Introduction

The Poetry of Being

Poetry is the creation of a name-of-being that was previously unknown.
—ALAIN BADIOU

The Presocratic philosophers invented new ways of thinking about life, the natural world, and the structure of reality. In doing so, they also conceived new ways of using language and novel forms of expression. This book examines these two innovations and the productive relation between them. It aims to show that the language of these thinkers not only conveys their thought but shapes and enables it. Experimenting in both poetry and prose, the Presocratics offer a unique laboratory for studying the formative and reciprocal interaction between thought and expression, idea and word, and—a distinction alien to these thinkers themselves—philosophy and literature.

The book examines the work of five Presocratic philosophers: Parmenides, Heraclitus, Empedocles, Anaxagoras, and Democritus. Heraclitus was composing around 500 BCE in Ephesus on the eastern edge of the Greek world; Parmenides at around the same time in Elea, on the western edge. Empedocles lived a generation later (c. 484–424 BCE) in Acragas in Sicily. Anaxagoras, from Clazomene in Asia Minor (c. 500–428 BCE), spent time in Athens and was part of the lively intellectual culture of the democracy. Democritus, born in Abdera in far northern Greece, also came to Athens, although he complains that no one recognized him there (B116/P22). He died some time after 399 BCE, the year of Socrates's trial. These five figures thus span the full length of the fifth century, from the late archaic through the classical period, and the geographical breadth of the Greek-speaking world.

Their thought, too, is striking in its scope and variety. These "first philosophers," as Aristotle termed them (*Metaph*. 1.3 983b6–7), investigated the origins

of the cosmos and the basic elements of which it was composed. They scrutinized the heavens—stars and planets, clouds and rainbows—and life in all its forms, including human life. They asked about the shape of the earth and what holds it in place, about the cause of eclipses and earthquakes, how magnets work or the eye sees color, how plants grow and whether they can think, what happens to the soul after death. These *phusikoi* (natural philosophers) were also metaphysicians, inquiring into the nature of time and space, causality, identity, and change. Where did everything come from and how? Why is there something rather than nothing? What *is* something and what, if anything, is nothing? The Presocratics were ontologists in the broadest sense of the term, analyzing all the manifold beings (*ta onta*) in the universe and the fundamental nature of being (*to on*) itself.

This new study of being and beings required a new discourse, the *logos* in "ontology." Parmenides was the first Greek we know of to use the verb "to be" as a noun to name being (*to eon*, in his epic dialect). In so doing, he created not only a new word but a new vision of a reality beyond our everyday perceptions and opinions, basically inventing the study of metaphysics. Parmenides's *To Eon* not only denotes that metaphysical vision but enables it to appear, lucent at the very edge of language and thought. Likewise, Democritus invented a new word to name his atom: he artificially dissected the Greek word *mēden* ("nothing") to create the neologism *den*. This new word allowed him to think, as well as to articulate, a new relation between being and nonbeing, beyond the simple binary of atoms and void. As these two examples suggest (and we will see many more), language does not follow passively in the wake of ideas, a vehicle deployed for their communication or a cosmetic added to adorn them. Instead, the word enables and extends the idea, such that without it the idea of the thing and even the thing itself could not exist. Through their innovative poetics the Presocratic philosophers not only describe a new reality; they create one.

This book attempts to demonstrate this claim through a close examination of the poetics of five Presocratic philosophers. By "poetics" I mean simply these writers' self-conscious deployment of the resources of language, including simile and metaphor, visual imagery and acoustic effects, unusual diction and word order, repetition and rhythm, puns, wordplay, and pointed ambiguity.[1] Two of these thinkers were poets in the stricter sense. Parmenides and Empedocles wrote in dactylic hexameter, the meter of epic. Both make extensive and creative use of epic diction and imagery, borrowing Homeric lines or Hesiodic phrases and putting them to uses neither epic poet could have dreamed of; both reimagine the epic Muse as they draw on the cultural prestige of epic poetry to authorize their radical

1. Silk (2010) offers a helpful discussion of poetic style in the ancient Greek context. To the extent that these features of poetry are a heightening of features of language in general, when I refer to the "poetics" of the Presocratics I might equally say their "language." The most comprehensive study of Presocratic poetics is still Most 1999.

intellectual projects.[2] The others wrote in prose, a stylistic choice that was in itself radical at a time when authoritative speech was expressed in verse and poets were divinely inspired "masters of truth."[3] But the choice of prose did not make them less poetic in the broader sense. Heraclitus's intricately structured and densely resonant prose aphorisms have been compared to the odes of his contemporary Aeschylus, and Democritus was praised by no lesser an authority on style than Cicero for the "brilliance of his diction" (*clarissimis verborum luminibus, Orat*. 20.67 < Dem. A34/R6). Even Anaxagoras, the most prosaic of the prose writers, makes artful use of hypotaxis and parataxis.[4]

But that art is never gratuitous nor merely *gratia artis*. Instead, it is profoundly implicated in these writers' vision of the cosmos. That implication is encapsulated in the very word *kosmos*, which, before it came to denote the universe, originally signified an aesthetically pleasing order.[5] In the Presocratics' cosmology, these two meanings can be neither separated nor fully superimposed. When Heraclitus writes of "this cosmos . . . [which] no god nor man created (*epoiēsen*), but it always was and is and will be fire ever-living, kindled in measure and extinguished in measure" (Her. B30/D85), he differentiates the natural cosmos—unauthored and eternal—from the artistry of his own *poiēsis*, but also connects the two, as the balanced rhythms of his prose replicate the rhythmic cycles of the cosmic fire. When Parmenides invites us to hear "the deceptive *kosmos* of my words" (Parm. B8.52/D8.57), he evokes both the natural universe he will describe and the aesthetic ordering of its description. At the same time he suggests a potential tension between the two: the "cosmetic" beauty of human language can conjure a false vision of the world. Even as they forge a new language of being, the Presocratics ask whether that being can be expressed in language. Can *ta onta*—to say nothing of *to on*—really be contained within *logos*, or will some aspect of being always remain in excess of its discursive articulation? Conversely, is *logos* itself securely part of "what is," or must it exceed being in order to express it? As I will argue

2. Cicero remarks that although Parmenides was a bad poet, he was indeed a poet (*Acad.* 2.74 = Xen. A25/R1, Parm. R1). Ancient verdicts on Empedocles were somewhat kinder: Aristotle praised his skillful diction and his use of metaphor and "the other poetic devices" ("On poets," fr. 70 Rose, quoted at Diog. Laert. 8.57 < Emp. A1/R1b). He also, however, insinuated that Empedocles wrote in verse to disguise the fact that he had nothing to say (*Rh.* 3.5 1407a32–33 < Emp. A25/R1c). On these and other ancient assessments of Empedocles's style, see Willi 2008, 197–200; and Rowett 2013.

