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Response by Catherine Osborne
Was verse the default form for Presocratic Philosophy?

In this short rejoinder to Professor Wright's paper I shall attempt to do two things: first, to raise two fundamental questions not directly discussed by Wright, but which nevertheless seem to me to bear on our present topic, that is the 'didactic poetry', so called, of Parmenides and Empedocles; and second, briefly to explore a theme of my own relating to the structure and content of the poems. In the course of developing these themes of my own, I shall also respond to some of the claims in Wright's paper where they bear on the same issue.

1. *Poetry or prose: a real choice?*

My two fundamental questions are these:

1.1. Is the notion of 'didactic poetry' appropriate or helpful in relation to this period and these thinkers?

1.2. Was poetry the default form for the Presocratics - and if so, why does not every philosopher write in verse?

The second of these questions does relate to Wright's basic question, only my question is not, as hers is, 'why did they write verse?' but 'why did some *not* write verse?' Surely it is only with expectations derived from the subsequent history of thought that we tend to think of philosophy as essentially a prose subject. However, before we even address that question, we need first to ask a more fundamental question: whether form and content can meaningfully be detached; whether it makes sense to suppose that a thinker would face a choice of medium in which to express a pre-conceived idea - or at least whether that choice is conceivable in the Presocratic period with which we are dealing.¹ Wright's use of the word

¹ The strongest version of my thesis would maintain that there is little sense to this notion at any period in the history of philosophy (that Wittgenstein's work comes out not in a treatise but in numbered paragraphs, that Plato's dialogues are dialogues and could not have been written like Aristotle's works. In neither case is the message independent and expressed in a medium that is not essentially related to it). Here however I shall content myself with the suggestion that the Presocratics were not selecting their medium independently of their message.

'chose' in the opening section of her paper indicates that she thinks of these poets as selecting their medium independently of the message that they have to convey, and also making an odd choice in the process.² Is either of these assumptions sound?

1.1 *Is the notion of 'didactic poetry' appropriate or helpful in relation to this period and these thinkers?*

What do we mean by 'didactic poetry'? I take it that we use the notion to capture the idea that a thinker has a certain lesson to teach - a message to convey - and that she then chooses a verse form to wrap the content in, perhaps with a conscious aim in view that will be achieved by a poetic form more successfully than by the alternative prose forms that might be on offer. Thus the idea of teaching *through the medium of poetry* seems to presuppose that form and content are distinguished: that there is a definite item of doctrine to be expressed prior to the choice of medium and that the writer faces a real question as to how to package the material she wants to convey to a particular audience. As a result the content of the doctrines has to be considered in detachment from the medium in which it is to be conveyed, and there must be alternative ways to choose to express the same thesis or doctrine. Does that choice of teaching medium present itself, in that form, to the writer of a philosophical poem in the Presocratic period?

Homer

It seems to me that when we are dealing with Homer the notion of a choice between prose and verse makes no sense. Homer has a story to tell, but we do not envisage the poet thinking up, or working out, the story independently of the poetic form in which he conceives it. Plainly the story has been handed down and developed, always in the epic formulae

² In the published version of her paper Wright has eliminated two of the references to this idea of 'choosing' that were originally included, substituting 'the use of epic poetry as a medium' and 'the adaptation of the poetic medium to their philosophic message' respectively. But it remains true that the underlying thought is that they had a prose message which, for some strange reason, they wanted to express in verse and for which they had to adapt a poetic 'medium' to do the job.

and verses. No one ever thinks the stories in prose. We can ourselves retell the stories in prose, but that is to change the character of what is conveyed. We cannot dispense with the epic form without dispensing with the message as well. Thus the poetry in Homer does not seem to be an optional extra. The idea that it was chosen in order to package the message more attractively would simply be bizarre.

Hesiod

The term 'didactic poetry' is often applied to Hesiod, presumably because his message is designed to be informative. But again I think it would be inappropriate to suppose that the *poetry* is conceived as a means to an end. Could Hesiod have faced a decision as to how to convey his information? Or was it rather that he faced a choice as to what subject matter to include in his poems? In Hesiod's milieu it appears that poetry is the only medium that anyone would use, and Hesiod is a *didactic* poet because he chose to write on a didactic subject, not as though he chose to write his works in verse. Thus if we think of the early Greek poets as *opting* for a poetic form we have fallen into an incongruous anachronism. Hesiod writes poetry, and doubtless his ideas were themselves composed in that medium. He has no verseless message.

