PARMENIDES' POEM

IL POEMA

Proemio

1

ἵπποι ταί με φέρουσιν, ὅσον τ’ ἔπι θυμός ἰκάνοι, τέμπον, ἐπεὶ μ’ ἐς ὄδον βῆσαν πολύφημον ἁγουσαὶ δαίμονοι, ἢ κατὰ πάντ’ ἀστῆ φέρει εἰδότα φῶτα: τήν φερόμην τήν γάρ με πολυφραστοῖ φέρον ἵπποι ἀρμα τιταίνουσαι, κοῦραν δ’ ὄδον ἠγεμόνευσιν. ἄξων δ’ ἐν χνοῆσιν ἦε σύρεγχος αὐτὴν αἰθήμενος (δουλεις γάρ ἐπείγετο δινοτοῖσιν κύκλοις ἀμφοτέρωθεν), ὡτε σπερχοιάτο πέμπειν Ἡλιόδες κοῦραν, προληπτοῦσα δῶματα Νυκτὸς.

5

eἰς φάνος, ὤσαμενα κράτων ἀπό χειρὶ καλύπτρας. ἐνθὰ πῦλα Νυκτὸς τε καὶ Ἡματός εἰς κελεύουν, καὶ σφας ὑπέρθυρον ἀμφίς ἔχει καὶ λάμπων οὖδός αὐτὰς δ’ αἰθέρια πλήττουσι μεγάλους θυρέτρας τῶν δὲ Δίκη πολύποινος ἔχει κλῆσας ἀμοιβοῦς.

10
tὴν δὴ παρφάμεναι κοῦρα μαλακοῖσι λόγοισιν πεῖσαι ἐπιφραδέως, ώς φαν βαλανικῶν ὀχῆμα ἀπερέσσι ἔσειεν πυλέων ἀπό ταῖ δὲ θυρέτρων χάσμ’ ἁγανεὶς ποίησαν ἀναπτύγμεαι πολυχάλκους ἄξους ἐν σύρεγχον ἀμοιβαδὸν εἰλίξασαι.

15
gόμβοις καὶ περουχήσαι ἀρηρτή: τῇ δ’ ἐν αὐτέων θεύς ἔχον κοῦρα καὶ ἀμαξίτων ἀρμα καὶ ἱππος. καὶ με θεά πρόφων ὑπεδέξατο, χειρὶ δὲ χειρὶ δεξιτερῆν ἔλευ, ὅδε δ’ ἔπος φάτο καὶ με προσηδαὶ· ὀ κοῦρ’ ἀθανάτοιο συνάρισος ἢνοχοῖοιν, ἱπποὶ ταῖ σε φέρουσιν ἱκανῶν ἡμέτερον διά, χαίρ’, ἐπεὶ οὕτω σε μοῖρα κακὴ προὔπεμπτε νεεσθαι τήν’ ὄδον (ἡ γάρ ἀπ’ ἀνθρώπως ἐκτὸς πάττου ἐστίν), ἀλλὰ θέμες τε δίκη τε. χρεὼ δὲ σε πάντα πυθέσαι ἤμεν Ἄληθείας εὐκυκλεός ἀτρεμές ἦτορ.

20

25

30

ṕῆ βροτῶν δόξας, ταῖς οὐκ ἐν πίστις ἄληθης. ἀλλ’ ἐμπίς καὶ ταῦτα μαθήσει, ώς ὑδ πολυῖνα χρῆν δοκίμους εἶναι διὰ παντὸς πάντα περίττα.
PROEM
Fragment 1
(verses 1-32)

