate or the arbitrary will of the gods, but will become the architects of their own liberation.⁴²

³⁸ This is why Empedocles says that it "inspires fear" (*dedissetai*: text adopted by Gallavotti in B 27 DK).

³⁹ See J.G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (originally published in 1890, reprinted in London: The Macmillan Press, 1976), Part 1: *The Magic Art and the Evolution of Kings*, vol. 1, 258.

⁴⁰ See Diogenes Laertius VIII, 53, but also A 11 DK, B 136 DK, B 137 DK, and B 139 DK.

⁴¹ See Diogenes Laertius VIII, 68.

⁴² Empedocles prophesies the final redemption of the "demons" currently serving their punishment on earth: they will become gods again. See B 147 DK: "and thence they [*sc.* the now redeemed demons] rise up as gods exalted in honor, sharing the hearth of the other gods and the

The life and even more so the death of Empedocles *usher in a new cycle*. Fire, which is, as Heraclitus said, that which is exchanged with everything and with which everything is exchanged,⁴³ symbolizes the eternal current of life to which Empedocles voluntarily returns.⁴⁴

The prophecy of a universal reconciliation

Empedocles strives to overcome, in the name of friendship and equality (*isonomia*), contentions and rivalries among citizens (B 112, 2-4 DK). Indeed, he seeks to create an atmosphere of peace among the various Sicilian cities, each of which was traditionally jealous of its autonomy and eager to overpower the others.⁴⁵ There is, however, an even deeper dimension to Empedocles's pacification project. In his reminiscence, he overcomes and recomposes in the unity of his own consciousness the distinction between the male and female genders, the opposition between flora and fauna, and the separation of the various living species. He remembers that he was *kouros* and *korē*, but also a bush (*thamnos*)—therefore a being belonging to flora and connected to earth—as well as a bird (*oiōnos*), that is, an animal connected to air, and a fish (*ichthys*), whose environment is water. In this way, his remembrance encompasses all environmental domains and all forms of life (B 117 DK). In him *all* reality is reconciled and becomes transparent to intelligence: his consciousness illuminates the darkest corners of the past, recreating a universal phylogeny. The philosopher-shaman, proclaiming himself eternally alive above and beyond individual existences, becomes the organ, the heart, in which the life of the cosmos beats. Empedocles prepares for the advent of

same table, free from human woes, safe from destiny, and incapable of hurt" (tr. Burnet).

⁴³ See Heraclitus, 22 A 5 DK (from Aëtius I 3, 11).

⁴⁴ Empedocles thought that fire flowed under the earth (and evidently the fire of Etna was connected to this subterranean fire); see Aristotle, *De generatione et corruptione* II 3, 330b19.

⁴⁵ See his criticism of Akragas's love of luxury, which caused their expansionist will, in Diogenes Laertius VIII, 63. On the first phase of the Sicilian tyrannies and their warlike policy, see Alberto Jori, *Sognando l'Arcadia. La cultura letteraria, filosofica e scientifica della Sicilia greca*, preface by Heather Reid, Ferrara (Ferrara: Este, 2023, 26 ff).

the Love-dominated *Sphairos*,⁴⁶ because he ushers in the era of universal concord.

Feeding on all experiences, sensations, and memories, and expanding the space of awareness in himself and the others, Empedocles, as Master of Wisdom, urges men to free themselves from their condition of bondage. The seat of this revolutionary awareness is thought (A 30 DK), which is nothing but *blood* as well-proportioned mixture of elements.⁴⁷ Just as the rupture of the original harmony was brought about at the beginning of this painful cycle by the outpouring of *blood* (B 115, 1-6 DK), in the same way, the defense of life, abstention from bloody sacrifice, and mutual love constitute the path to universal reconciliation.⁴⁸ *Rhetoric* is the factor that brings about this decisive change. Persuasive language makes use of the suggestive rhythm of verse—as in Empedocles's poems, written in Homeric style—but at the same time uses rational argumentation. It therefore fuses the power of *logos* with that of music, which acts as a

⁴⁶ See B 17, 23-26 DK; B 21, 8 DK, and especially B 27 DK: "There (in the sphere) are distinguished neither the swift limbs of the sun, no, nor the shaggy earth in its might, nor the sea, so fast was the god bound in the close covering of Harmony, spherical and round, rejoicing in his circular solitude."

⁴⁷ See B 105 DK: "(The heart), dwelling in the sea of blood that runs in opposite directions, where chiefly is what men call thought (*noēma*); for the blood round the heart is the thought of men" (tr. Burnet).

⁴⁸ See B 128 DK: "Nor had they any Ares for a god nor Kydoimos, no nor King Zeus nor Kronos nor Poseidon, but Kypris the Queen [...]. Her did they propitiate with holy gifts, with painted figures and perfumes of cunning fragrance, with offerings of pure myrrh and sweet-smelling frankincense, casting on the ground libations of brown honey. And the altar did not reek with pure bull's blood, but this was held in the greatest abomination among men, to eat the goodly limbs after tearing out the life" (tr. Burnet). And here is an idyllic picture of the concord that originally reigned among all living beings under the rule of Love, and that is to be reconstituted in the new cycle, B 130 DK: "For all things were tame and gentle to man, both beasts and birds, and friendly feelings were kindled everywhere" (tr. Burnet).

pacifying and moderating agent on all living beings (as in the myth of Orpheus, whose music appeased the animals).⁴⁹

