

THE FRAGMENTS OF EMPEDOCLES

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The Fragments of Empedocles by William Ellery Leonard

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WILLIAM ELLERY LEONARD

**THE FRAGMENTS
OF EMPEDOCLES**

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TRANSLATED INTO ENGLISH VERSE

BY

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Empedocles...

*Whom that three-cornered isle of all the lands
Bore on her coasts . . . which, though for much she seem
The mighty and the wondrous isle, . . . hath ne'er
Possessed within her aught of more renown,
Nor aught more holy, wonderful, and dear
Than this true man. Nay, ever so far and pure
The lofty music of his breast divine
Lifts up its voice and tells of glories found
That scarce he seems of human stock create.*

Lucretius, I. 716 ff.

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DEDICATION.

(To W. R. N.)

In my last winter by Atlantic seas,
How often, when the long day's task was through,
I found, in nights of friendliness with you,
The quiet corner of the scholar's ease;
While you explored the Orphic liturgies,
Or old Pythagoras' mystic One and Two,
Or heartened me with Plato's larger view,
Or the world-epic of Empedocles:

It cost you little; but such things as these,
When man goes inland, following his star—
When man goes inland where the strangers are—
Build him a house of goodly memories:
So take this book in token, and rejoice
That I am richer having heard your voice.

W. E. L.

MADISON. WIS., Dec. 1906.

EMPEDOCLES: THE MAN, THE PHILOSOPHER, THE POET.

LIFE.

THE philosopher Empedocles, according to the common tradition of antiquity, was born at Agrigentum in Sicily, and flourished just before the Peloponnesian war, the contemporary of the great Athenians about Pericles. He might have heard the *Prometheus* in the theatre of Dionysus and have talked with Euripides in the Agora; or have seen with Phidias the bright Pallas Athene on the Acropolis; or have listened in the groves beyond the city while Anaxagoras unfolded to him those half-spiritual guesses at the nature of the universe, so different from his own. He might: but the details of his life are all too imperfectly recorded. The brief references in other philosophers and the *vita* of Diogenes Laertius contain much that is contradictory or legendary. Though apparently of a wealthy and conservative family, he took the lead among his fellow citizens against the encroachments of the aristocracy; but, as it seems, falling at last from popular favor, he left Agrigentum and died in the Peloponnesus—his famous leap into Mount Aetna being as mythical as his reputed

translation after a sacrificial meal. . . . But time restores the exiles: Florence at last set the image of Dante before the gates of Santa Croce; and now, after two thousand years, the hardy democrats of Agrigentum begin to cherish (so I have read) the honest memory of Empedocles with that of Mazzini and Garibaldi.

PERSONALITY.

The personality of this old Mediterranean Greek must have been impressive. He was not only the statesman and philosopher, but the poet. And egotistic, melancholy, eloquent¹ soul that he was, he seems to have considered himself above all as the wonder-worker and the hierophant, in purple vest and golden girdle,

"Crowned both with filets and with flowering wreaths;"

and he tells us of his triumphal passage through the Sicilian cities, how throngs of his men and women accompanied him along the road, how from house and alley thousands of the fearful and the sick crowded upon him and besought oracles or healing words. And stories have come down to us of his wonderful deeds, as the waking of a woman from a long trance and the quite plausible cure of a madman by music. Some traces of this imposing figure, with elements frankly drawn from legends not here mentioned appear in Arnold's poem.

¹From Empedocles, indeed, according to Aristotle, the study of rhetoric got its first impulse. Cf. Diels's *Gorgias und Empedocles* in *Sitzungsberichte d. K. P. Akademie d. Wissenschaften*, 1884.

WORKS.

Of the many works, imputed to Empedocles by antiquity, presumably only two are genuine, the poems *On Nature* and the *Purifications*; and of these we possess but the fragments preserved in the citations of philosopher and doxographer from Aristotle to Simplicius, which, though but a small part of the whole, are much more numerous and comprehensive than those of either Xenophanes or Parmenides. It is impossible to determine when the poems were lost: they were read doubtless by Lucretius and Cicero, possibly as late as the sixth century by Simplicius, who at least quotes from the *On Nature* at length.^a

HISTORY OF THE TEXT.

The fragments were imperfectly collected late in the Renaissance, as far as I have been able to determine, first by the great German Xylander, who translated them into Latin. Stephanus published his *Empedoclis Fragmenta* at Paris in 1573. But not till the nineteenth century did they get the attention they deserve, in the editions of Sturz (1805) Karsten (1838), Stein (1852), and Mullach (1860), which show, however, confusing diversities in the readings as well as in the general arrangement. Each except Stein's is accompanied by Latin trans-

^aThe writings of Democritus are conjectured to have been lost between the third and fifth centuries.

lation⁸ and notes. But our best text is unquestionably that of Hermann Diels of Berlin, first published in 1901 in his *Poetarum Philosophorum Fragmenta*, and subsequently (1906), with a few slight changes and additions, in his *Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*.

TRANSLATIONS.

As said above, there are several translations into Latin; all that I have seen being in prose, and some rather loose for the work of distinguished scholars. The late P. Tannery gives a literal French translation in his work on Hellenic Science, Diels in his *Fragmente* one in German, Bodrero in his *Il Principio* one in Italian, and Burnet and Fairbanks in their works on early Greek philosophy literal English translations, of which the former's is the better. There is one in German hexameters from the earlier decades of the last century; and a few brief selections in the English hexameters of W. C. Lawton may be found in Warner's *Library of the World's Best Literature*. The works of Frere and of Symonds contain specimen renderings, the former's in verse, the latter's in prose. Probably Diels does most justice to the meaning of Empedocles; none assuredly does any kind of justice to his poetry.

THE IDEAS OF EMPEDOCLES.

We can reconstruct something of Empedocles's system out of the fragments themselves and out of

⁸I have not seen the original of Sturz's edition; but I gather from references in my reading that it contains a translation.