

# PUTTING EMPEDOCLES BACK TOGETHER

THE POETICS OF EMPEDOCLES' POEM:  
LITERARY FORM AND INTERPRETIVE  
POSSIBILITIES

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## INTRODUCTION: THE DOUBLE CREATION/SINGLE CREATION DEBATE

To say that Empedocles' poem<sup>1</sup> is poetry is obvious enough, but taking seriously this literary form may shed new light on how the work ought to be interpreted. Daniel Graham's ground breaking essay "Symmetry in the Empedoclean Cycle"<sup>2</sup> seeks to use a literary-analytical method to demonstrate that the traditional double creation view of the poem is correct. Our purpose in this paper is to evaluate the propriety of Graham's methods and examine if his work does indeed clinch the traditional reading in spite of revisionist challenges. In short, we are asking if Graham's literary analysis helps us put Empedocles' poem back together into a coherent whole.

The double creation view of the Empedoclean cycle asserts that there is a symmetry between the periods of Love and Strife. Each period has its own creation of biological life. At the extremities of each period, all life is destroyed. The fourfold cycle may be mapped as follows:

- A. Ascendancy of Love (total mortality)
  - B. Period of increasing Strife (creation period)
- A.' Ascendancy of Strife (total mortality)
  - B.' Period of increasing Love (creation period)

At the point of Strife's dominance, Love begins to increase once more, leading to its complete ascendancy as the cycle renews itself. The symmetry of the AB:A'B' pattern is

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<sup>1</sup> This paper will assume there is one poem, following Monica Secord's class presentation of 3/6/00.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel W. Graham, "Symmetry in the Empedoclean Cycle," *Classical Quarterly*, 38 (1988), 297-312.

clear. Love and Strife are mirror images of one another, each having a period of progress leading to a period of total triumph.

While Graham's view continues to be the majority view, it has not gone unrivaled. According to Graham, the most important challenge comes from the work of A. A. Long in his essay "Empedocles' Cosmic Cycle in the Sixties."<sup>3</sup> Long argues for a single creation view. While many single creation views have proposed only two stages, Long argues for four stages:

- A. The Sphere, in which all elements are blended
- B. The shattering of the Sphere by Strife
- C. The movement from maximum Strife to minimum Strife
- C.' The movement from minimum Love to maximum Love

Contrary to Long's claims, this version of the cycle is not truly symmetrical. As Graham points out, "symmetry typically involves a directional transformation such that the directions of one limb of a symmetry are opposite to those of another... Thus we would say that vectors ba and ab are symmetrical, but not that ab and bc are."<sup>4</sup> Long's C. and C.' may look symmetrical at first glance, but actually they are not. C.' simply picks up where C. leaves off, and both move in the same direction towards integration.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, for Long, Love and Strife cannot be symmetrical since Strife does not create anything. On the other hand, single creation advocates argue against the double creation view that

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<sup>3</sup> A. A. Long "Empedocles Cosmic Cycle in the Sixties," in A. P. D. Mourelatos, ed., *The Pre-Socratics* (Garden City, N. Y., 1974).

<sup>4</sup> Graham, 306.

<sup>5</sup> Thus, even if we were to reorder the above list of stages into B-C-C'-A, there would still not be symmetry in Long's reconstruction of the cycle. As Graham puts it, Long's cycle is continuous rather than symmetrical.

no existing fragment unambiguously describes a creation by Strife anyway.<sup>6</sup> The single creation reconstruction does not even allow for a *period* of Strife in Empedocles; rather Strife does its work all at once, shattering the elemental Sphere, which is then put back together by Love in a gradual process.

### TOWARDS A SOLUTION

Deciding between the double creation view and the single creation view has proven to be very difficult if one simply looks at the content of Empedocles' work. Given the varying opinions found in the testimonia, we must conclude that the poem was full of ambiguities even as it originally stood. The fragmentary nature of the poem's survival has only added to the mystery. Nonetheless, there may be hope of progress along routes that thus far have been less traveled.

Graham recognizes the difficulties in the debate between single and double creation supporters. His contribution to the discussion, an analysis of literary and rhetorical structures in the poem, has rarely been attempted to this point, probably because of Aristotle's strictures: "Homer and Empedocles have nothing in common except meter; thus, although we should call the former a poet, we should call the latter rather a natural philosopher."<sup>7</sup> This sharp dichotomy between poetry and philosophy has acted as a set of blinders to most interpreters, who have ignored the poem's literary features, or at least considered them unimportant for interpretation. But Graham wants to pull these blinders off by reading Empedocles as a philosophical poet (or a poetic philosopher).