3. Detienne 1996, 35–88.

4. Diogenes Laertius praises the "brevity and weightiness" of Heraclitus's style (*brakhutēs, baros*, 9.6–7 < Her. A1/R5c), and the Suda remarks that "he wrote many things poetically" (*poiētikōs,* H.472 < Her. A1a/R11). Plutarch comments that Democritus speaks "marvelously and magnificently" (*daimoniōs, megaloprepōs, Quaest. conv.* 683A = Dem. A77/R9). Even Anaxagoras, today largely unappreciated as a stylist, was judged to write "sweetly and magnificently" (*hēdeōs kai megalophronōs,* Diog. Laert. 2.6 < Anaxag. A1/R35).

5. Finkelberg (1998) argues that *kosmos* at this period denoted an order or arrangement, not a world or universe, but Kahn (1960, 219–30) sees the seeds of the latter meaning in the former.

throughout this book, the Presocratics' ontological inquiry is also an inquiry into the possibility or impossibility of ontology as a discursive project.

At first glance, the poetics of the Presocratics may seem an unpromising subject for study. The conditions within which their texts were first produced and circulated are unclear; fundamental questions about their original audience and performance context and how these factors affected each author's choice of expressive medium—verse or prose—are hard to answer decisively.[6] However they originally came into being, these texts survive for us only in fragments, some substantial, like the sixty-six continuous verses of Parmenides B8/D8, but some no more than a single evocative word, like Democritus's "change of world" (*ameipsikosmiē*, Dem. B138/D83b), or a mysterious phrase, like Heraclitus's statement that "souls can smell in Hades" (Her. B98/D121). These shards, moreover, are preserved almost entirely in the works of later authors, making it difficult to determine in any given case which words belong to the original text and which to the surrounding context. Hermann Diels, in his towering edition *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, differentiated what he believed were the original words of the author (which he labeled B fragments) from the testimonia that preserve them (his A fragments).[7] This practice is followed by André Laks and Glenn Most, whose important new English-Greek edition supplements and is poised to supplant Diels's: they distinguish D fragments (Doctrine) from R texts (Reception).[8] Presenting the fragments like gems on a velvet tray, this separation produces the illusion of solid objects with clear-cut edges, obscuring the way the history of transmission has impacted virtually every remaining word, rendering each individual fragment porous and unstable and the works as a whole less lapidary than labile, sand that shifts continually under our feet.[9]

6. For a good treatment of the issues see Sassi 2018, 64–109. The choice of verse or prose is not insignificant: as we shall see, it is tied to each author's understanding of his own linguistic practice. But the difference is often overstated, sometimes in service of a fallacious distinction between verse's supposed emotionality and the rational objectivity of prose and a historical trajectory from the former to the latter (from *muthos* to *logos*). For discussion of the topic, and the related question of whether the Presocratics composed and disseminated their works orally or in writing, see Havelock 1966, 1983; Kahn 1983, 2003; Robb 1983b; Osborne 1998; Laks 2001; Goldhill 2002; Patzer 2006; Sassi 2018, 81–93; and Bryan 2020. "The poetry of being" and "the prose of the world" in my title should be understood as congruent, not contrastive.

7. Diels and Kranz 1951, 1952, first published in 1903; the sixth edition, edited by Walther Kranz, is currently still the standard edition of the Presocratics. My citational practices are explained in the Preface.

8. Laks and Most 2016. They also have a section of P fragments having to do with the philosopher as a person and the tradition surrounding his biography.

9. Hence the insistence in much recent scholarship that one cannot study the original texts in isolation from the doxographic tradition and a tendency to focus on the latter even to the exclusion of the former. In addition to Diels 1929; Cherniss 1935; Osborne 1987b; Mansfeld and Runia 1997; Laks 2007; and other works surveyed in Baltussen 2005, see the interesting discussion of Cassin (2020, 5–22): "With doxography we are plunged right into a Nietzschean modernity, since it is clear that there are no facts but only interpretations and interpretations of interpretations" (8).

A close literary reading of the Presocratics is thus a precarious project, but I believe it is worth the risks, for despite the many uncertainties they pose, these tiny texts dazzle. I approach them as one would a poem, each rich and complex in itself and resonating complexly with all the others to make up a whole that is never really whole.[10] I view the fragmentary nature of these texts, both individually and in the aggregate, not as a liability but as an asset—or, at a minimum, a genuine opportunity. It demands a different quality of attention and promotes not just a resignation to but a positive valorization of incompleteness and incoherence. In this approach I follow the lead of Page DuBois, who notes that the challenge—and excitement—of studying fragments is merely an extreme version of that involved in the study of antiquity in general, inasmuch as all ancient texts are, to a greater or lesser degree, lacunose and unstable, both deracinated from their original context and overlaid by the history of their reception, and thus any coherent narrative we create from or for them is both tenuous and tendentious, the product of our own desire.[11]

I also take my cue from the Presocratic philosophers themselves, who are not only fragmentary philosophers but philosophers of the fragmentary. Pluralists like Empedocles, Anaxagoras, and Democritus posited the conceptual priority of the part to the whole, which is always contingent and provisional, and valued the productive energy of parts in unstable combination. But even those whose vision was more monistic or holistic (like Parmenides and Heraclitus) recognized the generativity of incoherence and preserved within their texts the gaps and contradictions that simultaneously propel their inquiry and prevent its totalization. Even before they were fragments these texts were not whole, and their internal fractures and aporias, as I will argue, represent moments not of failure, but of a formal and conceptual openness productive for both their poetics and their philosophy.

We will return to the productivity of aporia below. But first the term "Presocratic philosophy" requires some explanation. The label "Presocratic" is a convenient umbrella term for the philosophers who preceded Socrates. But that apparently simple designation is actually quite complicated, and it is surrounded by question marks on all sides.[12] For one thing, the chronology does not hold. Some of these thinkers, like Democritus, were contemporaries of Socrates; others who might be included in the group, like the fourth-century author of the Derveni Papyrus, were actually post-Socratic. One feature often taken to define the Presocratics

10. Compare Blanchot (1993, 153–55) on the "strange pluralism" of the fragment. Blanchot is one of the great modern masters of the fragment. His affinity for Heraclitus is manifest in his preface to Ramnoux 1968.

11. On the study of classical antiquity as a relationship with fragments, see DuBois 1995, 18–30; and on the aesthetics of the fragment (in her case, of Sappho), 31–54.

