Conclusion

The Prose of the World

> *It is precisely because he was a poet that Parmenides says what he has to say to us in the least stupid of manners. Otherwise, the idea that being is and that nonbeing is not, I don't know what that means to you, but personally I find that stupid.*
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> —JACQUES LACAN

This book has traced the productive aporia between *logos* and *onta* at the heart of early Greek ontology. It has argued that for the Presocratics, that aporia is both inescapable and generative. As the sophist Gorgias said, "The things that exist and that are (*ta onta*) are not speech (*logos*)" (Gorg. B3.84/D26b.84). If they were, there would be nothing to say about being, inasmuch as world and word would be identical. The Presocratics have a great deal to say about being, and they say it with exceptional innovation and artistry. Their approach to the nonidentity of language and being is a defining feature of their philosophy. The sophists, when faced with the schism between *logos* and *onta*, throw in their lot with the former. For Gorgias, this schism means that all *logos* can speak is *logos*, and it is irrational (*alogon*) to try to say otherwise. Thus being becomes an effect of language, and ontology essentially a *logos* about *logos*.[1] Plato, by contrast, takes up the banner of *onta*. His theory of the Forms fixes and reifies being, preserving it both from the vagaries of phenomenal becoming and from language, which is relegated to the sphere of the secondary and simulacral.

1. "We do not reveal what is (*ta onta*) to those near us, but *logos,* which is different from existing things" (Gorg. B3.84/D26b.84). Cassin characterizes the sophists' ontology as a logology (1995, 23–117; 2000, 961–64). She sets the sophists against Plato and Aristotle as (anti)philosophers of equivocal *logos* against the latter's philosophy of univocal being and meaning. The Presocratics get lost in this dichotomy, despite Cassin's brilliant work on Parmenides and Democritus.

If the sophists opt for *logos* and Plato for *onta*, the Presocratics sustain the aporia between the two, and this is one of the motors driving their thought. We have seen how each author attempts to resolve the tension between words and world, bringing the two into alignment. But in each case we have also noticed a resistance to such ontological closure: again and again, these authors reopen the gap between language and being and reproduce the tension between them. Parmenides, as we saw in chapter 1, attempts to purify language of its doxic ambiguities so that, as he says, "a single utterance of road is still left: that Is" (B8.1–2/D8.6–7). He dreams of a transparent *logos* of "Is." But he sustains that dream through metaphors: the metaphor of Necessity's bonds required to bind his vision of Being also exposes its boundedness precisely by language. Heraclitus seems to conflate language and being with a *logos* that names the structure of both. For him, as I argued in the second chapter, the *homologia* between the cosmic *logos* and his own produces a universe of exceptional unity and coherence. And yet even as he works to sustain that unity, he does not fully eliminate incoherence; instead he preserves it as a space of difference within his cosmos, an interval that is the enabling condition both of his philosophical project and of human life.

Like Parmenides and Heraclitus, Empedocles creates a *logos* of being—not by forging a language of being but by positing the material being of language: *logos* is a thing, composed of the same root elements as any other thing. Empedocles attempts to write this rhizomatic ontology from within it, but in doing so reinscribes a stable authorial self that reopens the schism between *logos* and *onta* that the theory seems to close. The author himself marks the point on the Möbius strip where the two cross without meeting. The tension between the desire to resolve the aporia of ontology and the desire to sustain it that we observed in the first three chapters has a politics that became evident in the fourth. Anaxagoras's Nous at once organizes the cosmos (in that sense making it a *kosmos* to begin with) and renders it visible and representable, imposing a rational order (*logos*) on the things that are (*ta onta*). Anaxagoras is complicit with Nous, and that complicity, I argued, is the condition of possibility of his cosmological project. But he also resists Nous's sovereign logic of being: his paratactic style, encoding an alternative to Nous's order of things, exposes both its costs and its contingency, political and philosophical.

