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DOSSIÊ: ESTILO E FUNDAMENTO NA FILOSOFIA PRÉSOCRÁTICA | DOSSIER: STYLE MATTERS IN PRESOCRATIC PHILOSOPHY

Equivocal and Deceitful Didactic Poetry. What Style Matters Can Say About Empedocles' Audience(s)

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Abstract: Since antiquity, Empedocles has been considered as an example of both successful and unsuccessful communication. Aristotle credits him with vividness of images, but blames him for failure of clarity, and eventually compares his obscureness to that of oracles. Therefore, scholars in the past came to the conclusion that

Empedocles deliberately employs an opaque style, like Heraclitus and his "studied ambiguity", as means for initiation. This paper challenges this assumption and asks whether and how ambiguity can work within a didactic poem. By showing how Empedocles' and Heraclitus' communicative strategies differ from one another, I shall point to the poet's role as a charismatic and spiritual guide, displaying at times a Sibyl-like attitude. Being a mediator between two separate dimensions puts Empedocles in an ambiguous position, because he delivers what the Muse and the gods made available for him to share, and so his opaqueness does not come directly from him. Ultimately, this style analysis also says something about who the ideal audience must have been.

Keywords: Empedocles, ambiguity, obscureness, vividness, oracle style.

1. Style and Communication: a meaningless interplay?

When[1] we, modern scholars and readers, speak of early Greek philosophy we usually refer to their ideas on a specific issue. Being so focused on the contents, we are much more rarely concerned on how such doctrines were delivered. So far early Greek philosophy has too much often eluded those questions we normally ask of literature. Of course, the fragmentary state in which the works of these thinkers are preserved can be discouraging: however, if it is true that we have lost much, in the case of some philosophers like Empedocles we have a good number of lines, which can (at least) lay the ground for some considerations.

Communication, in order to be effective, has to be clear for the intended audience. This, of course, does not imply that it should be clear for everyone, or clear for us today, but if the message is not perspicuous to the intended addressee(s), communication is clearly

[1] Translations, unless otherwise stated, are mine.

unsuccessful. Failing to reach the target audience means communication failure, both in terms of entertainment and of efficacy, unless a message is deliberately obscure to the many and understandable only to the few or totally enigmatic for its own sake. In addition, verbal communication may not be the only element at play, as in some cases we also have to consider the 'physicality' of communication, an element that can enhance the message's understandability. If it is true that matters of style vary from author to author and that the reasons why do not (completely and / or necessarily) need to lie in 'pragmatic' circumstances, it would be wrongheaded to put aside the weight of communicative goals when reading the Presocratics today. The proto–scientific neatness of Anaxagoras' Ionic prose, for example, is at odds with Heraclitus' obscure sentences in rhythmic prose. Thus, it does not come as a surprise that in antiquity a paradoxical story circulated about Heraclitus writing his book in the most difficult way to prevent people from understanding it (Diog. Laert. 9.6). Understanding and framing matters of style when reading ancient philosophy is not an erudite exercise, but a necessary lens to retrieve the overall impact of their literary production.

This paper takes an Aristotelian judgement on Empedocles' style as a jumping–off point to address how poetic ambiguity can work in a philosophical poem. It asks if vagueness and ambiguity in a work of philosophy can tell us something about the audience that was to come to grips with that message and, thus, what was the goal of it. More specifically, I analyse Empedocles' case, as, since antiquity, he was linked to both rhetoric – so, to 'successful' communication – and to failure of clarity (ἀσάφεια). Given the label of "avatar of didactic poets"[2] ascribed to him, perhaps it is not useless to investigate how the communicative goal is achieved through the choice of ambiguity and murkiness. How could he reach efficacy if the language was equivocal? Can such a stylistic choice say something about who the intended audience used to be? In the past, scholars, who have addressed the same research question, have come to the conclusion

[2] The definition is by Obbink (1993, p. 52).

that Empedocles deliberately employs an opaque style as an initiation device, but I shall challenge the assumption that Empedoclean obscurity and ambiguity is (fully) intentionally sought.[3] By contrast, the opaqueness of the text in some specific points testifies to the central role of Empedocles, as the author, initiated by the Muse, is the only one who can disclose the full meaning of his text. This paper does not ask whether the Empedoclean poem(s) were orally or written composed and if they were meant for oral and / or written dissemination, so it does not deal with the issues of oral and written style.[4]

2. Aristotle's (ambiguous) treatment of Empedocles' poetic ambiguity

According to Aristotle, clarity (σαφήνεια) must be the primary virtue of diction; as a consequence, ambiguity and obscureness are to be avoided (Aristot. *Poet*. 1458 a18, *Rhet.* 1404 b1–4). Indeed, the lack of clarity (ἀσάφεια) could disrupt the processability of the message and thus nullify any communicative endeavour.[5] We know that Aristotle distinguished five types of violation of the dictate of perspicuity, that deal with homonymity, ambiguity, connection and separation, stress, the form of an expression (*Soph. El*. 6.167 a23–

[3] The most thorough argumentation is to be found in Willi (2008, p. 197; 220-229) (with further modern literature in support of his thesis), on which I shall come back in the following paragraphs.

[4] This thorny question must of course involve a stylistic investigation, but that won't still be enough to discern the direct involvement of each medium. The presence of features of an oral style does not allow us to speak of an oral conception (and delivery) of the poems: see the discussion in Vatri (2017, p. 14-21) (a discussion about oratory, but whose conclusions are helpful also applied to other genres). On the oral nature of Empedocles' poems, see Hershbell (1968). Gheerbrant (2017, p. 493-592) chooses instead to interpret the presence of oral composition techniques as a debt to the previous and authoritative epic tradition.

[5] Similarly, the Stoics developed a fully–fledged approach to ambiguity, which has been investigated thoroughly by Atherton (1993), since *amphibolia* was a hindrance to get to the truth revealed by language.