12. Laks (2018) traces the ancient and modern construction of "the concept of Presocratic philosophy." He notes that the term dates to the end of the eighteenth century and was adopted at the end of the nineteenth under the influence of Nietzsche and Diels (19–34). Cf. Laks 2002a. On the problems and advantages of the label, see Long 1999b, 5–10; and Laks 2018, 28–34.

is their interest in the natural world; but since Socrates himself was a student of nature in his youth (as he confesses), he might himself be considered a Presocratic. In that case, the watershed moment would come not with Socrates but with Plato, whose account of Socrates tells of his development from natural philosopher to metaphysician (*Phd.* 96a–100a). "Presocratic philosophy" would thus be a Platonic conceit and the Presocratics more properly Preplatonic.[13] Alternatively, they might be considered Prearistotelian. This, in fact, is how Aristotle presents them in a key passage of *Metaphysics* I (to which we will return momentarily), a passage instrumental in the construction of these diverse thinkers as a unified group. Regardless of to whom or what one considers the Presocratics prior, many scholars have rightly objected to the teleological implications of the label, the notion that philosophy evolved along a single, unidirectional track.[14] This progressivist narrative figures the Presocratics as primitives, taking the first stumbling steps toward answering questions that would be formulated decisively by Plato and Aristotle and that, in that form, would define the modern discipline of philosophy. "Presocratic" in this narrative would seem to mean simply pre- or protophilosophical.

Others have seen these thinkers not as precursors to Plato and Aristotle but as alternatives to them and to the entire Western philosophical tradition derived from them. This is partly what drew Nietzsche to the study of the Presocratics and has attracted many other modern thinkers, from Martin Heidegger to Alain Badiou. From this perspective, the Presocratics are not prephilosophers but, in Badiou's term, "antiphilosophers," who challenge the premises and truth claims of Western philosophy as a whole.[15]

The label "Presocratic" thus raises questions about the label "philosophy." In what sense were the Presocratics philosophers? Was it the kind of questions they asked? The way they asked them? These early thinkers have been credited with the invention of logical argument, empiricism, rationalism, secularism, the very "art of thinking."[16] But "philosopher" was not a label they gave themselves, and the line that divides their mode of thought from that of their contemporaries is blurry at

13. Laks 2018, 1–18.

14. This teleological narrative can be traced back, via Zeller (1923), to Hegel. Following Nestle (1942), it often takes the form of a trajectory from *muthos* to *logos.* For a good critique of this narrative as part of philosophy's project of self-definition, see Morgan 2000, 30–37; and for a defense of its functional utility, see Laks 2018, 35–52.

15. Badiou (2011, 69, cf. 75; 2005, 15) takes the term from Lacan. He suggests that Heraclitus might have been the "inventor of the antiphilosophical position" later assumed by Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, and Lacan.

16. The "art of thinking" is Barnes's (1982, 3–5) phrase. Laks (2018, 52; cf. Long 1999b, 10–15) stresses the totalizing nature of their inquiry and "a certain type of rationalization"; Sassi (2018, xiv), their "critical stance toward received opinions." As Moore (2019, 2–3) observes, the attempt to determine whether the Presocratics were philosophers in the modern sense inevitably involves cherry-picking and retrojection of anachronistic assumptions.

best.[17] The intellectual terrain of Greece before Plato was varied and contested, and it was unmarked by boundaries we take for granted today between discrete fields and modalities of knowledge.[18] The archaic "wisdom tradition" encompassed *sophia* both practical and theoretical, including (for example) cosmological speculation, lawgiving and political wisdom, medical knowledge, divinatory and ritual expertise, and poetic and artistic skill.[19] The Presocratics reflect this cultural context both collectively and individually in their heterogeneity of topics and methods of inquiry and in the indeterminacy (from our modern perspective) of their self-presentation. Empedocles speaks as a divine prophet whose teachings can cure illness, protect against old age, and even bring the dead back to life (Emp. B111/D43, B112/D4). Whether we call him a philosopher or a religious healer says less about his ideas than about our own modern categories.[20]

Empedocles was also, of course, a poet, who was reported to have defused a crisis by reciting a well-chosen line from the *Odyssey*.[21] Poets had a privileged claim to *sophia* in a period when Homer and Hesiod were repositories of divinely inspired truth and authoritative sources on everything from the nature of moral excellence to proper agricultural techniques.[22] Aristotle includes Hesiod in his survey of the origins of philosophy as the first person to identify an efficient cause in the form of Eros, and he draws a straight line from there to Empedocles's principles of Love and Strife (*Metaph.* 1.4 984b23–985a10). Empedocles supports such an affiliation with his choice of meter and ubiquitous epic diction. Building his theories through sustained dialogue with his epic predecessors, he implicitly recognizes them as fellow philosophers, even as he presents himself as their fellow poet. Heraclitus makes the connection explicit: when he criticizes the wise men who preceded him, he targets not only Pythagoras, Xenophanes, and the geographer Hecataeus (Her. B40/D20) but also Homer, Hesiod, and Archilochus (B42/D21, B57/D25a).[23]

17. Long 1999b, 3. On the origins and adoption of the label *philosophos,* see Moore 2019.

18. Lloyd 2002. Cf. Gemelli Marciano 2002; Sassi 2002, 2018, 29–30; Cambiano 2006; and Kingsley 2024, 1–37.

19. Kurke 2011, 95–158.

20. In B111/D43 Empedocles also claims to teach control of the winds. Diogenes Laertius's account of him saving crops from damaging winds by constructing ass-skin windcatchers (8.60 < Emp. A1/P16) aligns him with the tradition of practical wisdom associated with the Seven Sages, on which see Martin 1998. On the blurry line between philosophy and religion in the archaic period, see, e.g., Cornford 1952; Kingsley 1995; Most 2007; and Tor 2017; between philosophy and medicine, see Longrigg 1963, 1989; Lloyd 1995, 1999, 10–58; and Vegetti 1999.

21. Iamblichus *VP* 113 = Emp. A15/P17. Mackenzie (2021a) takes this anecdote as the starting point for his rich study of the poetry of Empedocles, Parmenides, and Xenophanes, focusing on its emotional impact.

22. Ford 2002, 197–201; Graziosi 2002; and Folit-Weinberg 2022, 72–84.

23. Of course, Xenophanes himself was at once a philosopher and a poet (Lesher 1992). On his role in the "ancient quarrel" within an archaic culture of competitive wisdom, see Ford 2002, 46–66.

In short, the Presocratics were writing at a time before there was a clear consensus (if there has ever actually been one) on the "proper" form philosophical writing should take or a clear-cut distinction between figures we think of as philosophers and those we label poets.[24] It was only toward the end of the fifth century that philosophy came into its own as a discrete and identifiable mode of thought, such that Aristotle, writing in the fourth century, could opine in a way slighting to both that "Homer and Empedocles have nothing in common except the meter, so that it is right to call the former a poet (*poiētēs*) and the latter a natural philosopher (*phusiologos*) rather than a poet" (*Poet*. 1.11 1447b17–19).[25]

Aristotle plots this difference as a historical evolution of which he himself is the *telos*. In his well-known discussion in *Metaphysics* I, he presents his predecessors as groping uncertainly toward the four causes that he will go on to codify, thus both legitimating his theory and marking its originality.[26] As philosophy matures, it takes on its highest object—metaphysics—and also finds its proper form. "The earliest philosophy speaks falteringly (*psellizomenēi*), as it were, about everything, since it was young and just beginning" (*Metaph*. 1.10 993a15–16). The verb *psellizesthai* connotes baby talk and is also used in an earlier passage to characterize the poetic language of Empedocles.[27] Aristotle's developmental narrative figures poetic language as infantile, a phase that philosophy will grow out of as it matures into the serious discipline that it will become precisely with him.

