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# Empedocles's Autobiography

*It's not easy to see the grass in things and in words.*
—DELEUZE AND GUATTARI

## AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A *DAIMŌN*

Empedocles's *Purifications* begins with an extraordinary statement. Greeting his fellow citizens of Acragas, the narrator proclaims, "I come to you, an immortal god, no longer mortal (*egō d'humin theos ambrotos, ouketi thnētos*), honored among all, as I seem, crowned with ribbons and flourishing crowns" (B112.4–6/D4.4–6). This astonishing first-person assertion launches an extended account of this *egō*'s thirty-thousand-year saga of exile as what he calls a *daimōn*, a personal and highly emotional narrative likewise recounted in the first person.

This insistent first-person voice invites us to read Empedocles's poem as an autobiography. By this I do not mean an autobiography of the historical Empedocles, although he is a fascinating figure with a colorful ancient biographical tradition.[1] I mean instead an autobiography in the root sense of the word: the written account of the life of a self. Empedocles's philosophy explodes each component of the word—self (*autos*), life (*bios*), and writing (*graphē*)—and challenges the basic syntax of autobiography, which is also the syntax of natural philosophy.



1. Autobiography was not a recognized genre in antiquity, and I am not proposing that Empedocles invented it, nor am I trying to insert him into its history; instead, I use the structure of autobiography as a heuristic device for explicating the complex relation between self, life, and writing in Empedocles's philosophy. For Empedocles's ancient biography, see Diog. Laert. 8.51–77; and Chitwood 2004, 12–58. As with all ancient biographical traditions, the philosopher's life is largely reconstructed from his works.

Empedocles's cosmos is composed of four roots (*rhizōmata*)—earth, water, fire, and air—that combine under the force of Love (Philotēs) until they form an undifferentiated Sphere, then separate out again under the force of Strife (Neikos), in the process producing worlds and destroying them again. This system of elemental transformation undermines the notion of the *autos*, a discernible identity stable over time. As the daimonic *egō* of the *Purifications* will go on to recount, "I was once already a boy and a girl and a bush and a bird and a sea-leaping, voyaging fish" (D13/B117). Who, or what, is this *egō* who survives elemental transformation to recall its past incarnations? Changing form, this *autos* is not self-identical over time. Nor is it distinct from the world around it: it perceives external elements by way of those same elements within (B109/D207) and is composed of matter that was recently part of other beings. This elemental connection to all other things suggests that Empedocles's autobiography will be not the story of an individual self's life but the story of life itself and the place of the *egō* within it.

How does one write a *graphē* of this expanded *bios?* What is the relation of writing to the *autos* that writes and the *bios* that is written? Empedocles's poetic style is as exceptional as his first-person account: with its swirling structure of repetitions and half-echoes, its repurposed Homericisms and tangled metaphors, its idiolect of unfamiliar usages and unexpected coinages, this *graphē* is itself rather demonic. For Empedocles, as we shall see, writing too is alive. Composed of the same elements as every boy or girl or bush or bird, *graphē* is not a mimesis of life but a vital part of it, sharing in its process of endless transmutation.

This dynamic theory poses a challenge to the traditional metaphysics of autobiography. Autobiography both presupposes and produces an autonomous *egō* as the origin of an account of a life the author thereby claims as her own. The autobiographical *egō* must extract herself from the flow and activity of life in order to write it; in doing so, she declares her control over it. Autobiography is structurally homologous to the idealist mode of science that Nietzsche often criticized, the science that extracts itself from the "immediately perceived world" so as to conceptualize and represent it, that elevates the idea of the thing over the thing itself and in this way betrays life.[2] Language is key in this process, as Nietzsche argued: even before the concept, the word marks a first step away from life.[3] Both autobiography and natural philosophy are predicated on a syntax of subject-verb-object—"I write (my) life"—that elevates *autos* over *bios* by means of *graphē* and secures the former

2. This idealism is lambasted throughout Nietzsche's work but see especially 1989a. He traces it back to Parmenides (1962, 80–81, 86–87). In a similar vein, see Ingold (2011, 75): "Science as it stands rests upon an impossible foundation, for in order to turn the world into an object of concern, it has to place itself above and beyond the very world it claims to understand. The conditions that enable scientists to *know* . . . are such as to make it impossible for scientists to *be* in the very world of which they seek knowledge" (original emphasis).

3. Nietzsche (1989a, 251) writes that the concept is "the *residue of a metaphor,*" and our entire relation to reality is metaphoric.

as subject by reducing the latter to a tractable object. James Olney describes the dynamics of autobiography in terms that are apropos: in writing, he proposes, the autobiographer seeks to snatch his or her *bios* from a Heraclitean stream of becoming and fix it in the permanent present of Parmenidean Being.[4] Idealist philosophy, Nietzsche would add, does the same for life as a whole.

Empedocles refuses such fixity, even if he cannot fully avoid it. Responding to and reacting against Parmenides's attempt to cordon off Being from the things of the world, Empedocles insistently roots metaphysics in physics. For him thought and language are matter, made up of the same elements and subject to the same forces as all other matter. Thus there is no separation of words from things or thought from life. *Graphē* does not rise above *bios* to represent it in the idealized form of an objectifying mimesis; instead, *graphē* is enmeshed within *bios*, one vital being among countless others, each engaged in its own process of becoming. Likewise, the *autos* is not the autopoietic author of his own *graphē* and master of his *bios*, but rather coexists with them in a sympoietic network that sets *autos, graphē*, and *bios* on the same ontological ground.[5] Flattening the ontological hierarchy and scrambling the subject-verb-object syntax of autobiography, Empedocles undertakes a radical philosophical and poetic project—radical in the root sense of the word: it is an attempt to formulate a "root language," a philosophical language that is not abstracted from life but that spreads rhizomatically in its midst, like grass, down in the dirt of things.