Translation

The mares that carry me until where my mind desires to go
transported me after leaving and brought me toward the way with many voices,
that belongs to the deity, that leads to all the places the man who knows;
I was carried there; there in fact the wise mares brought me
pulling the chariot, and maidens showed the way. 5
The axis in the hubs emitted a squeal of the concave part,
inflaming (in fact it was pressed on both sides
by two well-worked circles), whenever the maidens, daughters of the Sun,
accelerated the race, after leaving the houses of the Night,
towards the light, removing with the hand the veils from their heads. 10
There is the gate that divides the paths of Night and Day,
and a lintel and a threshold of stone delimit it from above and below;
it, erected in the ether, is closed by large shutters:
of it Justice, which punishes severely, holds the keys that open and close.
The maidens then persuading her with sweet words 15
convinced her to carefully remove for them the bar of the bolt
quickly from the gate: this, opening,
produced a wide gap between the shutters, by turning - in mutual relationship
in the concave parts of the hinges - the bronze axes
fastened with nails and clasps: beyond so directly 20
through the gate the maidens drove chariot and mares across the great road.
And the benevolent goddess welcomed me, and took with her hand
my right hand, and so she spoke to me:
Oh young man, fellow-traveler of immortal drivers,
who come to our house with the mares that take you, 25
rejoice, because not a bad fate has sent you to follow
this way (in fact it is out of the path of men),
but divine will and justice. It is necessary that you learn
both the solid hearth of well-rounded Truth
and the opinions of mortals, in which there is no real certainty. 30
But you will learn these things also, how should be really
the appearances that pass all continuously.

Paraphrase of fragment 1

My philosophical and poetic inspiration, my imagination and my intelligence,
which are able to bring, as fast mares, my mind until where my heart desires,
led me to the way, which belongs to the deity, which leads the man who knows
and who researches knowledge to know everything.
My inspiration took me, and the maidens, daughters of the Sun, illuminated my path of rational search for Truth. They took me from the houses of the Night and of human ignorance into the light of the Day and of divine knowledge. They guided me to the giant gate that divides the paths of Night and Day; Divine Law that governs the world holds the keys of the gate. The maidens, daughters of the Sun, convinced that divine guardian of the gate to open it for us: so I could access the divine knowledge. The Queen of the Gods greeted me kindly and so told me: Oh young man, who – led by inspiration and by the light of knowledge – reach our house, rejoice, because not a bad fate has sent you to follow this path (it is in fact out of the path of men), but divine will and justice. It is necessary that you learn all things, both the Truth known only by the Gods and the opinions of mortals, always deceptive: you also need how to interpret the appearances that continuously pass before the eyes of mortals.

Translation

THE SPEECH ON TRUTH

Fragment 2
(verses 1-8)

If much I talk, you listen and accept my speech, which only ways of inquiry are thinkable:
the first: that [Being] is and that it is not not-being,
is the way of Persuasion (in fact it accompanies the Truth),
the second: that [Being] is not and that is necessary it is not,
I teach you that this is an entirely unknown way;
neither in fact you could know the Non-Being (in fact it is impossible)
nor you could express it.

Fragment 3
... in fact it is the same to think and to be.

Fragment 4
(verses 1-4)
Consider how far things have a strong presence to mind:
in fact [the mind] will not separate the being which holds narrow to the being
either [when it appears] fully scattered everywhere in the cosmos
or [when it appears] joined together.

Fragment 5
(verses 1-2)
To me it does not matter
whence I will begin: in fact there I will return again.

Fragment 6  
(verses 1-9)

It is necessary to say and think that Being is;  
nothingness is not: I order you to declare these things.  
In fact you'll begin from this first way of inquiry,  
but then from that invented by mortals who know nothing,  
men with two heads: the uncertainty in fact guides  
in their hearts the wandering mind: and they are dragged,  
stupid and also obtuse, astonished, confused races,  
for which Being and Non-Being are regarded as the same thing  
and not the same thing, and the walk of all things is reversible.

Fragment 7  
(verses 1-6)

Certainly this thing can never be imposed, that there are things that are not:
but you remove your thought from this way of inquiry
nor long habit push you along this way,
to direct the eye that does not look and the resounding ear
and the tongue, but judge by reasoning the hard-fought proof
exhibited by me.