If Aristotle represents philosophy's relation to poetry as a discursive Bildungsroman, Plato (who himself was said to have dallied with poetry in his youth) figures the relation in spatial, not temporal terms. In the *Republic*, he famously banishes poets from his philosophical city (*Resp*. 595a–608b). Elaborating on his spatial metaphor, scholars like Andrea Wilson Nightingale and Kathryn Morgan

24. Laks and Most (2016) include in the purview of "early Greek philosophy" passages of Hesiod and Homer on one end of the chronological spectrum and Attic tragedy and comedy on the other. They mark the former, however, as prephilosophical ("background that is useful for contextualizing the thought of the early Greek philosophers," 2:56), and the latter as reception (in a "Dramatic Appendix" to vol. 9). While Laks-Most's expansion of the ambit of "early Greek philosophy" to include authors we usually think of as poets is salutary, the isolation of particularly "philosophical" passages gives the impression that the poets simply embedded nuggets of philosophy in their work. But poets engaged in philosophical thought in a more sustained way, as Billings (2021) shows for tragedy and as Tor (2017, 52–103) and Iribarren and Koning (2022) show for Hesiod.

25. Whether Empedocles was a natural philosopher or a poet remained an open question, however, throughout antiquity: see Cic. *Orat.* 1.50.217 (< Emp. A25/R2a), Lactant. *Div. inst.* 2.12.4 (< Emp. A24/R3b). On the construction of philosophy as a discipline, see Nightingale 1995, 13–59; and Moore 2019, 221–87.

26. *Metaph.* 1.3–5 983b1–987a28. On the value of this passage for reconstructing Presocratic philosophy, see Cherniss 1935, 218–46; and Sassi 2018, 21–26. For more general analysis of the way Aristotle represents the views of his predecessors, see Cherniss 1935, 347–404; Furley 1987, 177–201; and Clarke 2019.

27. *Metaph.* 1.4 985a4–7. If one pays attention to his meaning and "not to what he says speaking falteringly" (*ha psellizetai legōn*), one can see that Empedocles's Love and Strife are really efficient causes.

have argued that philosophy first defined itself as a discrete discourse in part by policing its boundaries with poetry.[28] Plato's "ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy" (*Resp*. 606e–608b) was a quarrel philosophy itself picked, both repudiating and appropriating the forms of traditional poetry in order to carve out and legitimate its own discursive terrain.[29] In this account (as in Plato's philosophical republic), the putative boundary between philosophy and poetry is imagined to stand fully within philosophy's control. Philosophy sets the boundary and defends it; if it transgresses, crossing over to steal a potent image or myth, it does so deliberately and strategically, with philosophical ends in mind. All border skirmishes are fought on philosophy's terms and resolved in philosophy's favor, and if problems arise along the way, these are problems philosophy not only anticipates but in fact instigates in order to surmount.[30]

But the border between philosophy and poetry is always porous, and it is never clear whether it lies within philosophy's jurisdiction or beyond it. This indistinct boundary makes it impossible to say where poetry ends and philosophy begins. On the one side, what makes an account philosophical? That it is rational? If so, precisely how rational does it have to be? That it is argued for? But doesn't every simile make an argument? That it is systematic? What could be more systematic than the verbal and visual imagery of Aeschylus's *Oresteia?* That it criticizes received opinion? Surely Pindar's use of myth or the priamel of Sappho 16 does just that.[31] On the other side, what makes something poetic? Since many of the qualities that define poetic speech, such as metaphoricity and ambiguity, are qualities of speech *tout court*, and poetic language is merely an intensification of the features of language as a whole, to commit thought to language is a first step across the frontier. Those attempting to define poetry's borders often appeal to Cleanth Brooks's much-paraphrased "heresy of paraphrase."[32] You know you are on poetic terrain when the mode of expression is as important as the expressed

28. Nightingale 1995, esp. 60–92; and Morgan 2000.

29. Morgan (2000, 46–88) shows that individual Presocratic thinkers (if not Presocratic philosophy as a whole: Nightingale 1995, 20n21) were already engaged in this self-positioning vis à vis the poetic tradition.

30. See, for example, Morgan's (2000, 39–44) discussion of the difference between early Greek philosophers' view of language and that of deconstruction: the instability of meaning that Derrida identifies is a philosophical problem but not a problem *for* philosophy. Thus, "although myth does encapsulate the displacement of philosophical anxiety over language, it does not do so [contra Derrida and De Man] in a moment of self-blindness" (43). The problem of language, even in its irresolution, affirms the intentionality and self-awareness of the philosopher. Cf. 67: "When it [philosophy] undermines its own authority, it does so in a strictly controlled way that preempts a proliferation of undecidable readings." For the philosopher, in short, "the fallibility of language becomes a source of opportunity" (290).

31. On Sappho, see DuBois 1995, 98–126. Laks (2018, 48–49) observes that philosophy is hard to define because of its "particular inherent plasticity": it has no proper object and its disciplinary boundaries are thus intrinsically open. The same might be said of poetry.

32. Brooks 1949, 176–96.

content and the former cannot be altered without fundamentally altering the latter. This criterion risks reducing philosophy to paraphrasable content independent of its formal articulation. But paraphrase, as I hope this book will demonstrate, is just as heretical for philosophy as it is for poetry.[33] To paraphrase the Presocratics is to change the substance of their ideas and the content of their philosophy. Thus we could say that what the Presocratics are "pre-" is precisely the division that originated with Plato and Aristotle and has been maintained ever since between philosophy and poetry. But if that is true, studying the poetics of the Presocratics merely exposes the falsity of the division in general.

