

Neologism or PIE morphology? A linguistic and philological commentary on Empedocles, fr. B 121.3 D-K

The Presocratic philosopher Empedocles composed a philosophical poem in dactylic hexameter, which was famous during Antiquity for its neologisms and sophisticated expression.¹

Fragment B 121 Diels-Kranz provides a catalogue of deities or powers that roam an ἀτερπέα χῶρον, which may be the Underworld or, more convincingly, the world we live in:

...ἀτερπέα χῶρον,
ἔνθα Φόνος τε Κότος τε καὶ ἄλλων ἔθνεα Κηρῶν
ἀύχημαί τε Νόσοι καὶ Σήψιμες ἔργα τε ῥευστά
Ἄτης ἂν λειμῶνα κατὰ σκότος ἠλάσκουσιν.

The ancient sources provide no continuous quotation of these four lines. Lines 1-2+4 (without 1.3) are quoted by Hierocles, and Proclus (*In Rep.*) cites lines 2+4; however, Proclus (*In Crat.*) also quotes lines 2-3 without referring to Empedocles,² while line 3 also appears in the syncretic poem *Oracula Chaldaica*, fr. 134.3 Des Places.³

Several scholars deemed l. 3 as an interpolation by Proclus of the text of the *OC* into Empedocles,⁴ considering the transmission and linguistic criteria. The expression ἔργα τε ῥευστά was considered ‘awkward’,⁵ since ῥευστός is not formed as a regular verbal adjective: its *sigma* is not etymological, verbal adjectives are usually derived from the zero grade of the root (ῥϖ-), and Aeschylus uses ῥϖτός (the regular form). Furthermore its association with ἔργα makes a strange phrasing.

I argue in favour of the genuineness of line 3 by reassessing the formation and meaning of ἔργα τε ῥευστά. Two hypotheses may account for the adjective:

1. The word is ancient and came from a denominative formation in *-to-* based on a neuter *s*-stem (Gk. ῥέος, ‘anything flowing, stream’), which led to **sreu-s-tó-*.
2. Empedocles coined ῥευστός by analogy with verbal adjectives of contract dissyllabic verbs in *-έω* (e.g. πνέω > πνευστός).

Whichever hypothesis we choose, Empedocles’s ῥευστός (‘flowing’ or ‘susceptible to flow’) does not have the same meaning as ῥυτός in Aeschylus.

Thanks to parallels from the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, I also argue that ἔργα could be used in early epic in a ‘weak’ sense, to provide a grammatical support to an adjective (e.g. λοιγία ἔργα, in *Il.* 1.518 and 573, as an equivalent of λοιγία), in addition to its better-known meanings.

¹ Traglia, *Studi sulla lingua di Empedocle*, Bari (1952); Gemelli Marciano, *Le metamorfosi della tradizione*, Bari (1990); Rossetti and Santaniello (ed.), *Studi sul pensiero e sulla lingua di Empedocle*, Bari (2004).

² Hierocles, *Comm. to the Carmen aureum*, 24.2.1-24.3.5; Proclus, *In Crat.*, 174.41-2; Proclus, *In Rep.*, 2.157.15-2.158.15.

³ This is not properly speaking an oracular text but a poem in dactylic hexameter that combines various Neoplatonic elements and was composed in the 2nd-3rd centuries CE. See Lecerf, Saudelli, Seng (ed.), *Oracles chaldaïques: fragments et philosophie*, Heidelberg (2014). The standard edition is Des Places, *Oracles chaldaïques*, Paris (1971).

⁴ Karsten (*Empedoclis Carminum reliquiae*, Amsterdam (1838), 166-167) and Zuntz (*Persephone*, Oxford (1971), 202) consider the line spurious. Wright (*Empedocles*, London (1995), 279) considers it doubtful. Inwood (*The poem of Empedocles*, Toronto (2001), 264-265) deems it genuinely Empedoclean but places it in a different fragment.

⁵ Karsten, *op. cit.* p. 166; Zuntz, *op. cit.* p. 202.