Fragment 8
(verses 1-61)

Remains still an only speech of the way
[what says] It is: on this [way] there are many
signs, that Being is not-generated and undying,
entire and motionless and endless;
not sometimes it was nor sometimes it will be, because it is now, whole together,
one, continuous: which origin in fact will you search of it?
How and whence would it grow? From Non-Being I will not allow you
to say or to think: in fact What Is Not is absolutely
unutterable and unthinkable. What necessity would push it,
if it originated from nothing, to be born after or before?
So it is necessary or that it is entirely or that it is not at all.
Never force of certainty will concede that from Being something arises next to it: because of this the Justice did not allow it to be born or to die loosening it from the chains, but she holds it still; choice about these things is this: is or is not; it was therefore decided, as is necessary, to abandon an unthinkable and unutterable way (in fact it is not the way of Truth), and that the other really exists.

How might Being arise later? How could it be born? How is or is not; it was therefore decided, as is necessary, to abandon an unthinkable and unutterable way (in fact it is not the way of Truth), and that the other really exists.

In fact, if it was born, it is not, nor it is if is going to be. Thus the birth is off and the death is unknown. Neither it is divided, because it is all homogeneous: neither there is somewhere a more [of being], which can prevent it from being united, nor a less, but it is all full of being. So it is all continuous: being in fact approaches to being. But motionless within the limits of great bonds, it is without a beginning and without an end, since the birth and death were rejected very far, a real certainty expelled them. And remaining the same in the same place, it lies in itself and so it remains here steady: in fact the hard Necessity holds it in the bonds of the limit, shuts it around, since it is established that Being is complete: in fact it does not need anything; otherwise it would lack everything.
Thinking and that because of there is thinking are the same thing. In fact without Being, in which it is expressed, you will not find thinking: in fact nothing else exists or will exist outside of Being, as the Fate forced it.

to be whole and motionless; to this One so many names will be assigned as many are the things that mortals proposed, believing that they were true, that they were born and perish, that they exist and do not exist, that they changed the place and their bright color. But since there is an extreme limit, it is limited, on all sides like the mass of well-rounded sphere, from the center equal in every part: in fact it is necessary that it is not larger nor smaller in one part or another.
Neither indeed there is a Non-Being, which can make it desist from coming
to be the same [across all its surface], nor it is possible that Being belongs to Being
more here and less there, since it is all not forced:
in fact equal on all sides to itself, equally it touches the borders.

Now I interrupt the trustworthy speech and reflection about truth; henceforth learn the opinions of mortals
listening to the deceptive construction of my words.

THE SPEECH ON OPINIONS

In fact they proposed to call “forms” two opinions,
one of which is not necessary - in this they were wrong -
and they distinguished them as opposite things and assigned names to them
separately from each other, on the one hand the celestial fire of the flame [of the sun]
which is benign, light, identical to itself in every part,
but not identical to the other; but [they suggested] also the other thing on its own
as opposite things, the dark night, dense and heavy body.

To you I completely expose the likely cosmic order
so some opinion of mortals will never surpass you.
But since all entities are named light and night 
and these two, according to their powers, [are applied] to these or those, 
everything is full at the same time of light and dark night 
of both in the right proportions, since, if neither the one nor the other is present, 
there is nothing.

Paraphrase of difficult verses of fragments 8 and 9

Verses 8.5-15
Being not sometimes in the past was and then it was over, 
not sometimes in the future will begin to be but now is not, 
but it exists now, all together, one, continuous. 
Being can be born neither from Non-Being, that is, from nothingness, 
because Non-Being does not exist and is unthinkable and unutterable, 
nor can be born from Being: if Being beget another being beside itself, 
there would be a quantity of being greater than before; 
so this more of being, this part of being born now, would appear “ex novo”, 
so – although deriving from Being – would emerge however from nothingness, 
from Non-Being. Therefore the divine law did not allow it to be born or to die, 
but keeps it still tying with chains.

Verse 8,20
In fact, if it was born, it is not existing forever; and it is not existing forever, if it is going to 
be born.