Instead of laboring to differentiate philosophy from poetry, then, this book attempts to read the Presocratics rigorously as both at once. It attempts to understand how these writers use language to articulate their thought without subordinating the former to the latter.[34] My central claim is not only that the Presocratics' form is inseparable from their thought but, more strongly, that the form in itself *constitutes* thought. Parmenides's sphere, for instance, is not merely a vivid representation of his abstract notion of being; instead, the simile itself makes an argument about the self-delimiting wholeness of being. The same is true of Heraclitus's chiastic aphorisms, Empedocles's repetitions, Anaxagoras's parataxis, Democritus's neologisms: these formal features are not just pedagogical expedients or aesthetic ornamentation added to a preexisting philosophical theory, means of rendering abstract ideas more accessible or appealing to a reader. Thought does not come first, pure and autonomous, with language added later. Language is on the scene from the very beginning. Poetic form is not just the expression of philosophical content: it is itself philosophical content.[35]

Scholars of Presocratic philosophy have made this point, but the ancient quarrel has sometimes made it difficult for them to sustain it. The Presocratics have benefited from some exceptionally insightful and sensitive exegesis. Yet even the most philologically minded of their philosophical readers ultimately succumb to a desire to strip away the linguistic features they so carefully analyze to get to a primary philosophical essence. In his brilliant study of Heraclitus, Charles Kahn argues for "the intimate connection between the linguistic form and the intellectual

33. An egregious form of this heresy is the tendency to translate the Presocratics into the algebraism of analytic philosophy: see, e.g., Barnes 1982, 155–75, and for a critique of the practice see Rowett 2020.

34. Nor the latter to the former. This is less common in scholarship on the Presocratics, but see, e.g., Gemelli Marciano (1990), who treats the philosophical questions raised by Empedocles's poetry only "per la tangente" (25), or Mackenzie (2021a), for whom "the philosophical claims are used to shed light on how these texts are designed to affect their audiences" (6). Closer to my own approach is the attempt of Folit-Weinberg (2022) to understand Parmenides's deductive reasoning in light of his poetic strategies (in particular his intertextual adaptation of *Od.* 12.55–126), though he makes no claim to explicate the contents of that reasoning (see, e.g., 25, 270–78).

35. Nussbaum (1990) makes an eloquent case for this claim in the service of her philosophical reading of literary texts.

content of his discourse" and draws on the hermeneutics of literary criticism to explicate that bond.[36] Through a series of minutely close readings, Kahn shows how the deliberate ambiguity of Heraclitus's language binds the fragments into a dense network of images that not only represents but directly instantiates his vision of a cosmos in which "all things are one" (B50/D46). But in the concluding paragraph of his methodological introduction Kahn retreats from this position: the identification of multiple meanings, he says, "is only a hermeneutical device" for reaching "one single meaning, which is in fact the full semantic structure of [Heraclitus's] thought as a whole."[37] Thus his readings of the fragments, he concludes, "are best regarded as workmanlike tools for apprehending and reconstructing this global meaning, as a kind of ladder or crutch to be abandoned once the goal of understanding has been achieved."[38]

This final sentence evokes Wittgenstein's famous metaphor at the end of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* of his own propositions as a ladder to be thrown away once understanding has been reached.[39] The image, cited explicitly or (as here) allusively with remarkable frequency by scholars of early Greek philosophy,[40] makes both the author's language and its interpretation a mere tool: they allow access to a transcendent philosophical content but are ultimately disposable. Viewed in this instrumental light, literary-critical interpretation becomes a source of shame. It is a "crutch" we lean on to correct our crippling inability to immediately apprehend Heraclitus's "thought as a whole."[41] Were we able to apprehend it, the ladder would become a Jacob's ladder leading to a paradise of full philosophical meaning, free from the ambiguous mediation of language.[42]

36. Kahn 1979, 89. He lays out his interpretive principles at 87–95.

37. Kahn 1979, 95. With this move, the text's ambiguities become epiphenomenal, variegated surface effects produced by a unified underlying thought. See also Kahn 1983, 119–21, on the transparency of philosophical discourse: "The audience is invited to look through his words in order to recognize the reality which he describes" (120).

38. Kahn 1979, 95.

39. Wittgenstein 2001, 89 §6.54–7. I return to this metaphor in chapter 1.

40. Most notably Owen 1960, 100; 1974, 275–76. But compare, e.g., Mackenzie 2021a, 124; and Morgan 2022, 236.

41. In the study of ancient languages, aids to reading (like dictionaries, commentaries, and translations) are often referred to as "crutches." Kahn may have this metaphorical sense in mind and may, like Wittgenstein, be advising his reader how to use his text. But the veiled allusion to Wittgenstein and the visual similarity of a ladder and a literal crutch also suggest an anxiety that literary hermeneutics will be taken as a sign of philosophical disability. Moreover, the tight correspondence Kahn draws between the polysemy of Heraclitus's language and the hermeneutic principle attentive to that polysemy (e.g. at 1979, 92) means that the former gets cast aside with the latter/ladder.

42. This paradise is glimpsed in the final sentences of the *Tractatus,* with its ineffable truth beyond speech. Badiou (2011, 73–159) argues that Wittgenstein posits this mystical element not as a positive truth but in order to expose philosophy's limitations and critique its pretensions to truth; hence he considers Wittgenstein an "antiphilosopher." By this definition, philosophy is the discourse that believes in a truth that transcends language.

A similar conception underlies another of the most insightful readings of early Greek philosophy, Alexander Mourelatos's *The Route of Parmenides*.[43] Like Kahn, Mourelatos stresses the inextricability of his author's thought and language. He shows how Parmenides adapts the traditional poetic trope of the journey not merely to communicate but in fact to formulate his vision of being: What Is (*esti*), a word that conveys us to the truth of things through predication, is itself "*essentially* a route; it is not a route by poetic license, or for the purposes of rhetorical effect."[44] This makes the metaphor both indispensable, a "speculative" force that enables thought, and ultimately dispensable, a path that we can abandon once we reach our goal of a metaphysical reality that works like language but, subsuming its expressive function, no longer requires it.[45]

The theoretical separability of the journey from its destination is replicated in Mourelatos's analysis of the relation between the Aletheia (Truth) and Doxa (Belief) sections of Parmenides's poem. In a reading of tremendous sensitivity, Mourelatos argues that the equivocations of human belief, even as they lead us away from Truth, evoke the latent presence of What Is "as an implicit commitment, as a half-forgotten memory."[46] The latency of What Is within *doxa* reduces poetic ambiguity to a "positive veneer" covering without fully obliterating the unequivocal truth of being.[47] In the final analysis, linguistic ambiguity becomes "a case-study in self-deception, indecisiveness, and confusion" both for Parmenides and for his reader.[48] The implicit task, then, is to strip poetic language away so as to get to the "unvarnished" philosophical truth. Kahn's reading of Heraclitus and Mourelatos's of Parmenides demonstrate in fine detail the inseparability of poetic language and philosophical content, both in the production of the work and as a principle of its interpretation. But both ultimately subordinate language to content, imagining language, in the final reckoning, as a crutch to be used and cast

43. Originally published in 1970 by Yale University Press. I cite the revised and expanded 2008 edition.

44. Mourelatos 2008c, 134 (original emphasis); cf. 47–73.

45. Mourelatos 2008b, 330: "Parmenides' argument unmistakably proceeds from reflection on *logos*. . . . And yet the world he discovers *through logos* does not show the characteristic texture of *logos*. In an important sense, *logos* still has no constitutive function; it remains dispensable." On the speculative force of metaphor, see Mourelatos 2008c, 37–41.