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<sup>6</sup> Although it should be noted that Aristotle accused Empedocles of inconsistency since Love and Strife *both* combined and *both* separated.

Graham's approach rides the crest of a wave in studies of ancient literature more generally. The trend in recent decades among scholars of ancient literature has been to give literary features a much greater role in the overall interpretive process, even of prosaic writings. Scholars have begun to recognize that much ancient literature does not work the way most modern literature does. It has its own literary conventions, its own principles of composition that may seem odd in a mass literate society like our own. If this is so, giving attention to the "surface structures" of an ancient text may pay valuable dividends in uncovering its original meaning. Whereas modern writers have a plethora of visual markers available to them to clarify meaning for the reader (such as chapter breaks, subheadings, tables of contents, italic or bold face type, punctuation, footnotes, appendices, parentheses, etc.), ancient writers did not have these tools available. Very often, ancient writers would rely on internal literary structures to perform similar functions. Thus, the line between poetry and prose was not all that thick. A complete reading of any ancient work must examine the piece for literary clues as to its overall meaning.<sup>8</sup>

The Aristotelian dichotomy between poetry and philosophy is further undermined when we consider two other Pre-Socratic philosophers whose works require a literary interpretation. Both Heraclitus and Parmenides communicate their content through the

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<sup>7</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics* 1.1447b17-20.

<sup>8</sup> For more on the importance of literary structure in ancient literature, see, for example, John Welch, ed., *Chiasmus in Antiquity* (Brigham Young University: Research Press, 1981); John Breck, *The Shape of Biblical Language* (Crestwood, N. Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1994); Niles Lund, *Chiasmus in the New Testament* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1942); David A. Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999). While most of the work on ancient literary form has been done on Near Eastern literature, studies in Greek literature are beginning to catch up. If the thesis of Walter Burkert's study, *The Orientalizing Revolution: Near Eastern Influence on Greek*

form of their works. As Graham points out, Parmenides is a particularly important parallel since his work served as something of a model for that of Empedocles.<sup>9</sup> Aristotle was clearly mistaken to make poetry and philosophy mutually exclusive categories and it has only been in recent years that students of Empedocles have begun to move to a reading of his work that does not force dichotomies upon him that he probably would not have accepted.

Thus, we may reach a provisional methodological conclusion that literary features in Empedocles' work should be considered if we are to attain a holistic reading of his poem. As with so much ancient writing, the medium *is* the message. The literary structure of the text is not a mere adornment, that can be stripped away to reveal the core of his philosophy. Rather, the literary architecture is highly functional, and so it is just in examining the literary form that his philosophy becomes clear. Literary features are not expendable vehicles of philosophical ideas, but are containers that shape the very ideas they carry.

### **LITERARY ANALYSIS OF THE EMPEDOCLEAN POEM**

What, then, are the literary features of Empedocles' work that must be considered? While we cannot catalog all the literary techniques employed by Empedocles, we will briefly examine the following: meter, repetition, symmetry, mimesis, and prolegomena.<sup>10</sup> Then we will assess the value of this kind of literary

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*Culture in the Early Archaic Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992) is correct, we should expect many principles to be transferable from one culture to another.

<sup>9</sup> Graham, 300.

<sup>10</sup> These literary features overlap one another quite a bit, and so our analysis of them will too. There is no need to treat each technique in an artificially isolated fashion. One important feature Empedocles uses we will not examine is the use of compound words, which clearly relate to the formation of actual compounds in the cosmic cycle.

analysis for interpreting Empedocles and putting the Empedoclean fragments “back together.”

The dactylic hexameter employed by Empedocles does not simply give the work a Homer-esque flavor. The meter allows us to identify discrete thought units in the poem, since each line becomes a section unto itself. The metrical scheme also restricts the flexibility of Empedocles’ word choice. As Graham observes, “his vivid hexameters often threaten to overwhelm the ever tenuous thread of the argument.”<sup>11</sup>

As in the Homeric epics, meter gives rise to a certain amount of repetition. This repetition, however, is not merely stylistic, for it, in turn, gives rise to important symbolic motifs that come to dominate the work.<sup>12</sup> Fragment 17, perhaps the key fragment in the double creation/single creation debate, is marked by the recurring image of unification and separation. Graham points out the following repetitive pattern:

A. Line 1	unification
B. Line 2	separation
A. Line 4	unification
B. Line 5	separation
A. Line 7	unification
B. Line 8	separation
A. Line 9	unification
B. Line 10	separation
A. Line 16	unification

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<sup>11</sup> Graham, 304.

<sup>12</sup> Graham offers an excellent discussion of motifs on 304.