Democritus, finally, would seem to bring not only being but also nonbeing under the rule of *logos* with his construction of a transparent and universal discourse "concerning all things." And yet, once more aporia is introduced in the form of the *den*. A rock of the Real within the symbolic order, the *den* would seem to embody the unity of word and thing of which Parmenides dreamed with his *Esti*. But *den* unites a (non)word with a (no)thing, its indeterminacy vitiating the identitarian logic of a "correspondence theory of truth." The unspeakable name of an impossible being, *den* exceeds both *logos* and *onta*, revealing the limits of both; it is the "parasite of ontology."[2]

2. Cassin 2020, 107.

The rift between language and being is thus generative for the Presocratics. Whereas the sophists and Plato both move past this crossroads in one direction or the other, the Presocratics linger at the impasse. They embrace this aporia as a creative resource (*poros*) for thought and build it into their theories, and their ambivalent response to it forms the very substance of their philosophy. This is because, for these thinkers, language is never supplementary nor purely mimetic but is always part of the world it describes. For Empedocles that is literally true: words are things and they "run through" other things, flowing, combining and separating, entering the listener to produce meaning. The material being of language makes it impossible to differentiate the metaphorical from the literal or the author's artistry from words' own actancy. When we read that Philotēs, "inborn in their joints (*arthrois*)" causes mortals to "think dear (*phila*) thoughts and accomplish conjoint (*arthmia*) deeds" (*emphutos arthrois, tēi te phila phroneousi kai arthmia erga telousi*, B17.22–23/D73.253–54), is this a skillful verbal representation of Philotēs's influence or is it simply the manifestation of that influence? In speaking of Harmonia, the signifier is in harmony with its signified, and that linguistic harmony both explicates her effect and enacts it directly in the internal rhyme of *phroneousi* and *telousi* and the homophony of *arthrois* and *arthmia*, both from the same linguistic "root." Describing Love, Empedocles's words fall under its sway. For Empedocles and for all the authors we have discussed, language is vitally rooted in life. Thus even when they composed in meter, the Presocratics wrote a "prose of the world" in both senses of the genitive—theirs is a discourse about the world that belongs in a fundamental way to that world.[3]

Heraclitus, like Empedocles, harmonizes world and words: *logos* is both the structure of the cosmos and its linguistic articulation. Thus Alexander Mourelatos views Heraclitus as a precursor to Plato in creating a "*logos*-textured world," the world characterized by discursive mediation and conceptual abstraction in which we still live today.[4] Nietzsche, by contrast, praises Heraclitus for his refusal to elevate concepts over things, divorcing metaphysics from physics.[5] Heraclitus enables both interpretations and fully conforms to neither. His bow and lyre are at once signifiers of underlying principles and a material instantiation of those principles. His cosmic fire will burn your finger, and every bedside candle is a spark of the eternal flame. Physics metaphysics, metaphysics physics: a perfectly Heraclitean paradox. Thus the "worldliness" of their prose and verse does not mean that the

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3. *The Prose of the World* was the working title of an unfinished work by Merleau-Ponty (1973, xiii), which was to present a phenomenological theory of truth. It is also the title of the second chapter of Foucault's *The Order of Things* (1970), where it denotes the system of resemblances that makes the world both legible and in need of reading. Both take the phrase from Hegel's *Aesthetics,* where it describes "a world of finitude and mutability, of entanglement in the relative, of the pressure of necessity from which the individual is in no position to withdraw" (1975a, 150; cf. 245, 259, 566, 598: "the common prose of life").

4. Mourelatos 2008b, 299.

5. Nietzsche 1962, 51.

Presocratics were "premetaphysical" or incapable of metaphysical thought.[6] Even the most thoroughgoing materialists among them are metaphysicians: for Democritus atoms and void are all there is, but atoms and void, as Hegel observed, are conceptual objects, and their interactions constitute a metaphysical principle.[7] Rather, metaphysical principles are so thoroughly immersed in the physical world that their status in relation to that world is undecidable. Are Empedocles's Love and Strife higher forces that organize the root elements or do they simply name the immanent relations between those elements? Is Anaxagoras's sovereign Nous ontologically separate from the things he rules or is he merely a thing himself? Even Parmenides, the most metaphysical of the Presocratics (as Nietzsche charged), does not fully leave behind the sublunary realm of phenomenal becoming in his journey toward Being. The conundrum of the relation between his Aletheia and Doxa stands as the ultimate symptom of the conceptual inextricability of the two.[8] Metaphysical truths for the Presocratics are thus never beyond the physical world (*meta*) but always stand with or within it (*meta*).