28).[6] Homonymity (ὁμωνυμία) is lexical ambiguity, as it operates on the range of an individual word, i.e. when the word has more than one meaning (and the context is not sufficient to disambiguate). Ancient ambiguity (ἀμφιβολία) refers to the entire phrase and it has mainly to do with problems of syntactic attachment: it is a syntactic ambiguity. Another type refers to the delimitation of letters, words and phrases, namely a liminal ambiguity: connection and separation (σύνθεσις and διαίρεσις). Ambiguity can also be prosodic when the accent shifts meaning changes accordingly (προσῳδία). Lastly, Aristotle reckons a type of morphological ambiguity, form of an expression (σχῆμα τῆς λέξεως), if more than one grammatical interpretation is possible. To this list, one can add also other shades of ἀσάφεια: for example, the excessive use of hyperbaton, which affects the text's processability, metaphors difficult to interpret, the use of neologisms, obsolete or foreign words, and a wrong use of connectives.[7]

Quite surprisingly, Aristotle (*Rhet*. 1407 a 31-37) did not think highly of Empedocles' style, when he writes that:

> τρίτον μὴ ἀμφιβόλοις. τοῦτο δ΄ἂν μὴ τἀναντία προαιρῆται, ὅπερ ποιοῦσιν ὅταν μηδὲν μὲν ἔχωσι λέγειν, προσποιῶνται δέ τι λέγειν· οἱ γὰρ τοιοῦτοι ἐν ποιήσει λέγουσιν ταῦτα, οἷον Ἐμπεδοκλῆς· φενακίζει γὰρ τὸ κὺκλῳ πολὺ ὄν, καὶ πάσχουσιν οἱ ἀκροαταὶ ὅπερ οἱ πολλοὶ παρὰ τοῖς μάντεσιν· ὅταν γὰρ λέγωσιν ἀμφίβολα, συμπαρανεύσιν – Κροῖσος Ἅλυν διαβὰς μεγάλην ἀρχὴν καταλύσει – καὶ διὰ τὸ ὅλως ἔλαττον εἶναι ἁμάρτημα διὰ τῶν γενῶν τοῦ πράγματος λέγουσιν οἱ μάντεις·τύχοι γὰρ ἄν τις μᾶλλον ἐν τοῖς ἀρτιασμοῖς ἄρτια ἢ περισσὰ εἰπὼν μᾶλλον ἢ πόσα ἔχει, καὶ τὸ ὅτι ἔσται ἢ τὸ πότε, διὸ οἱ χρησμολόγοι οὐ

[6] On Aristotle's scholarly take on ambiguity, see Innes (2003, p. 12-14), and Golitsis (2021), with reference to previous literature. For an overall presentation and discussion of the ancient rhetorical debate on clarity, see Vatri (2017, p. 101-137).

[7] Cf. the criteria listed in Vatri (2017, p. 109). Needless to say, those ambiguities which pertain to the 'functions' of the text – narrator, referentiality, and so on – cannot be labelled as textual ambiguities *tout court*: they constitute a problem for us, due to the scarcity of information, but not for the intended audience. In other words, they are not intentionally sought ambiguities.

> προσορίζονται τὸ πότε. ἅπαντα δὴ ταῦτα ὅμοια, ὥστ᾽ἄν μὴ τοιούτου τινὸς ἕνεκα, φευκτέον.
>
> A third (element of good style) is to avoid ambiguities – this unless one willingly chooses the opposite, which is what people who have nothing to say but pretend to be saying something do. Such people say these things in poetry, like Empedocles. For the long circumlocution are deceitful and the listeners are affected in the same manner as many people are by the seers. Whenever they say equivocal sentences, they nod their agreement; for example: "Croesus, by crossing the Halys, will ruin a great empire". And, as there is less chance of being wrong when one speaks in general terms, seers express themselves in general terms on the question of fact. For, in playing odd or even, one is more likely to be right when he says even or odd than when he gives a specific number, and that something will be instead of when and for this reason soothsayers do not say when. All these ambiguities are alike, so that they should be avoided except for some such reason.

Aristotle's criticism of style comes with criticism of contents: verbal murkiness aims at covering the lack of argumentation, whereas philosophy and scientific rumination should be open to questioning and enquiries. Aristotle tips the scale even further in that direction when he says that Empedocles' employment of an opaque expression deliberately deceives the audience, which is thus led to believe him. Such persuasion takes place as people give credit to the ambiguous statement of the oracles, for example: since their statements can be understood in more ways, everyone will find in them the truth they believe in. Roughly put, Aristotle thinks that Empedocles did not really have something to say, but pretended to be a sophisticated thinker by speaking in an ambiguous way: if more options are left open, the odds are that Empedocles could be right. Likewise, the interpretation of oracles usually admits more than one explanation. "Croesus will destroy a great empire", the oracle said, but whose empire? Notoriously, Croesus believed the Persians', but he ended up losing his own.[8] Aristotle (*Met*. 2 357 a25-28) expands

[8] This famous oracle is mentioned in *Hdt.* (1.53) and later in *Diod. Sic.* (9.31).

on this idea and elucidates why he charges Empedocles with obscureness in another passage:

> ὁμοίως δὲ γελοῖον κἂν εἴ τις εἰπὼν ἱδρῶτα τῆς γῆς εἶναι τὴν θάλατταν οἴεταί
> τι σαφὲς εἰρηκέναι, καθάπερ Ἐμπεδοκλῆς· πρὸς ποίησιν μὲν γὰρ οὕτως
> εἰπὼν ἴσως εἴρηκεν ἱκανῶς (ἡ γὰρ μεταφορὰ ποιητικόν), πρὸς δὲ τὸ γνῶναι τὴν
> φύσιν οὐχ ἱκανῶς·
>
> It is equally ridiculous for anyone to think like Empedocles that he has made a clear statement when he says that the sea is the sweat of the earth. Such a statement is perhaps satisfactory in poetry, for poetry is a poetic device, but it does not advance our knowledge of nature.

Aristotle acknowledges that the lack of accuracy does not compromise the text's processability as far as one considers the poetic value of the metaphor: Empedocles describes the nature of the sea by means of an analogy with the human body and the process of sweating.[9] However, if one is instead interested in understanding what the "sea sweat of earth" metaphor really means, then Empedocles fails in providing enough information in support.[10] Scientific discussion cannot make use of the same literary devices as poetry: images like this one, despite their vividness, are irrefutable: they are not built on premises and they thus cannot be subjected to systematic objections.[11] This point is further highlighted in the following passage by Aristotle (*Post. An*. 2 97 b37-40):

> εἰ δὲ μὴ διαλέγεσθαι δεῖ μεταφοραῖς, δῆλον ὅτι οὐδ' ὁρίζεσθαι οὔτε μεταφοραῖς οὔτε ὅσα λέγεται

[9] For an analysis of this metaphor and his reception by Aristotle, see Zatta (2018).

