

## PARMENIDES AND EMPEDOCLES



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*The Fragments in Verse Translation*

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The Fragments in Verse Translation  
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## PREFACE

The common view of the pre-Socratic philosophers is that they stand at the beginning of Greek (and therefore Western) rationalism and science. And so they do. But they also stood at the end of a tradition, a life of the mind and spirit that was intuitive and holistic. Men like Pythagoras, Heraclitus, Parmenides and Empedocles did not distinguish science from poetry or religious experience from philosophical understanding. They represent an older cultural type—in many ways they resemble Siberian and American Indian shamans—that disappeared from the Greek world in the classical period, and is perhaps not widely enough understood in our own time.

E. R. Dodds and others, following the lead of the Swiss scholar Karl Meuli, have traced the outlines of a Greek shamanistic tradition that had contact with Asiatic shamanism in Scythia, was evidenced in the eastern Aegean rim and in Crete, and crossed over to southern Italy in the sixth century B.C. with Pythagoras. Parmenides, from Elea in southern Italy, was in this line; and Empedocles, a Sicilian, was its last representative.

A shaman is trained to undertake hazardous spiritual journeys in order to exercise compassion and advance in wisdom, and he often reports his experiences in the form of a song, chant or poem. Parmenides' poem closely resembles such a report, both in the details of the journey recounted in the prologue and in the substance of what the Goddess tells him, which is that the universe and our minds form a mutually committed whole. Dodds calls Empedocles' fragments "the one first-hand source from

which we can still form some notion of what a Greek shaman was really like" (*The Greeks and the Irrational* [1951], p. 145). His understanding of the physical and the metaphysical universe was directed toward a personal transformation that enabled him to benefit others and realize his own liberation. Poetry was for both of them a natural, but practiced, means of expression. They were not philosophers who just happened to write in verse.

Alongside their poetic practice I think both Empedocles and Parmenides trained themselves in some kind of formal meditation practice, perhaps Pythagorean in origin, and that there are hints of what this was in the fragments. I have indicated in the Introductions what can be made of this. The historical record, scant at best for both Parmenides and Empedocles, is not helpful here. But their poetry exists; it can be pieced together still, and through the pieced vision we can understand something of their minds.