But as Deleuze and Guattari say, "it's not easy to see the grass in things and in words."[6] Empedocles's experiment in writing a material ontology—in which the writing is as audacious as the ontology—produces certain incoherences in his work, even beyond those produced by the fragmentary state of his text. Empedocles presents his theories in the first person, as the teachings of an authoritative *egō*. But the theories themselves, as we shall see, place pressure on that *egō*. The *egō* tells a life story—or rather, a story of countless lives—that renders him unstable and fragmented, simply one mobile material part of a biosphere made up entirely and exclusively of mobile material parts. Even as he is submerged in this vital meshwork, the *egō* must rise above it to represent it. Empedocles's natural philosophy unsettles the philosophical *autos*, but it also requires and reproduces it as

4. Olney 1980, 237–38. Of course, much (post)modern autobiographical writing and criticism is animated by repudiation of such subjective mastery and fixity: see, e.g., De Man 1979; Derrida 1987, 292–337; and Herbrechter 2012.

5. I take the terms autopoietic and sympoietic from Haraway (2016, 33, 58–98). Empedocles's autobiographical subject is presumptively masculine.

6. Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 23. In labeling Empedocles's philosophy "radical" I mean to evoke Deleuze and Guattari's (1987, 3–25) theory of the rhizome. They differentiate the multiple interconnecting networks of rhizomes from roots, which they characterize as singular and hierarchical. For Empedocles the four roots themselves are singular and ontologically fundamental, but the cosmos they produce through their combinations is rhizomatic. Macauley (2005) develops the connection between Empedocles's *rhizōmata* and Deleuze and Guattari's rhizomatics.

its legitimating source. The author himself embodies this paradox: Empedocles—he of "stable glory" (*empedon kleos*)—will emerge as the singular exception to the volatile ontology he expounds and a productive point of aporia within his own philosophy. In this respect, Empedocles's text resembles Heraclitus's; as we observed in the last chapter, Heraclitus's own *logos* becomes audible at the very moment it splits from, and thus articulates a split in, the unitary cosmic *logos*.[7]

This chapter traces the tangled lines of *autos, bios*, and *graphē* across the fragments of Empedocles's text. In doing so, it does not aim to reorder these terms into a hierarchy that would secure both philosophy and philosopher as stable and coherent, vouchsafing their *empedon kleos*. Instead, it embraces the incoherences in Empedocles's work and persona as the inevitable byproduct of his ambitious experiment in rhizomatic thinking—his attempt to articulate a philosophy and poetics of the roots. The *autos* that writes this dynamic philosophy also lives it, but the life undoes the writing and the writing the life. In the schizophrenic autobiography and philosophy this paradox generates we can see both the radical nature of Empedocles's project and its limits.[8]

## *AUTOS*

Questions about the relation between autobiography and natural philosophy and the place of the *egō* in each are central to the study of Empedocles. Two titles come down to us from antiquity attached to Empedocles's name, *Katharmoi* (*Purifications*) and *Peri Phuseōs* (*On Nature*). The long-standing assumption that these two titles refer to two different poems has been challenged in recent decades, and scholars have argued for reading the fragments as part of a single poem.[9] This position received support from the identification in the 1990s of a papyrus in Strasbourg containing substantial new fragments of Empedocles's poem.[10] These

7. We will return to the aporia of the author function in the Conclusion.

8. Deleuze and Guattari label their materialist psychiatry "schizoanalysis" and posit the schizophrenic as the decentered subject of their rhizomatic ontology (1983b, 2, 14, 56–57; Holland 1999, 1–24). Their exemplum is Freud's Judge Schreber, "who sought to remain at that unbearable point where the mind touches matter and lives its every intensity" (1983b, 19–20). The hero of an autobiographical narrative of metempsychosis, persecutory transformations, and purification both individual and cosmic, materially connected to all other beings through nerves and rays, and communicating in a special "root language" (*Grundsprache*), Schreber offers a fertile comparandum to Empedocles's daimonic *autos*.

9. The one-poem thesis was argued forcefully by Osborne (1987a), extending the rearrangement of the fragments by Van der Ben (1975), and is followed by Inwood (2001, with justification at 8–21); Trépanier (2004, 1–30); and Mackenzie (2016, 2021a, 104–7). Without subscribing to a distinction between the esoteric and the exoteric (Kingsley 2002, 344–50; Bollack 2005; and Patzer 2006, 92) I find the two different addressees and imagined performative contexts hard to reconcile from a formal standpoint. But I remain open-minded on the issue and nothing in my argument rides on it: in fact, the tension I examine between the physical theory and the daimonic *autos* is all the more pointed if the two are part of the same poem.

10. The fragments of the Strasbourg papyrus have been edited by Martin and Primavesi (1999). As they point out, however, the papyrus neither proves nor disproves the one-poem theory (118–19). On