[10] As Celso Vieira has kindly pointed out to me, in this case one could mention a 'specialized' form of metaphor, *Kenning*. A figure of speech that comes from Old Norse literary criticism, *Kenningar* are metaphors 'with a deviation' (a base word + a modifier) and are in some respects comparable to riddles. For this reason, it comes as no surprise that oracular language is rich in *Kenning*.

[11] For Aristotle's approach to the use of metaphors outside the field of poetry, and thus in philosophy, see discussions in Bremen (1980), Laks (1994), Lloyd (1987, p. 183-190), Lloyd (1996) and Kirby (1997), with further bibliography.

> μεταφοραῖς· διαλέγεσθαι γὰρ ἀναγκη ἔσται μεταφοραῖς.
>
> If it is necessary not to argue in metaphors, thus one must avoid defining in metaphors and defining what it is said in metaphorically terms; otherwise, we are bound to argue in metaphors.

A preliminary conclusion may be that Aristotle criticises Empedocles insofar as scientific explanations are concerned. Metaphors can describe, can encapsulate, something that, however, needs to be stated in clear terms beforehand. When he writes that "everything said metaphorically is unclear" (πᾶν γὰρ ἀσαφὲς τὸ κατὰ μεταφορὰν λεγόμενον, *Top.* 6 139 b34-35), Aristotle means that metaphors are useless to back scientific discussion, as they do not rest on premises and conclusions and are eventually irrefutable *per se*. Yet, even though they do not yield knowledge, they can bring about learning and activate cognitive mechanisms.

In other circumstances, instead, Aristotle is not critical of Empedocles as a master of words. For example, we know that in this his book *On Poets* Aristotle states that Empedocles was on the same level as Homer as far as poetic diction is concerned: he was good at metaphors and at other poetic devices (Aristot. fr. 70 Rose = Diog. Laert. 8.57 = A 1 D.K.), even if he is not a poet like Homer: they have nothing in common but the hexameter meter (Aristot. *Poet.* 1.1447 b17 = A 22 D.K.). In addition, Aristotle appreciates again Empedocles' contribution when he says that he was the one who discovered the art of rhetoric (Aristot. fr. 65 Rose = Diog. Laert. 8.57 = A 1 D.K.: cf. Quint. *inst. or.* 3.1.8). The overall impression that we gain from the Aristotelian remarks is that he considers Empedocles something in between a poet and a natural philosopher: on the one hand, he lacks the narrative material of the epics to fully be 'Homeric', on the other his poetic language prevents him to disclose his views on the cosmos with exactness. All in all, he seems to score better in poetry than in philosophy.

Indeed, in Greek rhetorical works, σαφήνεια is often closely connected with another quality of speech, namely ἐνάργεια

("vividness"). If ἐνάργεια exploits the possibilities of language to create a vivid image, such vividness must come with a clear visualization. This interplay is especially important in narrative genres, as it allows bringing what is described before the hearers / readers (see, for example, Theon 119, 28; Quint. *inst. or.* 4.2.64 and Cic. *acad.* 2.17) and so does in philosophical speculation. If we come back to Aristotle's evaluations of Empedocles' performance as a master of rhetoric, we can see that, despite a lack of σαφήνεια, he was not as poor in ἐνάργεια. At first sight, his case might be one exception where σαφήνεια and ἐνάργεια are not associated with one another: his accounts are incisive thought not particularly perspicuous.[12]

Empedoclean metaphors offer good ground for seeing the interplay between ἀσάφεια and σαφήνεια at work: the images of the lantern and of the water–lifter, which describe the processes of vision and respiration respectively, despite being vivid, do not point to one, irrefutable explanation.[13] Obscureness and ambiguity do not only relate to metaphors and poetic images. Here an example of some Empedoclean lines, whose exegesis was not straightforward since antiquity and where one can detect the categories of ambiguity numbered by Aristotle:

> αὐτὰρ ἐγὼ παλίνορσος ἐλεύσομαι ἐς πόρον ὕμνων,
> τὸν πρότερον κατέλεξα, λόγου λόγον ἐξοχετεύων,
> κεῖνον· ἐπεὶ Νεῖκος μὲν ἐνέρτατον ἵκετο βένθος
> δίνης, ἐν δὲ μέσῃι Φιλότης στροφάλιγγι γένηται,
> ἐν τῇι δὴ τάδε πάντα συνέρχεται ἓν μόνον εἶναι,
> οὐκ ἄφαρ, ἀλλὰ θελημὰ συνιστάμεν' ἄλλοθεν ἄλλα.

[12] The distinction between σαφήνεια and ἐνάργεια was not as sharp as it is usually presented, as Farrell (2022, p. 165-166) has aptly shown with reference to Lucretius and on the basis of ancient passages dealing with rhetoric. Indeed, Farrell argues that Lucretius' claim of poetic *claritas* is not a claim for clarity in the sense of transparency (σαφήνεια), but of vividness (ἐνάργεια). His images did not need be necessarily clear, but vivid.

[13] On the lantern and the clepsydra the most thorough discussion is still O'Brien (1970). On the textual and exegetical difficulties raised by B 84 D.K. = D 215 L.M. (the lantern), see Lapini (2013, p. 87-115) and Gheerbrant (2017, p. 272-300); for the clepsydra (B 100 D.K. = D 201 L.M.) see also Bollack (1968, p. 468-501), Gheerbrant (2017, p. 280-308).