This immanent metaphysics is far from naive. If the Presocratics' world is not fully "*logos*-textured," no more is it (in Mourelatos's dichotomy) a "naive metaphysics of things," in which each thing appears in its own "is-ness," without mediation or abstraction.[9] Indeed, these authors reflected in sophisticated ways on the very idea of abstraction and on the relation between physics and what claims to succeed and supersede it. Anaxagoras's Nous may seem to represent the apotheosis of abstraction, the triumph of Mind over matter. But his rise, as we saw, was not uncontested, including by Anaxagoras himself. For Anaxagoras, the relation between physics and metaphysics is a power relation. The move from the former to the latter is not an intellectual progression at once natural and triumphant, but rather the contingent outcome of political and discursive contest between two different "distributions of the sensible" and understandings of reality.

Anaxagoras's reflection on the relation between physics and metaphysics was carried out, as we saw, not only through language but *in* language, in the structure

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6. *Pace* Heidegger and Fink 1993, 65, 74–76; cf. Heidegger 2018. Longing for a "before" of metaphysics is often taken to motivate Nietzsche's interest in the Presocratics, but Porter (2000, 21) argues that Nietzsche's studies of pre-Platonic philosophy in fact "reveal the *inescapability* of metaphysical thinking." As Nietzsche (1962, 83) comments on Parmenides's concept of Being, "Through words and concepts we shall never reach beyond the wall of relations, to some sort of fabulous primal ground of things."

7. Hegel 1975b, 144: "The atom, in fact, is itself a thought; and hence the theory which holds matter to consist of atoms is a metaphysical theory." Likewise, Lacan 1998, 71: "The atom is simply an element of flying signifierness." Cf. chapter 5, n. 78, on the atom as signifier.

8. Simplicius *in Cael.* 556.25–30 (< Parm. A14/R7): Parmenides and Melissus are rightly called *phusikoi* and their works titled *Peri Phuseōs,* for the nature of what is (*tēn tōn ontōn phusin*) is also part of *phusis,* and these authors speak not just of what is *huper phusin* but also of *ta phusika.*

9. Mourelatos 2008b, 316. Cf. Merleau-Ponty 1973, 4: "We all secretly venerate the ideal of a language which in the last analysis would deliver us from language by delivering us to things."

of his sentences. Speculations on *logos* and *to on* necessarily take place within both: there is no metalinguistic position from which to examine language, nor a meta-ontological vantage on being. That means that in the course of working through the paradoxes of ontology, these thinkers inevitably reproduce them. The tension between being and language that generates their thought also recurs within it, creating certain incoherences within their theories. These incoherences within the work, like the ontological aporia that produces them, are both irreducible and generative. They arise out of the primary desires and commitments that motivate the text, and they provide its fundamental architecture. Parmenides wants both to subordinate language to *To Eon* and to bind *To Eon* within language. Those two goals are incompatible, and the tension between them structures his entire text in the competing geometries of road and circuit, in the schism between the Aletheia and Doxa, in the two-way mimesis between a circular poem and the sphere of Being. In Heraclitus, the unresolvable tension between a drive to synthesis (what differs *agrees*) and the preservation of difference within sameness (what *differs* agrees) is felt at every level, from the nonclosure of the cosmic cycle to the slightest arrhythmia in his symmetrical aphorisms. Empedocles's every word vibrates with the tension between the mobile ontology he presents and the fixed position from which he must present it, while Anaxagoras's competing commitments to Nous and to the things organize both his cosmos and his cosmology. His irreconcilable fantasies of a totalizing discourse and of something that exceeds it create a parallax not just in the reception of Democritus's atomic theory but also within that theory itself. In each case, opposing lines of force within the author's thought form the "back-turned harmony" that structures both that thought and its expression. To attempt to reduce or reconcile them would be to unstring the work as a whole.