This means that, contrary to some interpretations (even dating back to antiquity) of his thought,⁵⁰ according to Empedocles the alternation of cosmic cycles is not a mechanical one. On the contrary, it is conditioned by human will, and above all it depends on the initiative of some exceptional individuals—such as himself—who, by the power of speech, are able to raise the level of awareness of men and peoples. In essence, he who is able to awaken in souls the consciousness of man's transcendent destiny, and to establish a climate of universal concord, can hasten the advent of Love. Empedocles felt that this was precisely *his* mission.⁵¹

Conclusion: Empedocles's legacy

What was the fate of rhetoric *after* Empedocles? His rhetoric was extraordinarily multifaceted: it had a cosmological significance, but it was also functional to a specific political and religious project. At the same time, it created an organic plane of connection between *being* (the "roots," as the deep structure of reality) and *phenomena* (the becoming of nature and history), establishing a kind of transcription code between the two ontological levels.⁵² After Empedocles,

⁴⁹ Significant in this regard is the episode of Empedocles appeasing wrath with music, in Iamblichus, *Vita Pythagorae* 113 (= A 15 DK).

⁵⁰ For example, this is the interpretation proposed by the ancient commentator Simplicius (in *De Caelo Commentarium* 293, 18).

⁵¹ In B 146 DK, Empedocles mentions the different categories of men who benefit mankind by extending (or hastening) the reign of Love, and who thus rise to the divine level: "But, at the last, they appear among mortal men as prophets, song-writers, physicians, and princes; and thence they rise up as gods exalted in honor" (tr. Burnet). Empedocles was a representative of *all* these categories: as such, he felt legitimately destined to ascend to divinity (see B 112, 4-5 DK).

⁵² Being and phenomena are expressly related in B 9 DK (Plutarch, *Adversus Colotem* 11, 1113a-b), which posits a precise correspondence between the two planes. Empedocles says he will use "ordinary" language, however improper, to "decode" the phenomena of birth and death in the light of "true" reality: "But they (hold?) that when Light and Air

however, rhetoric is no longer a proponent of peace and harmony among men; it is no longer meant to unveil the reality beneath phenomena; it is no longer the means of showing mankind the way to liberation, nor is it the way in which the exceptional, “god-like” individual, can fulfill his (or her) prophetic and demiurgic mission. Rhetoric then becomes an exclusively *human*, “earthly” practice. This is shown by Empedocles’s disciple Gorgias of Leontini (who, according to one account, recalled participating in a spell of the master).⁵³ With Gorgias, *sophistic* rhetoric—as the art of manipulating the psyche—enters the scene.

In criticizing the Sicilian sophist, Plato harkens back to the “noble” tradition of Empedoclean rhetoric, for which the function of the *logos* is far more demanding than mere persuasion: speech must *teach*, and rhetoric must be *didaskalikē*, not simply *pisteutikē* (*Gorgias* 454a-55a). For Plato, as for Empedocles, the philosopher’s task is to lead his fellow prisoners *out of* the cave. From this perspective, Gorgias’s rhetoric is only a way to remain *inside* the cave, playing with shadows and deceptive appearances in order to dominate others (*Gorgias* 459a-c).

In Empedocles, language still referred to the incantations of shamans.⁵⁴ But it had also a powerful *moral* significance. For the

(chance?) to have been mingled in the fashion of a man, or in the fashion of the race of wild beasts or of plants or birds, that that is to be born, and when these things have been separated once more, they call it (wrongly?) woeful death. I follow the custom and call it so myself.”

⁵³ See Diogenes Laertius VIII, 59 (the news is taken from Satyrus).

⁵⁴ About these incantations, see Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology* (French: *Anthropologie structurale*), tr. C. Jacobson and B. Grundfest Schoepf (New York: Anchor Books, 1967), 180 ff. The healing practice of the philosopher of Akragas—unlike the therapy of the Hippocratic physicians, which was structured in accordance with a method that was both rational and empirical—hinged on the magical power of language, using which Empedocles influenced the *organic* condition of the sick: see B 112, 10-12 DK: “... some, who for many a weary day have been pierced by the grievous pangs of all manner of sickness, beg to hear from me the word of healing” (tr. Burnet). Gorgias, too, attributes

philosopher of Akragas, *logos* was indeed a means of *purification*: it could elevate the human soul, enabling its return to the divine.⁵⁵ In this way, rhetoric organically connects such varied aspects of Empedocles's philosophy as the doctrine of the elements, the theory of cosmic cycles, the evolution of life forms, and metempsychosis.

Thus, we seem to have found a unified key to this figure. Was Empedocles a physician or a charlatan? Philosopher of nature or theologian? Rationalist or mystic? Aristocrat or democrat? In reality, he was all of these, and more. His figure has remained over the centuries and millennia as a paradigm too rich in meaning to be interpreted through one-sided categories. Yet, one aspect that allows the different planes of his thought and work to be grasped in a unified way is *logos*. Poet, prophet and rhetor, Empedocles proclaims a message of truth, he does not invent deceptive fables (B 114 DK). His *logos*, moreover, does not merely describe what *is*, but prepares the advent of what *is to be*: as such, it constitutes the highest form of praxis. Empedocles's *logos*, finally, is authoritative but not monological, nor even tyrannical: it is the "democratic" *logos* of one who wants to save *all* men, denying death and leading human beings to their original destination (B 2 DK).

great efficacy to language: yet it no longer has for him the power to modify the physiological (and pathological) state, but is a force of suggestion acting exclusively on the psyche: see *Hel.* 14. See also Jacqueline de Romilly, *Magic and Rhetoric in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975).

⁵⁵ On the process of elevation of the human soul, see B 146, 47 DK.