46. Mourelatos 2008c, 226. I return to Mourelatos's reading in chapter 1.

47. Mourelatos 2008c, 226.

48. Mourelatos 2008c, 260. Mourelatos proposes that Parmenides's goddess speaks to two audiences at once: the philosophical initiate who senses the presence of What Is behind ambiguous human belief and the ignorant mortal who does not. This "ironic" double address dissolves the ambiguities of the Doxa by distributing their two meanings between two different audiences, for each of which the meaning is univocal (and right, in the case of the philosophical initiate; wrong, in the case of ignorant mortals). This approach makes Parmenides a proto-Plato (his goddess a forebear of the supreme ironist, Socrates [263]), even perhaps a proto-Straussian.

away, a surface effect concealing an underlying truth, part of the philosophical journey but not present at its ultimate destination.

Behind this view of language as secondary and supplementary lies a conviction that philosophy's proper object is univocal meaning and that the task of the interpreter is to uncover or recover that meaning. This conviction is a foundational thesis of philosophy as a discourse and discipline. In *Metaphysics* 4 Aristotle lays out the basic axioms of metaphysics, "the science of being as being" (4.1 1003a21) and the pinnacle of philosophical inquiry. The most secure (*bebaiotatē*) of these is the principle of noncontradiction, which states that "it is impossible for the same thing simultaneously to hold and not to hold for the same thing and in the same respect" (4.3 1005b19–20). This principle is the grounds for any possible claim and is thus the starting point (*arkhē*) for all other axioms. The demonstration of the principle of noncontradiction is the singularity of meaning. The words "to be" (*to einai*) and "not to be" (*mē einai*) or the word "man" (*anthrōpos*) each signify one thing. Their meaning is discrete and determinate: the words can't mean just anything at all.[49] For if they could—if "man" had infinite meanings (*apeira sēmainein*)—"it is clear that there would be no rational discourse" (*logos*, 4.4 1006b6–7).

> τὸ γὰρ μὴ ἓν σημαίνειν οὐθὲν σημαίνειν ἐστίν, μὴ σημαινόντων δὲ τῶν ὀνομάτων ἀνῄρηται τὸ διαλέγεσθαι πρὸς ἀλλήλους, κατὰ δὲ τὴν ἀλήθειαν καὶ πρὸς αὑτόν· οὐθὲν γὰρ ἐνδέχεται νοεῖν μὴ νοοῦντα ἕν, εἰ δ' ἐνδέχεται, τεθείη ἂν ὄνομα τούτῳ τῷ πράγματι ἕν.—ἔστω δή, ὥσπερ ἐλέχθη κατ' ἀρχάς, σημαῖνόν τι τὸ ὄνομα καὶ σημαῖνον ἕν (Arist. *Metaph*. 4.4 1006b7–13).
>
> For not to have one meaning is to have no meaning; and if words have no meaning this eliminates discourse with others, and in truth even with oneself. For it is impossible to think of anything if one does not think of one thing, and if this is possible, one name would be given to that thing [of which we think]. Well, then, let the word, as was said at the start, have a meaning and let it have one meaning.

The foundation of thought and of *logos* as language, discourse, and reason, univocality is the *sine qua non* of metaphysics and of philosophy in general.[50]

Barbara Cassin has argued that the most vigorous challenge to this axiomatic singularity of meaning came from the sophists, who in their insistence on the sonorous qualities of language and ludic love of homonomy and wordplay

49. Aristotle concedes that "man" may have more than one meaning as long as they are limited in number and could each be defined with its own "proper name" (4.4 1006b5). The relation between the law of noncontradiction and the singularity of meaning is not straightforward. The latter is the primary proof (4.4 1006b30–1007a1) of an axiom that is said to need no proof (4.4 1006a5–8) and seems less a corollary of this first principle than its precondition.

50. Derrida 1982b, 247–48: "Univocity is the essence, or better, the *telos* of language. No philosophy, as such, has ever renounced this Aristotelian ideal. This ideal is philosophy" (247).

decoupled *logos* at once from singularity and from meaning.[51] If the philosopher requires univocality and meaning and the sophist repudiates both univocality and meaning, the poet, as Jacques Derrida says, stands between the two.[52] Polyvocality is the first principle of poetry. Poetry deliberately courts contradiction and promotes ambiguity—not so as to annihilate meaning but in order to generate and proliferate it. Poetry's metaphors import alien elements into the monologism of "proper" meaning and its metonymies produce branching streams of signification around every word.[53] Indeed, this axiom of polysemy is one reason why the paraphrase of poetry is a heresy: it reduces the multiplicity of significations and thus impoverishes sense. For poetry, "not to have one meaning" is not "to have no meaning" but rather precisely what it *means* to have meaning.

In this way too the Presocratics were poets. Parmenides, often credited with inventing the principle of noncontradiction, apotheosizes univocality in his unique and unitary "Is."[54] But as we shall see, the metaphorical language he deploys to secure that singular "Is" binds it to its contrary "Is Not" such that the word "to be" (*to einai*) also entails "not to be" (*mē einai*). Heraclitus, as Aristotle observed (*Metaph*. 4.3 1005b23–25), was known to violate the law of noncontradiction. In his paradoxical and polysemous aphorisms, contradiction and ambiguity are not surface effects of flawed human language (*logos*) but the defining characteristics of reality itself (which, ambiguously, he also terms *logos*). Democritus weaves contradiction into the material fabric of the universe: the neologism *den* makes his atom an "avatar of the void" (in Heinz Wismann's apt phrase).[55] A signifier of both something and nothing, the contradictory *den* introduces a quantum indeterminacy not only into Democritus's physics but also into his ethics, rendering the meaning of "man" as multiple as that of "to be." Far from eliminating discourse, then, as Aristotle predicts, polysemy and ambiguity are defining qualities of the Presocratics' discourse, and they do not disable meaning but generate and ramify it. Moreover, as these examples suggest, it is not just meaning that is multiple in the Presocratics but being as well. Ambiguity is a feature not only of their words but also of their worlds: theirs is a polyvocal ontology. If philosophy is founded

51. See esp. Cassin 2020, 59–92. She sees a similar challenge in Democritus (100–111) and in Lacan. I return to her reading of Democritus in chapter 5.

52. Derrida 1982b, 248n54: "The poet stands between the two [*logos* and sophistry]. He is the man of metaphor." Derrida's investigation of the effect of metaphor within the text of philosophy provides the theoretical impetus for chapter 1.

53. On metaphor as "alien," see Arist. *Rh.* 3.2 1404b8–37: such foreign elements are appropriate to poetry, in Aristotle's view, but must be used sparingly in prose. On Aristotle's critique of metaphor and his own (nonetheless) metaphorical language, see Lloyd 1995, 183–203; 1996, 205–22.

