

EMPEDOCLES IN CONTEXT

SAETTA COTTONE (R.) *Soleil et connaissance. Empédocle avant Platon*. Pp. xvi+294, figs. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2023. Paper, €25.50. ISBN: 978-2-35088-203-1.

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Over the past two centuries Empedocles' cosmology has been at the centre of intense philological and philosophical debates revolving around the reconstruction of the so-called 'cycle' – the circular movement of cosmic matter, which gives birth to the world and everything within – and the relationship between Love (*Philotes*) and Hate (*Neikos*), the two cosmic powers responsible for all becoming. According to certain scholars the Empedoclean cycle should be understood as a circular movement from the Sphere to itself produced by the joint action of Love and Hate and leading to a single world – the one we inhabit. According to others, the cycle must be conceived as an oscillation between the unity of matter within the Sphere and a state of absolute separation resulting in two opposite worlds, each depending on the alternating influence of the two cosmic powers. In this book, which combines rigorous philological analysis of Empedocles' verses as well as of the ancient doxographical sources, S.C. offers a bold and innovative reconstruction of the poet-philosopher's thought.

Rejecting the idea of the cosmic cycle as originating from and returning to the Sphere, S.C. takes the side of those who think of Empedoclean becoming as comprised between two opposite poles. However, if the adherents of this theory generally conceive of the anti-Sphere as a state of maximal separation of matter, dominated by Hate and characterised by a static condition, S.C. conceives of this polarity in different terms. Building on the study of the formal analogies between the famous fragments 134 DK and 29 DK and between 27 DK and 171 Bollack, S.C. advances a bold claim: the core of Empedocles' cosmology must be found in the polar opposition between the Sphere and the Sun. At the heart of this interpretation lies a new grasp of the interconnectedness between cosmology, epistemology and poetry in the philosopher's works. His reflections on the laws of the Universe are inseparable from a theory of knowledge based on images and fully attained only through poetry, where poetry plays a key role as mediator between human physiology and human understanding of nature. In this way, S.C. maintains, Empedocles would represent a fundamental epistemological anti-model to the one subsequently developed by Plato to conceive of the relationship between the sensible world and that of intelligible forms.

This argument is developed in the first part of the book, 'Cosmologie et connaissance', comprising fourteen chapters, which build on and push forward some of the ideas advanced by scholars such as S. Karsten (the first modern editor of Empedocles), P. Tannery (especially his doxographical studies) and J. Bollack (especially some of the ideas advanced in his 1965–69 edition). Chapters 1–9 are dedicated to specific issues of Empedocles' cosmology and epistemology, such as the Sphere, the theory of the reflected sun, and the poetic and philosophical devices of refrains and rondeaux; the remaining chapters (10–14) turn to doxographical sources, such as Aristotle, Theophrastus, Sextus Empiricus, Hippolytus of Rome and Clement of Alexandria.

The second part of the book, 'Empédocle à Athènes', shifts the focus to the appropriation of Empedocles' poetics and ideas in the dramatic works of Athenians such as Aristophanes, Euripides and Plato. This section sheds light on the richness and intricacies of intertextual allusions and dramatic interplay between comedy, tragedy and philosophical dialogues, which could not be fully appreciated without an understanding of the numerous

Empedoclean echoes and allusions hidden and disguised within the manifold constructions of dramatic personae, choruses and scenes. By so doing S.C. joins the recently expanding field of research on the interactions between dramatic plays and Presocratic ideas, where Aristophanic comedy still occupies a regrettably marginal role.

Overall, the book is exemplary and inspiring as regards to the methodology it employs. As the work of C. Osborne (*Rethinking Early Greek Philosophy: Hippolytus of Rome and the Presocratics* [1987]), among others, has demonstrated, no Presocratic thinker can be approached without a solid and critical engagement with the doxographical sources and the problems of reconstruction that these sources entail. Any scholarly reading of Presocratic ideas is confronted with the thorny issue of the presumed bias of the writers who preserved their fragments. S.C.'s masterly engagement with the relevant sources represents a solid example of philological inquiry: a good example is the chapter dedicated to the testimonials of Hippolytus and Clement (pp. 100–21), in which the parallelism between the passages of the two doxographers is employed to demonstrate the original discursive structure of Empedocles' argument on knowledge and his critique of separation and dispersion (p. 108). Similarly, the second part of the book is commendable for the way in which it brings together and assesses disparate sources. Mobilising a vast array of works, themes and ideas, it establishes innovative intellectual affiliations among fictitious characters and historical figures. Thus, it sheds light on the tenuous and often hidden presence of Empedocles' 'Apollinean knowledge' in the dramatic discourse of those Athenians who were competing for the role of (to borrow Vernant's famous designation) 'masters of truth'.

A minor setback of the work is its slightly confusing use of titles. Nothing in the main title suggests the real scope of the book: a study that goes well beyond Empedocles' theory of the sun and knowledge. There is no allusion to the conspicuous study of dramatic works in the second part of the book and, given the attention the *Symposium* receives, it is deceiving in presenting itself as a study of Empedocles 'avant' ('before') Plato. A similar problem occurs at the level of the chapters, such as the second chapter of the second part ('La dramaturgie du chœur, la trygédie et le fr. 146 d'Empedocle. La philosophie est-elle tragique?') with its tantalising question about the tragic colouring of philosophy in Aristophanes' chorus, which receives no straightforward answer. A more accurate use of titles would have perhaps also reduced the sensation of rupture between the first and the second parts of the book: for the study moves from an in-depth analysis of a specific philosophical issue within Empedocles' fragments to a wider cross-generic exploration of the dialogue between comedy, tragedy and philosophy. Because of this line of development, the main topic of Empedocles' theory of knowledge feels severely diluted in the second part of the book, where, being reduced to a red thread running through S.C.'s discussion of dramatic works, it is often drowned by the richness of the analysis.

This is a very minor issue of what is a successful multidisciplinary approach to the study of a Presocratic philosopher in its cultural and intellectual context, which will appeal to a variety of scholars. It is a book that offers a plethora of invitations for additional research in the field of the interactions between Presocratic ideas, doxographical sources and dramatic works. It is also a clear example of the potential for specific philosophical themes to be transformed into the premises of wider cultural narratives when subtle scholarship is applied.

Limoges

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