It is at the crux between these competing forces that we encounter the author within his text. One way in which readers have traditionally sought to reconcile a work's tensions and eliminate incoherences is by appeal to an all-knowing author, for whom any apparent inconsistency is actually deliberate and intended.[10] In the texts we have been discussing, however, the authorial persona does not appear in the guise of an all-knowing, all-intending subject. Instead it appears as an embodiment of the text's structuring contradictions. This may seem a counterintuitive claim for works that boast divine inspiration (Parmenides) or even authorship (Empedocles), in which the authorial *egō* claims understanding beyond all other mortals (Heraclitus), a vision of the invisible (Anaxagoras), or an Olympian knowledge of all things (Democritus). But in fact in each case study, the authorial "I" emerges at the point of maximum torsion within the theory.

10. Foucault 1984, 119: "The author is therefore the ideological figure by which one marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning." By "the author," I mean not the historical author, whose intentions are unrecoverable, but the author function, the position or persona of the author projected by and within the text. The author function is a retroactive effect of interpretation, but, as Foucault remarks (112), it is not pure projection, any more than the interpretation itself.

In chapter 3 we saw how Empedocles's poetics and physics of the roots reached their limit with the figure of the poet himself: Empedocles, he of "stable glory," emerged as the singular exception to the unstable ontology he expounds and the site of an incurable schism within his philosophy. Likewise, when Heraclitus says, "listen not to me but to the *logos*," his own *logos* becomes audible at the very moment it articulates a doubleness in the unitary *logos* that underwrites the wisdom that "all things are one" (Her. B50/D46). In Parmenides, the gap between three levels of enunciation—the goddess who reveals the path of Truth, the young initiate who relays her teaching, and the poet who recites their journey—opens the closed circle of the poem's mimesis, leaving the discursive and ontological boundedness of his Being in doubt. Similar tensions mark the authorial position in Anaxagoras and Democritus, the former in the problem of locating the cosmologist's position within his own cosmology, the latter in the problem of speaking the unspeakable within a totalizing world system. In each of these cases, the authorial *egō* emerges not as the stabilizing origin of his own philosophy, securing its meaning by supplying a masterful intent, but instead as a symptom of the aporias that both structure his thought and mark its internal limits.[11]

Such aporias may be considered as failings within an Aristotelian tradition that makes philosophy the pursuit of a univocal truth carried out under the law of noncontradiction. If the definition of truth is, as Aristotle says, "to say of what is that it is and of what is not that it is not" (*to men gar legein . . . to on einai kai to mē on mē einai alēthes, Metaph.* 4.7 1011b26–27), the Presocratics, in troubling the relation between *legein* and *einai*, demand a more capacious definition of truth and an appreciation of the multifarious ways of speaking it. They themselves, as we have seen, found myriad ways of speaking it: in prose and in verse, in metaphors and metonymies, through exposition or imagery, logical argumentation or epic allusion, even through paradox. Thus truth for Heraclitus might be to say of what is that it is and that it is not simultaneously, while the truth of Democritus's *den* might be closer to saying of what is that it is not and of what is not that it is. Paradox and contradiction, then, are not necessarily failures of thought. On the contrary, they can be modes of thought, as well as modes of expression, and can speak a different kind of truth.