Presocratic poets

As Wright has shown, the poetry of Parmenides and Empedocles is steeped in the same epic language and forms as the work of Homer. But should we suppose that the Presocratic poets deliberately adopted this poetry, and these characteristic and reminiscent formulae, as a 'medium' in preference to some alternative 'medium' that was available? My claim is that Parmenides and Empedocles are as unconsciously and naturally poets as Hesiod and Homer were, and that like the earlier poets they formulate their thought directly in the familiar language of poetry. It is not serving as a *medium* for something else, their philosophy. Are there any other terms that they might use for their message, besides the ones that they present? If so what are they and how could they say what the texts now say? Surely we think of the content as primarily a prose story only because we ourselves are now accustomed to philosophy in prose. But no verseless message need ever have been available to the poets we are con-

cerned with. These thinkers plainly do not start with our assumption that one writes philosophy normally in prose, and that only for special effect might it be 'put into' poetry.

It is my contention, then, that poetry, not prose, is the default setting for these thinkers, just as it was for Xenophanes, whose presence in the sequence of Presocratic thinkers is scarcely noticed by Wright in her paper. It is not the case that we have an established tradition of writing philosophy in prose by this period; rather the reverse, as I shall argue in section 1.2 below. In these circumstances, it seems clear that the form that the thoughts take cannot realistically be detached from the poetic verse composition in which they are expressed, as though the thinker might have devised the two independently. We should not, I suggest, think of these thinkers as looking to Homer as a poetic form and trying to 'adapt' it to their purpose,³ as though it was not just as much the poetry of their own thought as it was of the thought of Homer. We should not see them as having a straight story that gets embellished, or perhaps even concealed, by imaginative or distracting poetic language. Rather the language and the thought are indistinguishable. Those words are the thoughts they think, and hence the content itself is poetic.

For these reasons, then, we might say that the notion of 'didactic poetry' is unhelpful, if it is taken to mean the *use* of a poetic medium to dress up an otherwise dull educational message. For in these cases we do not have any sense that the poetry is being added as an optional extra. It is, I would claim, integral to these thinkers' philosophical thoughts.

It is true that the historians of philosophy in later antiquity found the Presocratics' use of verse surprising. When Plutarch suggests that Parmenides and Empedocles borrow the trappings of poetry to dress up their arguments and make them less pedestrian⁴ he is looking back from a position where the prose dialogues of Plato, the prose treatises of Aristotle, and a vast output of philosophical tracts of the Hellenistic period, have established prose as the norm for this field. It is no surprise that *he* unthinkingly presupposes that the Presocratics were choosing the poetic form for special effect, just as Lucretius had more recently done. Lucretius was deliberately and consciously following Empedocles by

³ Wright uses this model in the introductory section of her paper.

⁴ Plutarch *How the young should study poetry* 16c, quoted by Wright p. 3.

using a verse form that was now peculiar for philosophy, but this does not mean that it was peculiar when Empedocles wrote; nor does it mean that Lucretius saw himself as making the same *choice* as Empedocles. What was a choice - a statement - on Lucretius' part was simply the normal way to publish philosophy for Empedocles. Empedocles need not himself be making a statement about where he stands in philosophy (though Lucretius was) nor need he be making an effort to lighten the style of his prose. Plutarch's assessment that the poetic form makes these thinkers more accessible evidently belongs in the context of the education of the young of his own day (first to second century AD) and reflects the expectations of his own time, not the Presocratic tradition.

Wright's other examples of literary judgements on the Presocratic poets both go back to Aristotle, though one is known only from the quotation in Diogenes Laertius (8.57). But in neither case does Aristotle imply that Empedocles deliberately opts to write in verse for self-conscious reasons. Diogenes' quotation from *On poets* reveals that Aristotle not only admires Empedocles' Homeric style but also implies that he is, properly a poet in the formal sense - that is - that the expression is artful (δαινὸς περὶ τὴν φράσιν γέγονεν) and employs poetic imagery of all the appropriate kinds (μεταφορητικός τε ὢν καὶ τοῖς ἄλλοις τοῖς περὶ ποιητικὴν ἐπιτεύγμασι χρώμενος⁵). As regards the verse style Empedocles is not to be faulted, in Aristotle's judgement.

