PREFACE

(Meta)Physics for Poets

What men are poets who can speak of Jupiter if he were like a man, but if he is an immense spinning sphere of methane and ammonia must be silent?

—RICHARD FEYNMAN

I took a course in college entitled "Physics for Poets." The class was designed to give students with no scientific or mathematical background a sense of the key questions and concepts of physics, to allow them to appreciate the "poetry" of physics. I could little have guessed then that I would find myself working, several decades later, on the poetry of the first physicists, the early philosophers whom Aristotle calls *phusikoi*. These thinkers, active in ancient Greece in the late archaic and early classical period (roughly 600–400 BCE), were philosophers of *phusis*, nature. Their books, often known by the generic title *Peri Phuseōs* (*On Nature*), deal with the creation and constitutive elements of the cosmos and cover a vast array of topics: the planets and meteorological phenomena; the origins and development of plants, animals, and human beings; the soul and the limitations of knowledge; the gods and their relation to mortals. As this partial list suggests, their inquiries into nature took them beyond what we would think of as physics; they extended into metaphysics and the investigation of the fundamental qualities of reality itself, the "nature" of being as a whole. These thinkers were also poets, and it was their poetry not their physics or metaphysics that first drew me to them: the enigmatic brilliance of Heraclitus's aphorisms, the verbal invention of Democritus, the swirling, rushing verbiage of Empedocles. Even when they did not write in verse, they used language in self-conscious and innovative ways. This poetic language and its relation to their philosophical thought is the topic of this book.

The thinkers I examine here—Parmenides, Heraclitus, Empedocles, Anaxagoras, and Democritus—are members of the eclectic group generally known as

the "Presocratics."[1] This label, as we shall see in the Introduction, has come into question in recent years both for its teleological assumptions and for its historical inaccuracies. The term "Presocratic" tells an interesting story about the reception of these writers and the place they have been granted in the history of Western philosophy, but it says almost nothing about these thinkers themselves. They did not know they came before Socrates, nor did they call themselves philosophers. I use the label for convenience, but I do not subscribe to the assumptions it might entail as to the position of these writers in the diachronic sweep of intellectual history or the characteristics that unite them synchronically and differentiate them from other contemporaneous thinkers.

These are intriguing and important questions, but they are not my questions.[2] This study is less historicist or genealogical than literary-theoretical. I approach each author individually, attempting to elucidate the particular qualities of his thought and expression and the dynamic interrelation between them that plays out in his surviving texts. Of course, these texts do not exist in isolation, nor did their authors. The Presocratics were in conversation with one another: Parmenides seems to respond to Heraclitus, and everyone else responds to Parmenides.[3] It would be tempting—and productive—to compare Presocratic thinkers on a given topic in order to paint a picture of the intellectual culture of early Greece and their position within it.[4] Common themes will emerge in the pages that follow: a shared interest in origins and causality; time, fixity, and change; universality and plurality; and the conceptual and spatial geometry of the circle, to name just a few. But my interest is less in such themes per se than in how they take shape in and through each author's unique language. For these purposes it proved more expedient to treat each figure separately.

1. My choice of these five is exemplary, not exhaustive, though it does represent a large percentage of the surviving words attributed to the Presocratics. One notable omission is Xenophanes, who composed elegiac poetry on traditional themes, as well as hexameter poetry on the physical world, epistemology, and the nature of the divine. This heterogeneous output makes Xenophanes an important figure in a broader survey of the relation between philosophy and poetry in archaic Greece. But I find both the philosophy of the "poetic" fragments and the poetics of the "philosophical" fragments less rich than in the authors considered here, and the corpus as a whole offers less purchase for the kind of analysis I am undertaking. For a good recent treatment of Xenophanes's poetics and how they support his philosophy, see Mackenzie 2021a, 24–64.

2. Readers wanting an introduction to the Presocratics as a whole may consult Guthrie 1962, 1965; Kirk, Raven, and Schofield 1983; Long 1999a; Curd and Graham 2008; and the excellent study of Sassi (2018), who situates them well within their historical and sociological, as well as intellectual and literary, context. Hussey 1972; Warren 2007c; and McKirahan 2010 are informative and accessible for those with less background in the field.

3. See especially Curd 1998. Parmenides's decisive influence has been questioned by Osborne (2006).

4. There are many examples of the productivity of this approach, from Stokes 1971 (on the one and the many) to Porter 2010, 121–76 (on aesthetics); Bryan 2012 (on likeness and likelihood); and Tor 2017 (on the divine).

The Presocratics were in dialogue not only with one another but also indirectly, if not directly, with their "nonphilosophical" contemporaries. Focused study of this dialogue, too, would be illuminating and would no doubt support and extend the claims I make here about the porous border between philosophy and poetry in early Greece.[5] My project, however, is more inward-looking and, in a sense, preliminary. While I do hope to shed light on the larger intellectual landscape in which the Presocratics operated, my focus is on the figures, not the landscape. The complexity of these figures in themselves—the intricacy of the theories, their expression, and the relation between the two—precludes drawing easy connections with their contemporaries, philosophical or nonphilosophical, and complicates in advance any totalizing account of their intellectual milieu that might be extrapolated from such connections.