τῶν δέ τε μισγομένων χεῖτ' ἔθνεα μυρία θνητῶν·
πολλὰ δ' ἄμεικτ' ἔστηκε κεραιομένοισιν ἐναλλάξ,
ὅσσ' ἔτι Νεῖκος ἔρυκε μετάρσιον· οὐ γὰρ ἀμεμφέως
τῶν πᾶν ἐξέστηκεν ἐπ' ἔσχατα τέρματα κύκλου,
ἀλλὰ τὰ μέν τ' ἐνέμιμνε μελέων τὰ δέ τ' ἐξεβεβήκει.
ὅσσον δ' αἰὲν ὑπεκπροθέοι, τόσον αἰὲν ἐπήιει
ἠπιόφρων Φιλότητος ἀμεμφέος ἄμβροτος ὁρμή·
αἶψα δὲ θνήτ' ἐφύοντο, τὰ πρὶν μάθον ἀθάνατ' εἶναι,
ζωρά τε τὰ πρὶν ἄκρητα διαλλάξαντα κελεύθους.
τῶν δέ τε μισγομένων χεῖτ' ἔθνεα μυρία θνητῶν,
παντοίαις ἰδέησιν ἀρηρότα, θαῦμα ἰδέσθαι. (B 35 D.K. / D 75 L.M.)

But as for me, coming back, I shall proceed toward the path of songs, that I described earlier, drawing out one discourse by means of another,
that one: when Strife has reached the deepest depth
of the vortex, and Love has come to be in the center of the whirl,
under the dominion all these come together to be only one,
each one coming from a different place, not brusquely, but willingly,
and while they were mixing, myriad tribes of mortals spread out.
But much remained unmixed, alternating with the mixtures,
everything that Strife held back suspended. For not yet blamelessly
had he withdrawn completely to the farthest limits of the circle,
but in part he remained in the limbs, in part he had gone out from them.
And as far as he ran out ahead each time, just so far followed it each time
the gentle-thinking immortal drive of blameless Love.
And immediately were born as mortals those that earlier had learned to be immortals,
and as blended those that earlier has been unmixed, exchanging their paths.
And while they were mixing, myriad tribes of mortals spread out,
joined together in forms of all kinds, a wonder to see. (transl. by Laks / Most).

These lines have been debated in antiquity both for their overall meaning and for their more specific scope. As for the former, Simplicius (*de caelo* 587.8) wondered why Aristotle (and Alexander of Aphrodisia after him) believed Empedocles to have placed a creative phase during the Sphairos (i.e. the phase of Love's predominance), as l. 5 points to the contrary in his opinion. As for the latter, Plutarch (*quaest. conv.* 677 d) states that, according to the Sosicles the poet, at l. 15 Empedocles meant with ζωρά "well–blended": this is possibly a case of lexical ambiguity, since ζωρόν

can be glossed with both ἄκρατον ("not mixed", "pure") and εὔκρατον ("well–mixed"). And, to conclude, Aristotle in the *Poetics* (1461 a23) detects a case of ἀμφιβολία at ll. 14-15, more precisely a problem of punctuation (connection and separation, σύνθεσις and διαίρεσις): is πρίν, "previously", to be taken with "unmixed" or with the verb "were mixed"? As said, the only fact that multiple explanations are possible is untenable for scientific discussion. In this case, it is not even possible to postulate that both possible readings are intended, as they are contradictory of one another (e.g. ζωρόν means either "not mixed" or "well–mixed").

To sum up: according to Aristotle, Empedocles' main quality and main flaw is his use of images and metaphors: their vividness is absolutely good for poetry, but it is very problematic for philosophy. This Aristotelian judgement on Empedocles throws into question the didactic nature of the poem: how far can a poet go with ambiguity if his declared aim is to show the working process of nature?

3 Between intended and unintended obscureness: Heraclitus and Empedocles

As said, the link between Empedocles and oracular rhetoric is made clear by Aristototle (*Rhet*. 1407 a 31-37). Aristotle claims that Empedocles' form of expression is willingly murky, as he could not provide substantial material in support of his views. In other circumstances, Aristotle blames metaphorical usage as the responsible for such obscureness. However, it is important to highlight that the link between Empedocles' poetry and oracles is represented by a general and not further defined murkiness, whereas modern scholars who have addressed this feature of Empedocles' style tend to speak about a "studied ambiguity". This definition, first applied to Heraclitus by Charles Kahn (1979, p. 441), is sometimes used with regard to Empedocles as well, as he employed obscure images by choice.[14] Before discussing the soundness of this reading,

[14] Besides Willi (2008), see also Kahn (1979, p. 441), Wright (1981, p. 246), Gemelli Marciano (2001, p. 209-212).

some words on Heraclitus and his notoriously obscure style are in order.

In a famous fragment about oracles, which had been taken as a reference to Heraclitus' own style, he said that the god does not speak and does not hide, he gives signs (ὁ ἄναξ οὗ τὸ μαντεῖόν ἐστι τὸ ἐν Δελφοῖς οὔτε λέγει οὔτε κρύπτει ἀλλὰ σημαίνει, B 93 D.K. = D 41 L.M.). Apollo does not state openly what he means, but he does not cover it either: he chooses a middle way between open and covert communication. It is important to underline that, in Heraclitus' fragments, Apollo does not speak in an obscure way; he says anything neither clearly nor obscurely.[15] Actually, it cannot be proven that with this statement Heraclitus was (directly and/or exclusively) alluding to his own way of writing, yet given Heraclitus' fondness of similes, metaphors, and puns, the association between his book and oracles was an easy one, an attitude that gained him the nickname ὁ Σκοτεινός. Aristotle of course mentions him when addressing the issue of ἀσάφεια and cites B 1 D.K. (D 1 L.M.) as an instance of the difficulty of punctuation of his text (*Rhet.* 3 5.1407 b 11). There are several examples to quote, but to name but a few, see in B 48 = D 53 the word–play between βίος and βιός, the riddle of the lice (B 56 = D 22, "what we did not see or catch we take with us, what we did not catch, we bring"), and the numerous paradoxes spread in the fragments (e.g. B 34 = D 4 "... present, they are absent", B 49a = R 9 "we step and do not step into the same river", B 60 = D 51 "the road to and from is one and the same"). Indeed, the core of Heraclitus' thought lies in the paradox of reality: men fail to grasp the visible because "eyes and ears are bad witnesses for men, if they have muddled souls" (B 107 = D 33). Borrowing Hölscher's (2003, p. 231; 234) words:

> The point, conveyed merely by the riddle form, is: things, too, present a paradoxical, secret reality, which, at the same time, is manifest. Things themselves are a riddle to be solved – one has only to be able to read the cipher; that is, one must learn to

[15] This point is aptly highlighted by Tor (2016, p. 93).