This in itself should make us hesitate to read the passage from Aristotle *Poetics* 1447b11 in the way that Wright suggests when she introduces the quotation,⁶ as though Aristotle were saying that Empedocles really does not merit the title of poet and should not be classed with Homer for reasons of the poverty of his poetic style, his work being really just science dressed up with metre. But fortunately in this case we have Aristotle's own context to confirm our suspicions, for Aristotle's interest in the passage in question is not the poetic merits of one kind of poetry

⁵ I do not think that the verb χρώμενος need imply that Empedocles adds these features as artificial embellishments to an otherwise plain style: rather it suggests the proper way in which a poet employs poetic techniques that are integral to his poetic composition.

⁶ Wright p. 3: my point here addresses Wright's original version of the paper. In the published version she has now incorporated this observation concerning Aristotle's context and meaning, which however conflicts with her initial claim (still included) that the passage is disparaging of the connection between Homer and Empedocles.

rather than another, but the criteria for grouping poetry into classes under classificatory terms. If this is done on the basis of metre, which is the only classificatory terminology available to Aristotle's early stage in literary theory, then we find that Homer and Empedocles fall into the same class, simply on the basis of their metre. This has nothing to do with their content, and since their content is really substantially distinct, one being a scientific poem and the other fiction, Aristotle feels the need to hunt for a more sensitive method of classifying poems that share the same metrical form. Ironically we might suppose that he is hunting for the very term 'didactic poetry' that it has been my task to reject (though my objection is actually only to the notion of a prose message optionally packaged in verse).

Aristotle's purpose, in this introductory section of the *Poetics*, is to mark out the class of poetry with which he will be concerned in the *Poetics* — that is, strictly fictional dramatic poetry, poetry of the mimetic sort. Empedocles does not fall into that category, and hence he does not merit the title 'poet' in the new restricted sense which Aristotle is defining, for which a poet properly so called is one whose *subject matter* is mimetic, not scientific. Others may write poetry in the wider sense, but if the subject matter is scientific or from some other similar field it will not belong in Aristotle's present analysis of dramatic fiction. Thus there is no value judgement either implied or intended in Aristotle's proposed classification of poets by subject matter in preference to the traditional classification by metrical form; when he says that Empedocles has nothing in common with Homer besides the metre he is simply overstating an example which indicates the need for a classification system that can distinguish epic from philosophy.

1.2 Why didn't everyone write in verse?

To say that poetry is the default setting for philosophy before Socrates would imply that all the Presocratic thinkers naturally expressed themselves in verse. At first glance that is apparently not true, as Wright has observed, for we have some very early examples, from the Milesians and Heraclitus, in prose. But we should be cautious about supposing that these constitute anything like a tradition of writing philosophy in prose, or even a predilection for it.

First, the quantity of known prose philosophy is tiny: for Thales we

have no known writings nor any evidence relating to his style; one sole surviving sentence from Anaximander is said to be in 'somewhat poetical words'⁷ (the judgement of Simplicius who, in the sixth century AD, no longer expects philosophy to be in poetry); nothing extant from Anaximenes but a mention of his plain style that *might* be taken to imply prose, but could equally refer to a distinctively plain poetic style. Thus up to Heraclitus we have only one sentence of prose, and that is not prosaic in its style of diction. Similarly while Heraclitus' work does seem to be in prose — at least it does not obviously comply with the traditional Greek metres — it does not belong in the genre of the philosophical prose treatise familiar from later philosophy, and is probably rather different from prose writing in his own time.⁸ Heraclitus' sayings display the same delight in words and images that we associate with poetic forms, and they clearly use linguistic form to convey content. Thus we might want to say that Heraclitus' collection of gnomic utterances is a genre of its own,⁹ but it certainly does *not* establish a definitive prose style as a norm for philosophy. We are left, then, with three distinct traditions: the Milesian one, apparently in more or less plain prose; Xenophanes, clearly in conventional verse forms including both elegiac and epic metres; and Heraclitus, in a peculiar form of his own.