Verses 8,22-25
In these verses Parmenides affirms the continuity of Being inside itself: 
it is not internally divided by parts of itself apparently more concentrated 
(such as a wall or a mountain) or by parts of itself that seem to be less dense 
(such as air): Being is homogeneous, of the same density everywhere.

Verses 8,42-49
These verses are not a repetition of the previous concept of the verses 8,22-25.
Here Parmenides no longer speaks of the homogeneity and continuity of Being inside itself, but of the uniformity of its outer surface. Its outer surface is not more protruding at one point and less in another, because outside of Being there is no other thing that can “force” it, that is: a) press on its surface, producing projections or recesses on it depending on the lesser or greater pressure exerted on it, or b) despoil it of a part. Therefore, Being can freely press from the inside to the surface of the sphere and of its own border with equal pressure from all sides: therefore it resembles a sphere.

Verses 8, 53-59
In fact, since ancient times men individuated two opinions, two appearances, and mistakenly believed that they were two real entities, whereas it was only one – at that time historically their mistake and their wrong way of interpreting reality began –, regarded them as opposite things and gave them two distinct names, and called the one Light, which is benign and very slight, the other called Darkness, which is dark, dense and heavy.

Fragment 9
But since - according to human opinion - all the entities are made of light and darkness, and these, mixing in various proportions, constitute them, all things are made of light and darkness, because, if both were absent, there would be nothing.

Translation

10
εῖσθι δ᾿ αἰθερίαν τε φύσιν τά τ’ ἐν αἰθέρι πάντα
σῆμα καὶ καθαρὰς εὐαγέιας ἡλίου
λαμπάδος ἤργα αἰδηλα καὶ ὀππόθεν ἐξεγένοντα,
ἐργα τε κύκλωπος πεύκη περίφοτα σελήνης
καὶ φύσιν, εἰδήσεις δὲ καὶ ωρανὸν ἁμφίς ἐχοντα
ἐνθεὶ ἔφι τε καὶ ὑπὲρ νοοῦσα ἐπέδησεν Ἁλαγη
πείρατε ἔχειν ἀστρων.

Fragment 10
(verses 1-7)

You will know the nature of heaven and all the constellations in the sky and the unseen works of pure and shining torch of the sun, and from where they derived, and you will learn the wandering works of the round-shaped moon.
and its nature, also you will know from where was born
the sky that surrounds everything and how Necessity guiding it
forced it to support the extremities of the stars.

Fragment 11
(verses 1-4)

How the earth and the sun and the moon
and the ether common to all and the heavenly Milk Way
and the high Olympus and the hot strength of the stars were forced
to be born.

Fragment 12
(verses 1-6)

In fact the lowest [celestial spheres] were filled with pure fire,
the other above these [were filled] with darkness, but there infiltrates a portion of the
flame;
among these [spheres] is the goddess who governs everything:
she rules all things, the terrible childbirth and sexual union
pushing what is feminine to join what is male and again mutually
what is male to join what is feminine.

Fragment 13
[the Goddess] produced with the mind Love first of all the gods...

Fragment 14
[the moon] reflected light shining by night wandering around the earth

Fragment 15
[the moon] always looking towards the rays of the sun

Fragment 16
(verses 1-4)
In fact as each man governs a mixture of organs subject to errors, so a mind governs men; in fact the same thinking thing in men, both in all and in each, is the structural substance of the organs, whose main part is the thought.
Fragment 17
[in the uterus] on the right males, and females on the left...

Fragment 18
(verses 1-6)

When the female and the male mix together the seeds of Venus, the shaping force in the veins from different blood, if maintains a proportionate mix, forms well built bodies. If instead the forces, when the seeds are mixed, contrast between them and do not form a unit in the body formed of a mixture, terrible will torment the nascent sex because of the dual seed.

Fragment 19
(verses 1-3)

So according to the opinion these things were born and now are and then henceforth, after being grown, will die: men imposed a marked name on each of them.