> understand the visible as a sign, as the self–proclaiming of the invisible.
> We now see that the oracle fragment does not merely allude to Heraclitus' style it has a certain objective reference; it says something about how self–concealing *physis* is to be understood – as revealing itself in signs. It is, nevertheless, true that Heraclitus' own language is in large measure determined by the oracle's manner of speech. His language, too, must be one of paradox, simile, and riddle, precisely insofar as it seeks to proclaim the essence of what is. His speech is valid statement, yet remains essentially not understood – as with the oracle, in both respects. So there is a significant analogy between the *physis* of things and Heraclitean style. (...) Heraclitus does not speak in metaphors, in order to obscure a state of affairs that in itself is clear; rather, for him as for the oracle, simile is the means of hinting at a state of affairs that lies hidden.

Heraclitus, then, shaped his style to the subject matter of the book, *physis*. As reality is paradoxical, so is his way of describing it. As a result, Hölscher continues, Heraclitean fragments display a gnomic utterance claiming universal validity. Thus "the essence of Heraclitean saying is not didactic, but assertive and apodictic" (238). Giving signs, like the god at Delphi, cannot be didactic, as it does not explain anything.[16] Thus, the outlook of Heraclitus' fragments is deliberately and purposely enigmatic.

Does the same research for obscure language lie at the core of Empedocles' style? Modern scholarship on Empedocles' language and its ambiguity has mainly highlighted the presence of ambiguity of references: see, for example, the white liquid referred to by πύον λευκὸν (B 68 D.K. = D 168 L.M.), the epithet γλαυκῶπις referred to the moon (B 42 = D 132), or ἤκομος to flowers (B 127 = D 36), to name but a few cases [for full references, see Willi (2008, p. 212–

[16] Interestingly, in antiquity an anecdote by Diogenes Laertius (9.6) refers that Heraclitus deposited his book in Artemis' temple at Ephesus. He wrote it in the most obscure way possible, because he did not want everyone to understand it. On the possible interpretation of this anecdote, see Andolfi (2022, p. 131).

228)].[17] In particular, B 6 D.K. = D 57 L.M. has been identified as a case of a *Rätsel* (riddle):

> τέσσαρα γὰρ πάντων ῥιζώματα πρῶτον ἄκουε·
> Ζεὺς ἀργὴς Ἥρη τε φερέσβιος ἠδ' Ἀιδωνεύς
> Νῆστίς θ', ἣ δακρύοις τέγγει κρούνωμα βρότειον.
>
> Hear first of all the four roots of all things:
> Zeus the gleaming, Hera who gives life, Aidoneus,
> And Nestis, who moistens with her tears the mortal fountain.
> (transl. by Lask / Most).

The riddle is constituted by the identification of the four roots, Zeus, Hera, Adoneus, and Nestis: since antiquity, exegetes struggled to understand which physical element do they refer to respectively.[18] Such textual examples has led scholars like Willi to argue that Empedocles' poetry, given the presence of *hapax legomena* and lexical puzzles, has been conceived from the outset as an oracle. The linguistic alienation that one can appreciate in the verses is a means to de–automate the process of decipherment (229). However, is this ambiguity and uncertainty of references to be ascribed to Empedocles' own agenda? Going back to Heraclitus' "studied ambiguity", it seems clear that Empedocles' project is not as coherent as Heraclitus' in pursuing paradox. If a taste in linguistic variation is undeniable, are we sure that Empedocles' aim is precisely the same as Heraclitus, thus apodictic and not didactic? The interpretation does not seem to go in the same direction. Indeed, Empedocles is not ungenerous of explanations, and so he displays a very different attitude from Heraclitus, which is visible in the longer fragments in our possession. One can see, for example, B 17 D.K in the enriched

[17] When dealing with Empedocles' oracular and ambiguous language, Willi (2008, p. 220-228) considers also paraetymology (*Volksetymologie*), i.e. a commonly held (but wrong) etymology about the origin of a word. In Empedocles' case, a lexeme can take on an unexpected new meaning from the association with a phonetically similar word. Thus, the listeners are led to understand its meaning in an intuitive way. On the shift in meaning of some words in Empedocles, see also Gemelli Marciano (1990, p. 147-164).

[18] See full discussion in Willi (2008, p. 225-226), with mention of ancient authors who discussed the problem.

version in D 73 L.M., which includes the papyrus' text, where Empedocles literally unfolds the working mechanisms of the *cosmos*. What is more, at l. 257 he states: "... listen to the undeceitful road of my discourse" (... σὺ δ' ἄκουσε λόγου στόλον οὐκ ἀπατηλόν). This is the stronger point against the hypothesis of an Empedoclean deliberate ambiguity.[19] There are also other instances in the extant fragments in which Empedocles exhorts his listeners to analyse carefully the argumentation that he has put forward, for example, in fr. B 4 D.K. (D 47 L.M.):

> ἀλλὰ κακοῖς μὲν κάρτα πέλει κρατέουσιν ἀπιστεῖν·
> ὡς δὲ παρ' ἡμετέρης κέλεται πιστώματα Μούσης,
> γνῶθι διατμηθέντος ἐνὶ σπλάγχνοισι λόγοιο.
>
> but it is typical of base people to distrust greatly those who have authority;
> whereas you, in what way our Muse's proofs urge,
> know this within yourself, once the discourse has been eviscerated.

The expression διατμηθέντος ἐνὶ σπλάγχνοισι λόγοιο (l. 3) precisely evokes the idea of knowledge as a process that asks for rumination.[20] The verb διατέμνω, "to cut up", "to disunite", connected to the inward parts (ἐνὶ σπλάγχνοισι), is in some way surprising, as here Empedocles seems much closer to Aristotle's own thinking than one would expect: the only way to come to grips with the truth is to "eviscerate" the *logos* in all its components and this is what Empedocles is going to do with the help of the Muse. Even if the syntactic arrangement (genitive absolute) does not give

[19] I am not dwelling on the presence in Empedocles of terms evoking 'clarity' (for example: νόει θ' ᾗ δῆλον ἕκαστον in B 3 D.K. = D 44 L.M., l. 5), as their presence is not incontrovertible evidence against the "studied ambiguity" hypothesis. Also in Heraclitus, or in oracles, one can find such warnings, as an exhortation to interpretation. See also the discussion in Farrell (2022, p. 157-167) about the possibility of considering all the lexical terms referring to "clear" and "clarity" (δῆλος, λαμπρός, φανερός, σαφής, to quote just some of them) as pointing to vividness instead.