So what are we to conclude from this? Not, in my view, that the way the thinkers express themselves is a separate decision from what they want to say. Indeed the three traditions of how to express the thoughts also reflect three traditions of thought expressed and this is unlikely to be accidental. To have something to say is, I would suggest, to have a way to say it, and of the three forms, I would claim that poetry is far the most ordinary form of expression for the time.¹⁰

⁷ ἐξ ὧν δὲ ἡ γένεσις ἐστὶ τοῖς οὖσι, καὶ τὴν φθορὰν ἣ ταῦτα γίνεσθαι 'κατὰ τὸ χρεών' διδόναι γὰρ αὐτὰ δίκην καὶ τίσιν ἀλλήλοις τῆς ἀδικίας κατὰ τὴν τοῦ χρόνου τάξιν' ποιητικωτέροις οὕτως ὀνόμασιν αὐτὰ λέγων. Simplicius *In Phys.* 24.17ff.

⁸ For example the work of Hecataeus, which Heraclitus himself knew, B40. Fragments of Hecataeus' researches are collected in Jacoby FGrH I. See the discussion in C.H. Kahn *The art and thought of Heraclitus* 96-7.

⁹ It is possible that the genre is a familiar oral genre that is not exceptional except in being written down. It has been suggested to me by F.-G. Hermann that the model is the after-dinner riddle or aphorism.

¹⁰ It is worth noticing that even for the scientific and technical writing in the Ionian tradition prose is probably less common than poetry. The nautical astrology circulating under

Perhaps, then, we need to ask what kind of genre naturally comes out in prose and what in poetry, and to what kind of audience each is addressed. We might, for example, ask whether, in Anaximander's Miletus, political decrees and legal speeches were now being formulated in prose. In that case it may be that his use of prose reflects his understanding of the world as a rule-governed cosmos for which legal language is the appropriate vocabulary.¹¹ Given that Hecataeus also comes from Miletus, we may suppose that to write in prose is to engage in that Ionian tradition of research or *historiē* that Heraclitus so much despised,¹² a tradition that continued in the work of Herodotus. By contrast, Heraclitus' enthusiasm is for the manner in which Apollo signifies his insights through the Delphic oracle,¹³ and although Heraclitus does not himself copy the poetic form in which the Delphic oracle formulated its answers, he does address his listeners with a kind of oracular obscurity that is idiosyncratic. But then Heraclitus was probably not intending his writings to be published to a large and popular audience: his is a relatively esoteric text. Indeed if we believe some ancient sources it was supposed to be for the few or none to read.¹⁴

Thus we might surmise that the normal way to publish one's thoughts to a large audience, probably predominantly listeners rather than readers, was in poetic recitation, as Xenophanes and Empedocles clearly used to do.¹⁵ Prose, by contrast, probably initially addresses itself to the educated and literate professionals and intellectuals. It seems likely that it becomes a mass medium only later, with the development of democracy and the

the names of Thales and/or Phocylides of Samos was in hexameters (DK 5, DK 11A1, 11B1) and so was the astrology of Cleostratus of Tenedos (DK6B1). It seems clear that verse was more frequent for materials that were to be memorised by members of a predominantly oral community. Many of the earliest inscriptions and graffiti are metrical, and there are grounds for thinking that statutes were sometimes handed down by chanting. See Rosalind Thomas *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge 1992), pp. 62-5; 113-7.

¹¹ Cf. Anaximander fragment 1, in the quotation of Simplicius above (n. 7).

¹² Heraclitus B40 and 129.

¹³ Heraclitus B93, taken by Plutarch who quotes it (*Why the Pythia no longer prophecies in verse* 404d-e) to refer to the god's use of the Pythia as a mouthpiece.

¹⁴ Diogenes Laertius 9.6

¹⁵ The case for this conclusion is well made by Thomas, *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece* chapter 6.

public political speech, or as philosophy moves to Athens in the fifth century, and there encounters the rhetorical tradition of prose public speaking. I would maintain, therefore, that to write, or recite, in verse is the standard manner of publishing ideas to an audience in the early Greek world; that the primary tradition of philosophy in this period is clearly in verse; and that it is unlikely that either Parmenides or Empedocles would have devised their thoughts in any other medium. It follows that our question should never have been 'why did these thinkers choose to write in verse?' but rather, 'why did some Presocratic philosophy turn out in prose?'