In seventeen lines of text, this AB pattern occurs five times.<sup>13</sup> Obviously, there is a literary design at work here that must be reckoned with. It seems Empedocles has given his poem a symmetrical AB structure, which, not incidentally, matches the structure of the cycle according to the traditional, double creation view.<sup>14</sup> Thus, Graham reasons,

The message of the lines embodying the unification-separation motif is adequately conveyed by any one of the couplets. What is gained by repetition is an increase not of cognitive content but of poetic force. At a basic descriptive level these lines describe the alternation of a process of unification with a process of separation. At a higher level of poetic integration they not only describe the process but *imitate* it. Empedocles structures B17 around the iterated motif of unification-separation so that the endless recurrence of the processes shows itself in the structure of the narration. Things come together into one, they separate into more, they come together into one, only to separate again. The sense of eternal recurrence is conveyed more subtly but more powerfully by the repetition of motifs than it can be in a mere statement. Yet Empedocles makes a statement too: 'and these things never cease continually alternating' (line 6). From a standpoint of literary analysis, line 6 not only makes a statement but also expresses a theme, the very theme for which the motif of unification-separation is a vehicle.

We see then that Empedocles is not content to state a principle of eternal recurrence, but at the same time he thematizes the principle and represents it by weaving a texture of motifs which embody the principle. Thus B17 must be read as more than an argument or a program for an argument: it is also a *mimetic structure* which *portrays* the world condition which it describes. As the cosmos endlessly traces out its cycles, so the present passage reiterates the order of development. From this analysis we may infer that the occurrences of the motif in other passages at least recall the nature of the cosmic cycle and are meant to remind the hearer of the eternal recurrence of the cycle.<sup>15</sup>

If this repetitive symmetry does indeed mimic the world cycle, non-symmetrical views such as Long's would be ruled out,<sup>16</sup> and a period of creation by Strife would be not simply legitimated but necessitated.

Not only does the literary technique of repetition give rise to mimetic symmetry; it also provides inclusions. Ancient writers frequently employed repetition to serve as

<sup>13</sup> Graham (306) also points out its occurrence in B20 (twice), B21, B22 (twice), and B26.

<sup>14</sup> We pointed out this AB pattern of the traditional view in our opening section.

<sup>15</sup> Graham, 305-6.

<sup>16</sup> It also seems to rule out Long's reversing of lines 4-5. Why should they be allowed to break with such a pervasive literary pattern?



“bookends” or boundary markers to literary units. Empedocles seems to have done this in fragment 17. Lines 14-15 are roughly synonymous with lines 1-2. Lines 16-17 are then verbatim repeats of the first two lines. Taken together, these two couplets in lines 14-17 apparently mark the introduction to a new section. Thus, lines 1-13 may be isolated as a rather self-contained package.

Graham argues persuasively that lines 1-13 may be broken into four sections by sense, rhetorical structure, and punctuation:<sup>17</sup>

Lines 1-2 - A double tale will be told, concerning a unification-separation process

Lines 3-5 - There is a double genesis-destruction of mortal things

Lines 6-8 - The alternation is brought about by Love and Strife and never ceases

Lines 9-13 - Things are mortal in one sense, immortal in another

If we follow testimonia from Simplicius and Clement, as Graham does, we will put fragment 17 at the beginning of the poem. We may then see lines 1-13 as something of a prolegomena for the work as whole. These lines serve a programmatic function, prefiguring the overall design of the poem. They are something of a table of contents to inform the reader of what is coming in the work.<sup>18</sup>

While the fragmentary nature of the surviving poem does not allow us to test Graham’s hypothesis, we can get a sense for what the poem should look like if he is right:

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<sup>17</sup> For details, see Graham 301.

<sup>18</sup> Opening a work with a programmatic section was common in the ancient world. According to Aristotle (*Rhetoric*, 1414b), a prologue provides “an indication of what is to be said so that hearers can know beforehand what the work is about.” Quintillian (*Institutionis*, 10.1.48) praised Homer because “his poems made his listeners attentive by his mention of the greatness of the theme and open to instruction by his swift sketch of the plot.” D. Earle, in an article entitled “Prologue Form in Ancient Historiography,” *ANRW* I:22, 856, summarizes: “[In] history, epideictic oratory, philosophical dialogue, political treatise or whatever, your first sentence had to announce what you were writing...The techniques of ancient book production, the physical nature of the volumen, did not allow the reader to easily scan the body of the work

Lines 1-2	expounded in	lines 14-35
Lines 3-5	expounded in	lines 35-??
Lines 6-8	expounded in	lines ??-??
Lines 9-13	expounded in	lines ??-??