54. Detienne (1996, 130–37) considers Parmenides pivotal in a historical shift from a religious tradition of ambiguous truth to a secular insistence on truth as noncontradiction. Kahn (2009, 150) writes that the principle of noncontradiction was not explicitly formulated until Plato and Aristotle, but it is "on the tip of Parmenides' tongue." I disagree with Morgan (2000, 40) that because the Presocratics established the law of noncontradiction "they cannot therefore have deconstructionist reservations about it."

55. Wismann 2010.

on the axiom of univocality, the Presocratics were thus antiphilosophers *avant la lettre*, and the study of these "first philosophers" suggests that polyvocality was not just a sophistic assault from without but a native feature of philosophy's discursive landscape from its very inception.

This is to say that philosophy never fully controls its own terrain: its text, as Derrida says, always "overflows and cracks its meaning."[56] Poetic language has a force in excess of its words' immediate representative function and each ambiguous utterance opens up many simultaneous "paths of inquiry." Some of these paths proceed directly in line with the philosopher's charted itinerary, leading straight toward the *telos* of a coherent philosophical theory. But others run athwart of such a unidirectional trajectory; wandering off-course or even in the opposite direction, these poetic paths (*poroi*) often lead to aporia, an impasse within the author's thought and incoherence within his theory. The chapters that follow home in on these moments of incoherence, considering them not as failures of the theory but as sources of an internal capaciousness. One characteristic sometimes taken to define Presocratic thought is its totalizing nature: "speaking about all things" (Xenoph. B34/D49), it aims, as A. A. Long writes, "to give a universalist account. . . to take everything—the world as a whole—as the subject of inquiry."[57] The aporias within their theories are an inevitable byproduct of this totalizing ambition; they mark its limits but also, as we shall see, an attempt to think beyond them. If we linger at these impasses, then, it is not to identify a dead end. Rather, it is to demonstrate that aporia can provide a resource (*poros*) for thought and thus (as Plato and Aristotle would both assert) the instigation to further philosophical inquiry.[58]

The first chapter, "Parmenides's *Logos* of Being," examines this aporia most directly, exploring the paradoxical relationship between language (*logos*) and being (*to on*) at the heart of ontology. The ontological project, it argues, is driven by two competing desires: to contain being within *logos*, fixing it as the object of analysis, and to contain *logos* within being as the faithful servant of a more fundamental reality. Parmenides uses metaphor to think through this ontological paradox. This is itself paradoxical. Metaphor is the trope par excellence of *doxa*, the register of erroneous human belief and of language in all its misleading doubleness and ambiguity. Parmenides deploys metaphor—his famous metaphor of the road—to convey the reader out of the doxic realm; following this path we seem to transcend metaphorical language to a pure aether of "Is" (*esti*) where *logos* and being speak as one. At the same time, Parmenides also exploits metaphor to secure this metaphysical reality in the repeated image of Necessity's bonds. This image is generally taken as merely a picturesque representation of being's innate qualities of fixity, wholeness, and determinate singularity. A close reading will show, however, that

56. Derrida 1982a, xxiii.

57. Long 1999b, 10; cf. Laks 2018, 52; and Sassi 2018, 30. In addition to Xenoph. B34/D49, see Her. B1/D1; Parm. B1.28/D4.28; and Dem. B165/P44.

58. Arist. *Metaph.* 1.2 982b17–21: men began (and still begin) to philosophize out of *aporia* and *thauma* (wonder).

the metaphor of Necessity's bonds, far from a secondary expression of those necessary qualities, is in fact the source of their necessity. Metaphysics cannot escape metaphor, for it relies on it to secure its fundamental truths. At the extreme, being itself becomes a metaphor or simile, "like a well-rounded sphere" (B8.43/D8.48). The sphere figures both the determinate wholeness of being and the circular form of the poem. But its very shape forbids a unidirectional reading of the relation between poetic form and metaphysical substance or any presupposition that the former is a mere mimesis of the latter. Instead, it sets *logos* and *to on* circling one another as in a Möbius strip, each bounding and bonding the other.

The second chapter, "Time, the Cosmos, and the Soul in Heraclitus," aims to show how Heraclitus negotiates the relations among these three terms through his poetic form. It proposes that the exquisite symmetry—and asymmetry—of his aphorisms enables the reader to experience corporeally what she cannot grasp cognitively, the "back-turned harmony" (B51/D49) of the cosmos. Beginning from Bruno Snell's claim that Heraclitus invented "a new concept of soul," it argues that the Heraclitean *psukhē* emerges in its difference from the material cosmos through a temporal schism, a fundamental asynchrony between the eternal always of cosmic time (the *aei*) and the terminal existence of human life (the *aiōn*). That asynchrony is exemplified by the *logos* with which Heraclitus's book begins (B1/D1), which refers simultaneously to the words we are about to read—an ephemeral human product, as its fragmentary status attests—and the eternal *logos* that for Heraclitus names the ordering principle of the cosmos. Heraclitus attempts to synchronize *logos* and *logos, aei* and *aiōn* through the formal structure of his aphorisms: the extreme compression of his paradoxes eliminates time, reproducing the atemporal temporality of the cosmic *aei*; his chiastic structures suspend the reader in that impossible temporality, lulling us into a lucid sleep in which we experience the elemental rhythms of the cosmos. Simultaneously ephemeral and timeless, his fragments thus bridge at the level of sensation a schism that is ineradicable at the level of sense, bringing human comprehension (*xunesis*, B1/D1) together with the "common *logos*" (*xunos logos*, B2/D2) to produce, even as they mimetically reproduce, a cosmos in which "all things are one" (B50/D46). And yet from time to time this metaphysical union is ruptured by odd moments of disequilibrium, slight stutters in both Heraclitus's own *logos* and the cosmic *logos*. These moments hold open the interval between *logos* and *logos* and preserve the asynchrony of cosmic *aei* and human *aiōn* that Heraclitus ostensibly works to close, producing a generative incoherence that, I will argue, is the condition of possibility of both his philosophical project and the human psyche.