Links might be forged diachronically as well as synchronically. Each of my authors engaged in a sustained and serious way with Homer and Hesiod, thinking both with and against these authoritative figures and reworking not only their epic forms but their entire worldview. We will see examples of this engagement throughout the book, but it is not my emphasis. The creative rewriting of their epic predecessors was never an end in itself for the Presocratic philosophers, and it needs to be understood within the context of their larger poetic and philosophical projects.[6] A diachronic approach might, alternatively, lead forward in time to examine the Presocratics' influence on later thinkers, ancient and modern, philosophical and nonphilosophical.[7] Again, we will observe this influence, especially in chapter 5, which situates Democritus in relation to both Aristotle's reception and the (avowedly anti-Aristotelian) reception of Barbara Cassin and other modern philosophers. But serious consideration of the Presocratics' long philosophical—or poetic—afterlife is beyond the scope of this book, which is, first and foremost, a close analysis of the expressive choices of five Presocratic authors and an attempt to understand how these choices shape—both limit and enable—their philosophical inquiry.

This project is rife with challenges of its own. The philosophical doctrines of each of these figures is the subject of vehement debate and there is often no consensus on the most basic features of their philosophical system nor even on

5. For scholarship in this vein see, e.g., Kouremenos 1993; Egli 2003; Irby-Massie 2008; Seaford 2013; Scapin 2020; Ciampa 2021, 2023; Mackenzie 2022; and Kingsley 2024. Kotwick and Moore (forthcoming) will facilitate this sort of intergeneric study.

6. There are several fine recent studies of the Presocratics' engagement with Homer and Hesiod, including Tor 2017; Iribarren 2018; Mackenzie 2021a; Iribarren and Koning 2022; and Folit-Weinberg 2022.

7. Laks (2018) shows well how the "concept of Presocratic philosophy" was shaped by its later reception. See further, purely by way of example, Stamatellos 2007 on Plotinus and the Presocratics; Porter 2000 on Nietzsche; O'Connell 2005 on Derrida; and Jacobs 1999 and Korab-Karpowicz 2016 on Heidegger. A list of poetic receptions would likewise be lengthy, ranging from Ovid to Hölderlin to T. S. Eliot.

their (highly fragmentary) texts. To attempt to interpret the thought and language of the Presocratics is to work always amid radical uncertainty about both the thought and the language. I remain agnostic on many fundamental points of doctrine. Myriad decisions must be made about each in order to proceed, but my commitment to these decisions is at most provisional. In reaching them, I rely on the work of scholars of ancient philosophy who have labored to reconstruct the texts and the theories of these authors. But while I engage extensively, and I hope responsibly, with the philosophical scholarship, my own hermeneutics are unapologetically literary. This interpretive strategy follows closely on my conviction that in the Presocratics poetics and philosophy are inseparable. Writers—even philosophers!—think in language: their language very simply is their thought (and vice versa), and thus a close reading of their poetics is the only way to fully understand their philosophy.

The primacy of language relative to thought is a generally accepted premise of modern continental philosophy. The same premise is less accepted (when not outright rejected) within the Anglo-American tradition—indeed, this is one of the main differences between the two.[8] For readers in the latter camp this difference in approach may produce misunderstandings, in particular surrounding the evaluation of incoherence and inconsistency, notions that will figure centrally in my readings of the Presocratics. These are serious failings in a philosophical tradition that (starting with Aristotle, as we shall see) prizes clarity of expression, consistency of argumentation, and coherence of thought above all else and presupposes that these are the proper aims of philosophical writing. When I use terms like "incoherence" below, I do so not to denounce the author's shortcomings or suggest that his theories are invalid or worthless—quite the opposite. I proceed from the assumption that no systematic thinking, much less writing, is ever fully coherent, and that its unresolved tensions and unresolvable paradoxes are among the most exciting moments in any text—the richest, the most telling, and the most hermeneutically rewarding. I do not aim to resolve them myself, nor do I require my authors to resolve them. Instead, I examine how each author approaches and thinks through these aporias—including how he tries and necessarily fails to solve them—in order to identify both the theoretical impasses and creative impetuses of his philosophy.

In emphasizing language and its aporias, I put the Presocratic philosophers into conversation with certain modern continental philosophers who, in my view, share their concerns. The book engages throughout with these theorists, in particular Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze, the former for his exploration of language at the "margins of philosophy," the latter for his attempt to articulate a mode of philosophy that expands those margins. My emphasis on this

8. Rowett (2020) notes the challenge the Presocratic philosopher-poets pose to the alliance of scholars of ancient philosophy with analytic philosophy.

nonlinear lineage over more immediate or direct genealogies may incur the charge of anachronism. But the Presocratics, as I hope to show, were preoccupied with the same questions that—in a very different idiom, to be sure, and with different presuppositions and aims—concern these twentieth-century thinkers, and the juxtaposition brings out otherwise obscure aspects of their thought. Part of the merit of drawing these connections is precisely its untimeliness, which can open up new and unanticipated ways of interpreting the texts in their historical specificity—what Barbara Cassin terms "a different way of being pre-Socratic."[9] The strategic anachronism of my theoretical framework also helps counter the different, and more entrenched, anachronism of reading the Presocratics through Aristotle. The modern philosophers (or perhaps "antiphilosophers") with whom I engage operate at a critical remove from the Aristotelian tradition and help us to see beyond his influential but partial (in both senses) definition of philosophy. In this way, too, the anachronism of modern theories can be a means to the end of a more—or at least differently—attuned historicism.

