Empedocles of Acragas (ca. 494–434 B.C.)

He was the most multi-faceted figure of ancient Greek philosophy: With him departs the age of myth, tragedy, and orgiastic rites, while at the same time in him appears the new Greek – a democratic statesman, orator, reformer, allegorist, scientist. In him the two epochs clash . . .

Friedrich Nietzsche

Personality

He was to be likened to Faust. Nietzsche saw him as “oscillating between physician and magus, between poet and demagogue, between god and mortal, between scientist and artist, between statesman and priest, between Pythagoras and Democritus”.¹ Renan limned him epigrammatically as “a cross between Pythagoras and Democritus, Newton and Cagliostro”.² He was born in Acragas (today’s Agrigenti) in southern Sicily. As an offspring of an aristocratic family he would participate passionately in the political affairs of his community, but contrary to what one would expect, he committed himself to the democratic cause. The success of his struggle against tyranny would be so great that his fellow citizens honored him with royal powers, which he disdained, preferring to devote himself to the investigation of nature. Soon he would be a renowned physician, poet and speaker, as well as a seer who would lead the people on the road to salvation. Moving among them in a grand and striking manner, he wore a gold wreath on his head, a purple robe with a golden girdle, and bronze scandals.³ We must not forget that in that age medicine was as yet closely tied to both philosophy and sorcery. The intensely mystical character of Empedocles’s language and work bears witness to the Orphic influence, which must have come through the Pythagoreans. He was not only a ‘superb doctor’⁴-considered to be the founder of the Italian school of medicine- but also a distinguished speaker. Aristotle himself calls him the inventor of the art of oratory.⁵

Many legends grew up around his work, suggesting both rare genius and supernatural powers. These achievements would lead the populace “to bow down before

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¹ F. Nietzsche, Philologica III, 201.
² E. Renan’s portrait is hyperbolic. As Guthrie properly reminds us, even Isaac Newton -with his interests in alchemy and the prophesies of Daniel- exhibited mystical tendencies and thus has been called “the first modern scientist and the last of the mages” (W.K.C. Guthrie, A History of Greek Philosophy: The Presocratic Tradition from Parmenides to Democritus, II, 123). The same characterization could apply to Empedocles.
him and worship him as a god”. Empedocles himself embraced that role. In the opening lines of his *Purifications*, he would announce: “I, an immortal god, no longer a mortal, go about among you all, honoured as is meet, crowned with fillets and blooming garlands.” However, side-by-side with this arrogance and condescension there exist -as is characteristic of a deeply religious temperament- extreme humility and contrition: “I too am no one, a fugitive and a wanderer from the gods, having put my trust in raving strife”.

His death, like his life, is shrouded in the mantle of legend. One version has it that, hounded by political foes and opponents, he would flee to the Peloponnese and there breathe his last. An other legend has the philosopher on the peak of Mt. Etna, hurling himself into the fiery crater, “confirming the hearsay of his deification”. Later, the volcano would erupt, sending up one of his bronze sculptures. This legend would inspire romantic spirits in Europe at the beginning of the 19th century. It would comprise the core of the dramatic poem, *Empedocles on Etna* by Matthew Arnold and J.C.F. Hölderlin’s tragedy, *The Death of Empedocles*. In his unfinished play composed of three versions, Hölderlin lends psychological, historical and political dimensions to Empedocles’s action.

**Writings**

The work of Empedocles reflects his many-sided and integrated spirit. According to tradition, he must have written one prose work, *Medicine*, political essays, many tragedies, poems, hymns, epigrams, and the two known works which were most likely posthumously titled, *On nature* and *Purifications*. These are the only writings of which today around four hundred and fifty lines survive from an estimated total of three to five thousand. Empedocles would be the last of the Presocratics who -emulating his teacher Parmenides- would compose in epic hexameter verse. His style is personal and lacks the strict logical development of a Parmenides.

There are significant differences between the two surviving works. *On nature* represents a philosophy of nature, which attempts on a rational basis to combine Parmenides’s doctrines with human experience. It is written in the second person and is addressed to the philosopher’s favorite pupil, Pausanias, explaining the writer’s physical theory in a confidential manner.

In contrast, *Purifications*, which presents the moral principles of spiritual life, is addressed to the poet’s fellow citizens. Here the style changes utterly. It becomes mystical, meditative, filled with intense religious illumination, as it displays the fall of man and the stages through which he must pass to achieve expiation, rehabilitation. The differences between the two works are so marked that many would maintain that Empedocles wrote them during two very distant moments of his life under the influence of differing experiences and situations. Others, however,

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3 Few of the fragments belong with certainty to the one or the other poem. Most have been assigned to the two works by later scholars.