Chapter 3, "Empedocles's Autobiography," examines Empedocles's radical experiment in materialist poetics. Narrated in the first person, Empedocles's poems tell a traumatic tale of his reincarnation as a *daimōn*, a divine entity, and share the philosophical wisdom gleaned in his thirty-thousand-year journey of metempsychosis. Reading Empedocles's poems as autobiography in the root sense of the word—as the account (*graphē*) of the life (*bios*) of a self (*autos*)—I

consider how Empedocles's materialist ontology destabilizes each of these terms. *Bios*, as Empedocles imagines it, is a dynamic meshwork of mobile and mutually transforming parts, each with its own agency and desire. This labile ontology decenters the human *autos* as a singular entity stable across time: the self is just one thing among an assemblage of things and itself composed of an assemblage of things, which are all constantly changing; none has "a stable lifetime" (*empedos aiōn*, B17.11/D73.242). But where does this leave the authorial *autos*, Empedocles himself? Writing (*graphē*) would seem to presuppose a singular self as the stable origin of enunciation, making Empedocles the aporia in his own ontological theory. Empedocles's radical poetic style is an attempt to negotiate that contradiction, to erase his own authorial *egō* and write life not from above but from within its dynamic midst. On the one hand, words are material things with a will and trajectory of their own; on the other hand, they are carefully wrought representations of things, the artistry of a poet who compares his aesthetic production to cosmogonic creation (B23/D60). Oscillating between the literal and the metaphorical, materiality and mimesis, Empedocles's language produces a schizophrenic poetics and a schizophrenic poet. That internal division (manifested in the schism between Empedocles's two poems) symptomatizes both the challenge and the limits of Empedocles's radical experiment in materialist poetics.

One defining feature of the Presocratics' thought was the search for an *arkhē*, a primary and governing principle. This quest means that their natural philosophy also entailed an implicit vision of politics. Starting from this observation, the fourth chapter ("Paratactic Politics: Anaxagoras and the Things") examines the political thought implicit in the cosmology of Anaxagoras. Anaxagoras begins with a decentralized pluriverse of infinite, equal, and heterogeneous "things" (*khrēmata*), reciprocally interconnected such that "everything is in everything" (B4/D12, B6/D25, B12/D27). Into this original community (described in language of political participation, B6/D25), Anaxagoras introduces Nous (Mind). Ontologically distinct, autonomous and "autocratic" (*autokrates*, B12/D27), Nous initiates the process that will organize the things into the compounds that make up our phenomenal world. In this way he performs the "distribution of the sensible" that Jacques Rancière posits as the founding gesture of the political. Chapter 4 explores this "aesthetic politics" not only in the content of Anaxagoras's cosmological theory but also in the formal structure of his prose. In Nous, I argue, Anaxagoras theorizes sovereign power as autonomous and self-grounding. He sustains this autocratic power by repressing the political contest from which it originates, a struggle between Nous and the things over the distribution of the sensible. But that repressed political struggle rages on in Anaxagoras's prose: even as the author aligns himself closely with Nous's omniscient gaze, his paratactic and polysyndetic style recuperates the political logic of the original community of things and not only sustains but in fact develops its political potential. The contest between these two arrangements of power plays out in the literary form and syntactic structure of the text, illustrating Rancière's thesis that aesthetics are political (and vice versa)

and adding a new dimension to this book's central claim that the Presocratics' cosmos is an aesthetic, as well as physical and metaphysical, order.

In a ring composition that imitates a central figure of Presocratic thought and poetics, the final chapter, "Democritus and the Poetics of (N)othing," returns to the ontological paradox of the first chapter and to the relation of language to being and, especially, nonbeing. Democritus famously posits that everything is atoms and void. This theory seems to reify being in the form of the atom and to secure its presence against the negative space of the void. But the binarism of atomic theory overwrites a stranger and more alien ontology, for which Democritus invents the word *den*. This subtraction from *mēden* names the atom not as a positive presence but as the negation of a negation, literally less than nothing. Jacques Lacan speaks of the *den* as a fragment of the Real, that which resists theorization within Western philosophy. It also resists theorization, as we shall see, within Democritus's own theoretical discourse. That discourse is totalizing: it claims to be comprehensive, a theory of everything. It creates a new technical language to articulate that theory, a language that presents itself, in its immediate legibility, as transparent and true. The *den* both exemplifies this new language and marks its limits: it instantiates Democritus's vision of (non)being but cannot signify it, eluding both *onta* and *logos*. Instead, it appears as an exclusion, a blind spot within his philosophy. Untheorizable in itself, the *den* nonetheless exerts a dark force on Democritus's theory, shaping not only his physics but also his ethics and an ethical subject centered around a psychic void. "In reality to recognize what each thing is is in aporia" (*en aporōi*, B8/D19), writes Democritus. *Den* embodies that aporia and the unspeakable, untheorizable knowledge it contains.

As these synopses indicate, ontology for these five authors is a poetic as well as a philosophical project: it is an experiment in uniting language and being. This experiment enacts the truth that for the Presocratics language is not merely expressive or mimetic of reality but continuous with it, governed by its laws and sharing its same fundamental structure. Empedocles's words combine and separate just like his elements, and Democritus's *den* exhibits all the indeterminacy of his material universe. For Heraclitus the word "bow" enacts cosmic unity-in-difference no less than the physical object (B48/D53, B51/D49). Even Parmenides, who sets language against reality, works to forge a pure language of being and a word that *is* in the same way as Is itself. Indeed, the (physical and metaphysical) reality of their language is partly what makes the Presocratics such an exciting object of study: the symbolic, for them, presses up not just against reality but against the Real, precisely that which resists linguistic expression.[59] But if their poetics bring them closer to the Real, theirs was no "naive metaphysics of things," a mythic "before" to

59. This is part of what makes the Presocratics "antiphilosophers," in Badiou's term. It should be noted that the label is not necessarily approbative for Badiou, who defends philosophy's ability to signify the Real via mathematical formulas. I return to the Presocratics' antiphilosophy in the Conclusion.

the "after/beyond" of metaphysics.[60] The Presocratics had no metaphysical metalanguage in which to speak of *logos, to on*, and the relation between them. This is not because they lacked the conceptual sophistication or specialized vocabulary to formulate one but because they attempt to write this relation from within it and thus reproduce it—not mimetically but materially—in the very process of writing.

In so doing, they inevitably also reproduce the limits of that project, for the synthesis between *logos* and *to on*, as we shall see, is never total, and the attempt to bring them together produces a surplus on both sides: a being (or nonbeing) not captured in language; language that, impossibly, exceeds being. Language and being never fully converge, and their nonconvergence sustains a gap or aporia within the author's work and his world. That aporia is not an end in itself, however. The Presocratics' thought does not dead end in the impasse between language and the ineffable truth of a being that language cannot reach. If that were the case, to study their poetics would merely be to watch them throw the linguistic ladder away over and over again. Instead, the aporia between language and being opens generative aporias within language and being themselves. On the one side, being is revealed as not-whole: structured by internal rifts and disjunctions, it is fundamentally incoherent. On the other side, the discourse of being is shown to be nontotalizable, a circle that never fully closes. That lack of closure is the condition of possibility, as well as the condition of impossibility, of the Presocratics' theory of everything, for if it were possible to completely unite *logos* and being—to speak being fully and univocally—there would be nothing to say but "Is." The poetry and prose of the Presocratics in all its astonishing and fragmentary richness is the product of this ineluctable aporia.

60. "Naive metaphysics of things" is the title of Mourelatos 2008b.