[20] In an article about poetological images, Nünlist (2005) has argued that the presence of path–images in Empedocles is especially revealing, for they show how he intended philosophy as a long process involving a struggle.

irrefutable evidence of who is going to cut the argument up, the most plausible option is that Empedocles is the one who is going to unfold the message: he is the one in touch with the Muse and thus he can unfold her message. We need not to forget that Empedocles' Muse is the one in charge to channel the message through the poet: he begs her to send them the words that the ephemeral beings are allowed to hear (fr. B 3 D.K. = D 44 L.M., ll. 4–6). In some cases, we also know of deceptive oracles from tragedy and historiography, which, however, at the end aim at pursuing the gods' agenda.[21] One could also say that Empedocles is not the ultimate responsible for the words he utters.

In conclusion, ascribing to Empedocles the employment of a deliberate opaque expression on the basis of ambiguity of references is potentially misleading, as, for example, references might have been shown somewhere else. What if the poem contained them in other lines than those we have? What if there were 'secret' lines that do not belong to the poem we know about? What if those references were clarified or alluded to during the performance of the poem, before the audience? The sense of Empedoclean message is not intendedly as obscure as that of Heraclitus'. Even if both of them have explored unconventional linguistic choices in their philosophical exposition, however, I cannot see how Empedocles' use of language would come any close to Heraclitus' project as far as communicative strategies are concerned. To understand the reason why Aristotle compared Empedocles' to oracles, perhaps we should look somewhere else.

[21] For Greek historiography, see some Herodotean passages, such as, to name but a few, *Hdt.* (1.66.2; 3.57-58; 4.164). However, scholars tend to agree on the fact that Herodotus does not hold the oracle responsible for the misunderstanding, but the recipient(s), for it's their responsibility to interpret correctly the verdict. See, for example, Pucci (1996, p. 153-161), Giuliano (2000) and Kindt (2016, p. 16-54). *Contra*, Fontenrose (1978, p. 67-68), who finds oracular ambiguity as deceptive. More complex the situation of Greek tragedy, as in some circumstance, especially in Euripides, the oracle can be interpreted as deceptive Pucci (1996, p. 165-190. It is important not to forget that epigraphic oracles from Delphi do not display the same literary features of ambiguity; by contrast, they give short and precise instructions on the given issue Delcourt (1955, p. 70-85). For an ambiguous response coming from Delphi, see the text L 4 (PW 110) in Fontenrose (1978).

4 A special mediator who leads the way

As already said, Empedocles is said to be the father of rhetoric by Aristotle himself. If one is happy with the Aristotelian definition of rhetoric as "the ability of seeing in any given case the available means of persuasion" (... δύναμις περὶ ἕκαστον τοῦ θεωρῆσαι τὸ ἐνδεχόμενον πιθανόν *Rhet.* 2.1355b 26; cf. *Top.* 12.149 b25), that means that Empedocles knew well his way into his listeners / readers' minds.[22] It looks like Empedocles did gave a contribution to the art of rhetoric as Aristotle meant it, but, in other circumstances, as we saw, he distanced himself from the Aristotelian precepts of clarity and unambiguousness, mainly due to the employment of images, whose reference is not immediately perspicuous. In addition, the presence of lexical and syntactical ambiguities (like those analysed above), makes the textual complexity increase.

When a text conforms to the principles of clarity, content is transmitted efficiently and with minimal effort. In addition, the text, when it is meant to circulate within a given environment in a given situation, draws upon a set of rules of procedure that guarantee an efficient transmission. Literary communication is regulated by such rules, previously agreed on by the author and the putative audience, and an institutional validation thus provides the frame for such rules and the key to decrypt some references within the text. One can consider, for example, a good many Greek literary genres: epic poetry and rhapsodic contests, judicial speeches and trials, lyric poetry and the symposium, tragedy and comedy and religious festivals, and so on: all these genres are placed within a specific setting. However, there are cases where such agreement is not as strong and the text presents itself as 'occult'. In this case, the cornerstone of successful communication is represented by the author alone, who has the keys to the meaning of the text. To balance the

[22] See Willi (2008, p. 262-263) for an interesting and elaborated discussion about Empedocles' *Sprachpsycologie*, for he understood the power of the words to influence one's *psyche*. This awareness constitutes Empedocles' contribution to the field of rhetoric.

lack of established procedures and rules, the author needs to attract his audience using specific 'weapons', such as the promise of a secret knowledge of which he is the (only) champion. This is the case, for example, of the Greco–Egyptian magical papyri (esp. the Paris papyrus), which Kingsley has suggested to read to better understand Empedocles.[23] The author's own individuality and charisma becomes the unifying element, as s/he is the one able to provide the code of reference to decrypt the literary message and its references, which can appear opaque or ambiguous. In support of this reading, Empedocles' famous fragment B 111 D.K. = D 43 L.M. would be a case in point:

> φάρμακα δ' ὅσσα γεγᾶσι κακῶν καὶ γήραος ἄλκαρ
> πεύσῃ, ἐπεὶ μούνωι σοὶ ἐγὼ κρανέω τάδε πάντα.
> παύσεις δ' ἀκαμάτων ἀνέμων μένος οἵ τ' ἐπὶ γαῖαν
> ὀρνύμενοι πνοιαῖσι καταφθινύθουσιν ἀρούρας·
> καὶ πάλιν, ἢν ἐθέλῃισθα, παλίντιτα πνεύματ(α) ἐπάξεις·
> θήσεις δ' ἐξ ὄμβροιο κελαινοῦ καίριον αὐχμόν
> ἀνθρώποις, θήσεις δὲ καὶ ἐξ αὐχμοῖο θερείου
> ῥεύματα δενδρεόθρεπτα, τά τ' αἰθέρι ναιήσονται,
> ἄξεις δ' ἐξ Ἀίδαο καταφθιμένου μένος ἀνδρός.
>
> And you will learn the *pharmaka*, however many are a protection against evil and old age,
> since for you alone I shall accomplish these things.
> You will stop the force of tireless winds that rising up along the earth
> destroy the fields with their blasts;
> and again, if you wish, you will bring the winds back.
> Out of a black rain you will make a timely dryness for men,
> and out of a summer dryness you will make tree–nourishing streams that dwell in the air.
> And you will lead from Hades the strength of a dead man.