2. *How does the formal structure of the poem relate to the message?*

Although I have claimed that we should not suppose that the poet devised the content independently of the form and language in which it is expressed, I do not want to preclude reflection on the relation between form and content. After all, if the two go hand in hand it is all the more appropriate to notice how they belong together. In this section I shall make a few suggestions, not about the language, vocabulary or imagery of the poems, but about the structure or framework of the poem. How is the framework of the poem constructed so as to convey the philosophical point?

Obviously the fragmentary nature of our evidence makes it difficult to discover precisely how either poem was constructed.¹⁶ However in the case of Parmenides, for whom we have a good deal of continuous text and a fair idea of the sequence of ideas, we might start with the question 'Where does the poem go?' It seems that Parmenides' poem sets out on a rectilinear plan: it starts with the speaker's journey with the mares to the gates of night and day¹⁷ and continues with a single continuous telling of two consecutive sequences of the goddess's revelation, first one and then the other.¹⁸

¹⁶ For Parmenides there is widespread agreement on the sequence for most of the known fragments, but a few are hard to place and there must be some further text that is lost. The reconstruction of Empedocles' poem remains controversial, though assisted somewhat by the recently discovered Strasbourg papyrus (publication expected shortly) which appears to confirm the integration of scientific and religious motifs in his thought. The reflections that I put forward here do not depend upon any controversial ordering of Empedocles' text.

¹⁷ B1, 1-21

¹⁸ B1.22-B8.49; B8.50 onwards.

By contrast, Empedocles, so far as we can tell, constructs a poem that frequently repeats motifs and passages with minor variations, returning again and again to the mention of events and explanations canvassed and re-canvassed earlier. It seems evident that this procedure matches the way in which the world that he describes is built, both in its construction out of a number of persistent elements that run through each other, ever the same and always different,¹⁹ and its temporal pattern with recurring events and programmes or sequences of development.²⁰ Naturally he has to 'tell a twofold tale'²¹ of a world in which there are two balanced processes, in which worlds come into being and fall apart again in parallel ways. Thus we might say that the repetitive construction of Empedocles' poem is not merely an accidental inheritance of the formulaic construction of a Homeric text, nor a didactic device to get us to take in the important points he wants to make and memorise them more accurately, but actually part and parcel of the message that is being presented.

Of course if this is so for Empedocles, we might ask why Parmenides' journey is not more precisely represented in the construction of his poem too. In Parmenides' poem, once the speaker encounters the Goddess, she takes him along two of the three roads that she is presenting to him as choices for his road of enquiry. He finds himself, so to speak, at a place where three roads meet. One road, the road characterised by 'it is not and needs must not be'²² is apparently a dead end, and the Goddess merely points it out and warns him off²³ but does not take him down it; the other two roads have to be explored, however, and it is the exploration of these two remaining roads, constituting the Way of Truth and the Way of Seeming, that are the main body of Parmenides' poem. One of these roads is a 'backward turning road' (B6.9), and we might suppose that to travel on this road would bring us back to the same starting point as we set out from, since the mortals apparently wander and get nowhere by pursuing this road, and say and unsay the same things.²⁴ Surely if the goddess were

¹⁹ See for example B17.11-13 and 34-5; B21.13-14; B26.8-12.

²⁰ See for example B17.1-8; B20.2-5; B26.1-2.

²¹ B17.1 and 16.

²² B2.5

²³ B2.6; B6.3

²⁴ B6.5; B6.8-9.

to take us down this road first, then we could see how we might arrive back in a position to start out on the correct road that really leads somewhere, on which we shall be accompanied by truth (B 2.4). Thus we might have expected that the goddess would first take us by the round-about wandering route of mortal opinion, the road that appears to go somewhere and actually doesn't, and *then* set out on the road of true being where the signposts are clear and persuasive.²⁵ That way we would actually arrive back at the right place to start out on the second journey. Indeed I suppose someone might think that this would be a logical way to proceed: first showing the errors of mortal thinking and finishing with a definitive account of real truth. Does it not seem to us a trifle lame when the goddess, suddenly at line 49, comes to a stop and says (8.50-51):

That's where I stop the reliable discourse or theory
about the truth; now from here on you're to learn mortal opinions...?

