

**STEPHEN COLLIS / Love and Strife (A translation of
Empedocles Fragment 17)**

A double tale I will tell:
Once they grew as One from
Many—another time again they grew
To be Many from this One—
Double is this their mortal birth
Double the destruction of mortal life—
For first the convergence of all
Begets and destroys one living round
And then the dispersal of all
Begets and destroys another turn round
And these never cease dialectically turning
All coming together because of Love
All driven apart again by Strife—
So as One arises from Many
And Many come together in One
Thus there is becoming and no
Abiding—but as there is also
No end to their turning—what
Does not change is endless changing.

But come—listen—learning increases wisdom
As already told here I tell
A double tale—at one time
They grew One alone from Many
Another time again they split into
Many from being One—Fire and
Water and Earth and expansive Air
And catastrophic Strife apart from them
Balanced in every way—and Love—
Too—equal in length and breadth:

Gaze upon her with your mind—
Do not sit with dazzled eyes
She is said to be inborn
In bodies of men—by her
Convivial thoughts flow and collective labours
Are accomplished—naming her Joy and
Aphrodite whom no mortal has seen
Whirling amongst them—listen close to
These words—they do not deceive.

All these [elements] are equal and
Of the same age but each
Has its own domain and ethos
Prevailing in turn as time rounds
And nothing else comes into being
Or ceases to be—for continual
Destruction would leave nothing left and
What could add to this totality?
And where would it come from?
Perishing into what would it pass
Since there is nothing outside these?
No—only these exist and passing
Through each other they become different
Things at different times—yet ever
And always they remain the same.

I began translating Empedocles when, after publishing too many books too quickly, I didn't know what to write, and didn't want to write anything really. Translation, especially the slowness of translating ancient Greek, seemed the ideal stop-gap—the ideal way of feeding my compulsion, while still in some sense avoiding writing. A means of resistance. A brake.

Empedocles had been an interest since I re-read the Presocratics while working on a book about change. That dialectic—it struck me as a dialectic—of Love and Strife, of attraction and

repulsion, union and division, stuck with me. Everything now especially seems such a tug of war—the things I want to join, defend, and hold together—those things I want to resist, cut loose, disperse forever. To at once love and struggle against a humanity bent on the beauty of creation and the ugliness of destruction. To find these human attributes incommensurable and yet indissoluble. Walter Benjamin: “There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.” How to resolve this? I fear we cannot.

I thought of Yeats’s gyres: surely Love and Strife were not successive moments (as Empedocles’ language at times appears to suggest)—surely they overlap, contend simultaneously, with Love ascending against the resistance of Strife, or Strife driving everything apart against the grip of Love. So one conical spiral, circling together from the circumference of the Many to the apex of the One rests within another cone where the unified One circles out in a widening gyre towards a scattering many. To be one torn towards its manyness. To be many pulled towards the density of one. A dialectic—the primary dialectic: one and many, identity and difference, the complex calculations of which determine our politics, our fate, our planetary staying power.

I did not want to write. But I could not escape. On a peninsula where rising waters will soon island me once again. And islands make for philosophical states of mind and being. Give me a volcano to jump into. Quick—before the tides rise too high. Throw some meaningless words against our self-assault. Some idle whittling at our Greek quick. See what rises to the surface, what sinks at last into the darkening depths.

I thought of Charles Olson too: “what does not change / is the will to change,” seems abidingly Empedoclean. But even more so his epigraph to *Maximus*: “*all my life I’ve heard / one makes many*”—which reverses the direction of the American motto “*e pluribus unum*”—out of many, one. An anarchist’s turn of the social screw? Or the fact that—simultaneously and forever—one driving towards many / many driving towards one, as Love and Strife struggle across the terrain of this human universe, throwing us together and driving us apart.

My translation of this, Empedocles’ most famous and sizeable fragment, takes numerous liberties—beginning with my imposition of the word “dialectic” (so—call it an interpretive translation). More generally, I have privileged poetic compression over exactness—in part to fit a six-word line, as a way of invoking a ghost of the original’s hexameters. Punctuation is an ambiguous concept in most ancient Greek texts: I have chosen to largely eliminate it, except for some Dickinsonian dashes. I probably owe the most to M.R. Wright’s translation and commentary, though Daniel W. Graham has been helpful too.