Many questions rise from these lines and we are doomed not to know the answers. What does he mean by φάρμακα, "remedies" or "incantations"? Is he actually performing magic rituals? Or is he referring to the magic accomplished by his words? Is the text to be in

[23] Esp. the Paris papyrus (*PGM* 4.254-256, 476-485, 12.93-94, 36.293-294).

charge of disclosing all these incredible pieces of knowledge?[24] Without being able to see what the original performance was like and to know whether the poet put into action what he claimed before the audience's eyes, there are too many questions marks for developing a definite interpretation. Again, the ambiguity of references cannot be fully ascribed to the poet, as we have possibly lost decisive pieces of information that can solve what, in our view, is a riddle, but that, possibly, in Empedocles' time, was not.

As said, communicating science / philosophy using poetic devices makes processability not an easy task: ambiguity provokes debates and questions so that, at the end, not only the desired answer does not arrive, but new questions come up instead. Of course, Aristotle's judgement is belittling: he wants us to believe that Empedocles, as well as oracles, aims at leaving the door open to multiple interpretations not to be caught in fault. People would find the best way to fill the gap, which means that they will offer to the text their "charitable interpretation": they will interpret Empedocles' utterances in the truest and most rational way they know. But, if Empedocles leaves some matters open to speculation, is this really his fault? The Muse cannot disclose what human beings are not ready to digest.[25] Possibly, Empedocles is not even the repository of the definitive answers: even if he posits himself on a superior level than the others, nevertheless he is going through the same phases of the cycle than everybody else.[26] However, one may be tempted to wonder whether there is a kernel of truth in what Aristotle claims.

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[24] In my translation I have kept the Greek *pharmaka*, as choosing one interpretation over the other would require an in–depth discussion which would have led us too far from the scope of this paper. In a recent paper, Faraone (2019) has defended the necessity to translate it "incantations".

[25] Willi (2008, p. 243-254) also acknowledges the gap between human and divine knowledge. In addition, he goes as far as to argue that Empedocles presupposes the use of two different languages, namely a human language and a divine language, regulated by Themis. The latter form of language is the one responsible for allusions and *amphibolia*, as its aim is to suggest the intimate connection of words and thus of things.

[26] That Empedocles has not reached (yet?) the level of a god is evident from: fr. B 113 D.K. = D 5 L.M., where he denies to be superior to mortal beings; fr. B 115

A text that needs to be brought to bear is the opening of *Purifications*. As people used to hail Empedocles as a god, no longer a mortal, and he states that he can pronounce oracles of healing (B 112 D.K. = D 4 L.M. l. 11, εὐηκέα βάξιν), one would be tempted to describe his activity as that of a μάντις,[27] which is what Aristotle does:

> ὦ φίλοι, οἳ μέγα ἄστυ κατὰ ξανθοῦ Ἀκράγαντος
> ναίετ' ἀν' ἄκρα πόλεος, ἀγαθῶν μελεδήμονες ἔργων,
> ξείνων αἰδοῖοι λιμένες, κακότητος ἄπειροι,
> χαίρετ'· ἐγὼ δ' ὑμῖν θεὸς ἄμβροτος, οὐκέτι θνητός
> πωλεῦμαι μετὰ πᾶσι τετιμένος, ὥσπερ ἔοικα,
> ταινίαις τε περίστεπτος στέφεσίν τε θαλείοις.
> τοῖσιν † ἅμ' † ἂν ἵκωμαι ἄστεα τηλεθάοντα,
> ἀνδράσιν ἠδὲ γυναιξί, σεβίζομαι· οἱ δ' ἅμ' ἕπονται
> μυρίοι ἐξερέοντες, ὅπηι πρὸς κέρδος ἀταρπός,
> οἱ μὲν μαντοσυνέων κεχρημένοι, οἱ δ' ἐπὶ νούσων
> παντοίων ἐπύθοντο κλυεῖν εὐηκέα βάξιν,
> δηρὸν δὴ χαλεπῆισι πεπαρμένοι <ἀμφ' ὀδύνηισιν>.[28]
>
> My friends, you who live in the great city beside the tawny Acragas,
> on the city's citadel and who care for good deeds,
> respectful habors for strangers, men who do not know wickedness,
> I greet you! I, who for you am an immortal god,
> mortal no longer, I go among you, honored, as I appear,
> crowned with ribbons and with blooming garlands.
> Whenever I enter flourishing towns,
> I am venerated by men and women; they follow me,
> countless in number, asking where their benefit is:
> some of them looking for prophecies, others ask to hear

D.K. = D 10 L.M. ll. 13-14, where he says he is an exile from the divine. The text that has consolidated the image of "Empedocles the god" is l. 3 of B 112, where the majority of scholars interpret ὑμῖν as an ethical dative (following Wilamowitz): Zuntz (1971, p. 190-191); Wright (1981, p. 266); Willi (2008, p. 241-242) *contra* Gallavotti (1975, p. 266-267); van der Ben (1975, p. 22-25).

[27] Casevitz (1992) has argued that μάντις is not etymologically connected to *mania*, but to the root **ma*, "to reveal". On the role of the *mantis*, fundamental is Dillery (2005).

[28] L. 7 is especially problematic. I have printed a *locus desperatus*, following Diels-Kranz and Wright (1981) (who places *cruces* before τοῖσιν and after ἂν). Laks and Most print the line without *cruces*. Zunzt (1971) and Kirk, Raven & Schofield print Wilamowitz's supplement <πᾶσι δὲ> τοῖς ἄν, while Gallavotti (1975): τοῖσιν <ἄρ'> ἀμ<φ'> ἄν.