This scheme works nicely in fragment 17. Lines 14-35 do indeed correlate well with the opening lines, as Graham ably demonstrates.<sup>19</sup> Line 35 appears to introduce the subject of ‘coming to be,’ which would fit well with an exposition of lines 3-5. As far as the evidence will allow, the hypothesis works.

### POETICS AND INTERPRETATION

If Empedocles did indeed construct his poem according to the principles of composition discussed above, using these principles to unlock the meaning of the poem should bear a great deal of interpretive fruit. We have already seen how this literary approach favors the symmetry of the double creation view. One more example of how this poetic analysis of the work aids interpretation will suffice for our present purpose.

A controversial phrase in the poem is “mortal things.” It occurs in line 3 of fragment 17 and at several other key junctures in the poem. What are these “mortal things”? Long’s view requires six entities to be included in the “mortal things” category: Love and Strife, plus the four elements. Long claims that the “mortal things” of line 3 are described in lines 16ff. But if Graham’s literary analysis is correct, and lines 1-13 give the poem’s overall plan in a microstructure, then “mortal things” are not under discussion in lines 16ff at all. The exposition of “mortal things,” along with other key ideas in lines

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to ascertain its subject. The first sentence and first paragraph performed much of the function of the title page and list of contents in a modern codex.”

3-5, would come in the section beginning at line 35. Graham's literary analysis leads him to view "mortal things" as compounds. Once again, we see how the significance of perceiving the poem's structure is essential if we are to grasp its meaning.<sup>20</sup>

### AN UNSOLVABLE MYSTERY?

The literary techniques Empedocles employs do not merely give his poem an aesthetic appeal, but serve as bearers and shapers of meaning. Any complete interpretation of Empedocles must give due weight to the "connection between his philosophical objectives and his poetic medium."<sup>21</sup> Graham's attempt to put poetics in the service of interpretation has certainly aided the study of Empedocles and made the traditional reading of the cycle more plausible than ever.<sup>22</sup>

But there are still difficulties to be resolved – if such resolution is possible. In particular, the new data from the publication *L'Empedocle de Strasbourg*<sup>23</sup> may need to be incorporated in Graham's analysis. The Strasbourg papyrus seems to provide two main lines of evidence that affect Graham's literary reading, one positive, one negative.

On the favorable side, the Strasbourg reconstruction of the poem allows us to continue fragment 17 beyond line 35. We find that the fragment does indeed go on to discuss "coming to be" and "perishing," just as Graham predicted. Negatively, however, the Strasbourg edition of the poem situates fragment 17 far from the beginning of the

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<sup>19</sup> Graham, 302.

<sup>20</sup> Graham provides further evidence for his reading of "mortal things" as compounds on 302-303.

<sup>21</sup> Graham, 301.

<sup>22</sup> Graham's own conclusion on 311-312 bears this out:

The vigorous challenge Long and others have raised to the Double Creation view has forced a critical rethinking of the very structure of Empedocles' world view; but at the same time it has exhibited the remarkable tenacity of DC. Perhaps part of the reason for the persistence of DC is the failure of its opponents to reach a consensus or provide a coherent alternative. But I cannot help thinking that, for all its philosophic imprecision, Empedocles' text itself resists SC. What Empedocles failed to state perspicuously he nevertheless succeeded in conveying in vibrant imagery and poetic design. The verbal structure of his poem is after all not dispensable in the way Aristotle thought it was, for it is in poetic form that Empedocles most unmistakably reveals the eternal recurrence of the cosmic cycle and its fearful symmetry.

overall poem, meaning it cannot be a programmatic introduction.<sup>24</sup> If the line numbering is accepted, rehabilitating Graham's analysis would require either jettisoning the argument from prolegomena altogether, in favor of some different overall structure, or perhaps viewing fragment 17 as the starting point and introduction of a new section within the larger poem.<sup>25</sup>

If anything, the Strasbourg fragments may have made the task of Empedoclean "detectives" even more difficult, for now there seem to be more conflicting clues. So long as the original structure of the poem remains in doubt, all interpretations of the poem must be regarded as tentative. The question now facing interpreters of the poem is this: Which form of evidence should be given more weight, the literary-analytical evidence offered by Graham or the evidence from the papyrus reconstruction? Certainly both kinds of evidence will prove to be important, but balancing the scales between them should keep students of Empedocles busy for years to come.

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<sup>23</sup> Alain Martin and Oliver Primavesi, *L'Empedocle de Strasbourg* (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 1998).

<sup>24</sup> Of course, the line numbering of the papyrus is far from certain. The Strasbourg reconstruction puts fragment 17 at line 233ff.

<sup>25</sup> It should be noted that Parmenides did not put his programmatic statement at the beginning of the poem.