This different mode of truth-telling situates the Presocratics at an oblique angle to the Aristotelian definition of philosophy. It may even make them

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11. This is to say that the author within these texts speaks the discourse of the hysteric, in Lacan's terms, not that of the master or the university. In the hysteric's discourse, the split subject ($) addresses herself (the hysteric being paradigmatically female) to the master signifier (S_1), showing it to be lacking; in this way she produces knowledge (S_2) and the real (*a*) as the unacknowledged truth of that knowledge (Lacan 2007, 31–38, 94–98, 175–76). The Presocratic philosopher, a subject presumed not to know ($), addresses himself to ontology (S_1), showing it incoherent, inconsistent, contradictory; in doing so he produces his own philosophy as a totalizing system (S_2) and also the truth of that system's gaps and paradoxes (*a*).

antiphilosophers. Antiphilosophers, in Badiou's term, throw down the gauntlet to philosophy by demonstrating that it concerns itself only with truth as the evaluation of statements (i.e., *logos*), not with the "truest" aspect of being that those statements cannot speak.[12] "This," Badiou writes, "is precisely where antiphilosophy deposes philosophy: by showing what its theoretical pretension has missed and which in the end is nothing less than the real."[13]

The Presocratics, even as they aim to offer a *logos peri tōn xumpantōn*, also hint at what that account has missed. In this way they acknowledge the incompleteness of their own discourse and of any totalizing discourse of being. At the same time they gesture to a being inaccessible to *logos*, that unspeakable and senseless (*alogon*) remainder of all ontological inquiry that Lacan calls the Real. We glimpsed this most clearly in the case of Democritus's obscure *den*. A supplement to everything, the *den* shows that the description of reality is not fully exhausted by what is and what is not. There is something left over, a something that, exceeding both meaning and being, is necessarily nothing. In their gaps and aporias, their stutters and incoherences, the Presocratics speak not propositional truths about reality but the Real, which structures those truths but cannot be expressed by them. In this oblique form, they install the Real within their texts as what escapes the compass of their ontological inquiry. That Real appears not as a mystical plenitude of pure being, to be accessed by a ladder of language that, once ascended, is cast away.[14] Rather, the Real as it appears in these texts is itself aporetic, a surplus of both meaning and being produced by the noncongruity of the two.

The Presocratics articulate this paradoxical Real through their poetics, as Lacan suggests in the quotation that serves as an epigraph to this Conclusion.[15] Faced with being, *logos* is reduced to stupidity, Aristotle's vacuous proposition that being is and nonbeing is not. Poetry, Lacan suggests, offered the Presocratics a way of speaking that goes beyond truth as the univocal proposition of an unequivocal being and touches on the Real. To say this is to reiterate the central claim of this book: for the Presocratics, poetics are not extrinsic or secondary to their thought, at best an ornamentation (and at worst an obfuscation) of the reiterated statement that being is and nonbeing is not. Instead, they are a different means of speaking the truth and a means of speaking a different truth. In their poetics, something

12. Badiou 2011, 80: "The antiphilosophical act consists in letting what there is show itself, insofar as 'what there is' is precisely that which no true proposition can say."

13. Badiou 2011, 95.

14. Cf. the discussion in the Introduction and chapter 1.

15. Lacan 1998, 22. Badiou (2005, 9) quotes this passage and argues that for Lacan the Presocratics' poetry prefigures his own attempt to articulate the Real through mathemes. Likewise, Badiou (2011, 137) himself defends philosophy from the antiphilosophers by promoting mathematics as philosophy's language of the Real (cf. Badiou 2014; Badiou 2018, 27–37; and Meillassoux 2009). The recourse to mathematics may seem to align these continental philosophers with the algebraism of analytic philosophy, but for the latter (as Badiou would argue) mathematical formulas express propositional truths, whereas for the former they articulate something beyond such propositions.

speaks through their language rather than being spoken by it. In Democritus's impossible neologism and Anaxagoras's archaizing syntax, in the radical vibrancy of Empedocles's verbiage, in Heraclitus's cosmic symmetries and syncopations and Parmenides's wayward metaphors, we see these writers coming up to the edge of their own thought and going beyond the limits of their own *logos* to articulate a paradoxical truth that remains, as Democritus puts it, "in an abyss" (B117/D24). Their poetics are, in this very *real* sense, their (anti)philosophy.