> for illnesses of all kinds, a healing utterance, pierced for a long time by terrible <pains>.

Notwithstanding the obvious differences of context and functions, what really connects Empedocles to the realm of oracles and prophecies is the recipients' need for guidance. People turn to oracles when they need practical guidance on a given matter. They turn to Empedocles, and to charismatic personalities, when they need spiritual guidance. In addition, not only Empedocles displays features of oracular communication, but also of prophesizing. In the manner of a Sibyl, he is not (only) interested in the present moment, in the contingency, in the small–scale problem. On the contrary, Empedocles addresses matters of universal scope, whose validity transcends the here–and–now situation.[29] His statements do not show which path to take in a given situation, but are a guide to navigate life in its entire course. Whereas the Apollonian / Delphic approach stays in the boundaries of rationality, the prophetic / Sibyllic one makes use of earnest warnings, solemn admonitions, which are attested in Empedocles as well:

> ὢ πόποι, ὢ δειλὸν θνητῶν γένος, ὢ δυσάνολβον,
> τοίων ἔκ τ' ἐρίδων ἔκ τε στοναχῶν ἐγένεσθε. (B 124 D.K. / D 17 L.M.)
>
> Alas! Wretched race of mortals, miserable race! From such kinds of strife and from such groans you are born!
>
> οὐ παύσεσθε φόνοιο δυσηχέος; οὐκ ἐσορᾶτε
> ἀλλήλους δάπτοντες ἀκηδείῃσι νόοιο; (B 136 / D 28)
>
> Will you not desist from evil–sounding murder?
> Do you not see that you are devouring each other in the carelessness of your mind?

[29] The character of the Sibyl was already known by Heraclitus (B 92 D.K. = D 42 L.M.) and Pausanias (10.12) knew four different kinds of Sibyls. Despite being inspired by a god, she usually did not belong to a given place, but was a wanderer prophetess. For an overview that spans across centuries of Sibyls, see Sfameni Gasparro (1999, p. 61-102) and Suárez de la Torre (2005, p. 29-106).

> οἴμ᾽ὅτι οὐ πρόσθεν με διώλεσε νηλεὲς ἦμαρ,
> πρὶν σχέτλι᾽ἔργα βορᾶς περὶ χείλεσι
> μητίσασθαι. (B 139 / D 34)
>
> Alas, that the pitiless day did not destroy me earlier,
> before I contrived terrible deeds of feeding around my lips!

Bearing this in mind, we can answer to the initial question of this paper: are we in the position of knowing who was Empedocles' intended audience? Like an oracle, a prophet, a god, Empedocles is a charismatic guide – but actually he is neither of them. As the discovery of the Strasbourg papyrus has shown, the discussion on physics is closely intertwined with Empedocles' moral precepts and religious beliefs, that are delivered with frequent addresses to the addressees – Pausanias, friends of Acragas (B 112 D.K.), and, more generally, an unspecified group of people.[30] Especially from B 111 D. K. one would be led to believe that Empedocles' poetry was meant for circulating only among a very limited audience: he promises Pausanias to disclose "to him only" his secrets. Peter Kingsley rejected the idea that μούνωι σοὶ tells us something about the Empedocles' audience, as the reference of a one–to–one communication, from spiritual father to son, is a preserve of the magical and esoteric tradition of the Near East.[31] Without involving the alleged 'magical' character of the Empedoclean verses, these lines show that Empedocles is not secluding the content of the poem to one person only, but, on the contrary, that line highlights how the message is delivered to each person individually. It goes without saying that then this poetry was not (exclusively) meant to entertain people, but to provide them with some tools to understand what happens before their eyes and within themselves. The presence of (sometimes) equivocal statements, mainly metaphors and images, is not to be referred to Empedocles' agenda, but is the result of an

[30] Obbink (1993, p. 52-53) has argued that this (unusual) sequence of addresses exploits "a common archaic phenotype of a master (ritual–) craftsman indoctrinating his (occasionally dull–witted) apprentice" with "greater emphasis on mastering a body of knowledge or particular ritual skills than on ethics and proper behavior".

[31] Kingsley (1995, p. 221), Faraone (2019, p. 17).

articulated work–in–progress where Empedocles shares what the Muse (and the god) what is available to him / to them.

In ultimate analysis, we perhaps cannot infer from such style choices who the audience actually was, but can say who the 'ideal' audience was meant to be. From the analysis conducted so far, it emerges that the intent of attracting disciples is evident: those who will follow him will have a chance to see their problems and perplexities solved.[32] The hunt for knowledge, for oracles, for guidance, makes Empedocles a central figure in the whole process, who is the only one who leads the way. In addition, Empedocles was also believed to utter soothing and therapeutic words to his followers. Like the seers and soothsayers that Aristotle compares to him, he is the one whom people look for to have answers to their questions and solutions to their problems (as he says in B 112). However, the story about the *cosmos* that he tells is not scientifically approvable, Aristotle would say, but that was not Empedocles' aim. His was to attract listeners and to share with them the gift of knowledge, that particular knowledge which not only falls under the label of philosophy of nature, but also of religion. Whereas the former produces verifiable and questionable knowledge, the latter engages with the divine realm and thus is not subjected to the same process of empirical and rational discovery. To this end, Empedocles' intervention is fundamental as he has the power to make visible what is not (to the many), through the employment of images, not always transparent in meaning, but effective. The obscure points of his exposition, whether they are really as such or not, are possibly inevitable, as we have lost much of the text and all of context for the poem, but also partly inherent to his position of mediator between the gods and the humans and, all in all, not entirely ascribable to him.[33]

[32] I wonder whether the verse by Timon of Phlius where Empedocles is portrayed as "a bawler of verses in the *agora*" (fr. 42 di Marco: Ἐμπεδοκλῆς ἀγοραίων/ληκητὴς ἐπέων) testifies to this interpretation.

[33] Willi (2008, p. 262) sees the Empedoclean message as addressed to an élite, but to a potentially wide élite, for anyone who listens to him could theoretically benefit from Empedocles' teachings (*Demokratization der Elite*).

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