With this abrupt diversion, off we go on the Way of Seeming. And how, we then ask, did the poem as a whole conclude, if in this way its last section was devoted to the deceptive ordering of the Way of Seeming? Although we do not know for certain what the last lines of Parmenides' poem were, Simplicius records a short sequence of lines (B19) that sum up the world of opinion by reminding us of the role of the mortals who 'name things' as separate, an issue previously mentioned in the way of truth (B8.38). This suggests that the Way of Seeming brings us back to a point that we had reached earlier. There is, in fact, no end to Parmenides' journey that is not also an old beginning.

But perhaps we were already mistaken in thinking that the Way of Truth was a linear progress to a final destination. Fragment B5, quoted by Proclus without any context, says:

It is all the same to me
whence I begin, for there I shall arrive again.

Proclus clearly believes that these lines relate to the Way of Truth, since he uses them to deduce information about Parmenides' views on the

²⁵ B8.2

Intelligible World.²⁶ Thus it seems that in the Way of Truth the goddess must have affirmed that her argument would always return again to its first starting point, and that that starting point might be anywhere. The obvious conclusion is that the Way of Truth itself is, after all, a circular route.

Evidently, then, whatever is meant by the 'backward-turning' road of mortals, it looks as though returning to the starting point is not what is wrong with it, since the Way of Truth also does that. However, on the Way of Seeming mortals wander in an unproductive way; the difference on the Way of Truth is that we complete a full and well-rounded circuit that lacks nothing in its mutually self-supporting arguments.²⁷ Parmenides' Way of Truth is, I would suggest, an internally consistent, self-supporting, construction, both assuming and proving the impossibility of what is not, and this coheres with the idea that it has no goal that is different from its starting point. Thus while the muddled road of mortal opinions is inconsistent and contradictory, undermining its own premises, turning back and retracing all its steps in a way that destroys its credibility, the Way of Truth, by contrast, is soundly enclosed upon itself as a circular route from which we can escape only by the abrupt procedure that we complained about above, when the goddess simply cancels the talk of truth and starts out on her deceptive journey instead.²⁸ Evidently we could have done that at any point, because no point is the beginning or the end of the Way of Truth: ἔστιν ἀναρχον ἀπανστον (B8.27).

In conclusion, then, I would suggest that in both Parmenides and Empedocles we find that the structure of the poem itself expresses the message conveyed in it. Parmenides' journey in verse matches the journey he describes, which in turn expresses the logical structure of the argument it represents, and reveals that the contrast between the mortal confusion and the true logic is not that one is straight and the other crooked, but that one is internally consistent and circular and the other

²⁶ Proclus *Commentary on the Parmenides* 708.16. Proclus quotes B8.25, B5 and B8.43 in succession to support his claim that Parmenides presupposes a plurality of intelligible objects. It is not immediately obvious how he finds plurality in B5; probably he picks up the implied plurality of places.

²⁷ Cf. the notion of well-rounded truth in Simplicius' version of B1.29, and the well-rounded sphere in B8.43.

²⁸ B8.50.

inconsistent and wayward. Empedocles' formulaic and cyclical poetry, in which words and lines are recycled for new uses and new tellings of old tales, accurately recaptures his formulaic world in which events recur in cycles as time recycles forces and elements to create new worlds and retell old stories. Though we may not ask why they wrote *in verse* we may ask what form the verse takes in each case. What I hope to have shown is that in both cases form and content are so closely matched that the medium is itself indispensable to the message, and indeed, once we take that relation seriously, we can start to discover just what the message is.

OSBORNE, Catherine. – *Was verse the default form for presocratic philosophy?* Form and content in didactic poetry (→ 69-06516) 23-35. • Risposta all'intervento di M. R. Wright (→ 69-03352). Nell'opera di Parmenide e in quella di Empedocle forma e contenuto sono così intimamente legati da far supporre che l'impiego della versificazione non sia stato frutto di una scelta non convenzionale, ma che la forma poetica fosse considerato l'unico mezzo espressivo in grado di veicolare contenuti di qualsiasi tipo. [69-06550]