If for some readers my choice of theoretical interlocutors will seem too modern, for others it may feel rather old-fashioned. Why Deleuze and Derrida in preference to approaches with higher current cachet like the various new materialisms, speculative realisms, or object-oriented ontologies? These theories are helpful in understanding the world the Presocratics imagine (in particular that of Empedocles, as we shall see in chapter 3) but less helpful in understanding that imagining itself: they tend to be relatively uninterested in language. But the Presocratics' cosmos is created and preserved in language. This language, as I hope to show, has a materiality and an agency of its own and to overlook it, or attempt to look through it as though it were transparent, is to ignore a fundamental element of that cosmos itself.

Both the cosmos and the poetics of the Presocratics are stunning in their originality and strangeness. I think of the Presocratics as what Deleuze and Guattari call "a minor literature." This has nothing to do with the minuteness of the fragments or the minor place they occupy in ancient literary history, but rather evokes their strangeness in relation to more familiar genres of Greek expression and thought. To write a minor literature is, Deleuze and Guattari say, "to be as a stranger *in* one's own language."[10] The Presocratics are strangers in the Greek language, expanding its possibilities, bending it into new forms, often straining it to the breaking point of syntax and semantics alike. They are also strangers in the language of philosophy passed down from Plato and Aristotle, dialects of which are still spoken by

9. Cassin 2014, 26; cf. 2, 8, 27. See the thoughtful comments on untimeliness in Postclassicisms Collective 2020, 161–81. Michel Serres (Serres and Latour 1995, 60) offers the image of a crumpled handkerchief to figure nonlinear history and the surprising transhistorical proximities it produces. Holmes (2016) adopts this image as a model for the study of classical reception.

10. Deleuze and Guattari 1983a, 26 (= 1986, 16–27).

most professional philosophers today. I attempt to hear this strangeness and to do it justice in my readings.

I cite the fragments by their Diels-Kranz (DK) number, as this is the numbering system most commonly used in the scholarship and in the searchable databases of ancient Greek literature. The Diels-Kranz system refers to authors by number; for ease of reference I will refer to them by abbreviated name (so Heraclitus's first fragment will be Her. B1 instead of Diels-Kranz's 21 B1) and where there is no risk of ambiguity, simply by the fragment number. As Diels-Kranz seems likely to be superseded, at least in the anglophone and francophone worlds, by Laks-Most's Loeb edition, I also give LM numbers for each fragment, separated by a backslash. Where I prefer Laks-Most's text to Diels-Kranz's, I put their number first. The result is some rather ungainly strings of numbers, but I hope the loss in elegance will be compensated by a gain in utility. Translations, also often ungainly, are my own.

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Doing so has meant often working at, or even over, the limits of my knowledge—of physics, of philosophy, and of poetry. As Bernard Williams, one of the many illustrious previous Sather Lecturers, said, "The truth is that we all have to do more things than we can rightly do, if we are to do anything at all."[12] If I have done more things than I can rightly do in this project, it has been with the help of many generous friends and colleagues. The project began as a graduate seminar on the Presocratics at the University of Toronto in the fall of 2017 and culminated in seminars on the four elements at UC Berkeley in the fall of 2023 and the University

11. Kurke 2011, 49.
12. Williams 1993, x.

of Toronto the following fall. Discussions with students in these seminars helped me develop and refine my ideas. In the intervening years, I presented preliminary versions of this material to many audiences and received invaluable feedback. I am especially thankful to Phiroze Vasunia for organizing an extremely helpful roundtable discussion and to everyone who participated, particularly respondents Shaul Tor and Duncan Kennedy. My thanks to Matt Evans, Tom Mackenzie, Kathryn Morgan, James Porter, David Sider, Charles Stocking, Shaul Tor, and Iakovos Vasiliou for sharing their ideas and (then) unpublished work with me, and to many of these colleagues again plus Phil Mitsis, Jean-Claude Picot, Emmanuela Bakola, and especially Alex Purves for reading and offering valuable advice on drafts of individual chapters. Material related to chapter 2 was published as "Heraclitus Stuttered," in S. Nooter and M. Telò, eds. *Radical Formalisms: Reading, Theory, and the Boundaries of the Classical* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2024), 138–52. I thank the two editors for their improvements to that chapter and the press for permission to reprint the material. I am also grateful to Rebecca Comay for turning me on to the Dolar articles that became the basis of chapter 5 and for her insightful feedback on that chapter.

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