

# The Poem of Parmenides of Velia

(500-450 BCE)



Περσεφόνη

the mares that carry me as far as longing can reach  
rode on, once they had come and fetched me onto the legendary  
road of the divinity that carries the man who knows  
through the vast and dark unknown. and on i was carried  
as the mares, aware just where to go, kept carrying me  
straining at the chariot; and young women led the way.

and the axle in the hubs let out the sound of a pipe  
blazing from the pressure of the two well-rounded wheels  
at either side, as they rapidly led on: young women, girls,  
daughters of the Sun who had left the Mansions of Night  
for the light and pushed back the veils from their faces  
with their hands.

there are the gates on the pathways of Night and Day,  
held fast in place between the lintel above and a threshold of stone.  
they reach right up into the heavens, filled with gigantic doors.  
and the keys - that now open, now lock - are held fast by  
Justice: she who always demands exact returns. and with  
soft seductive words the girls cunningly persuaded her to  
push back immediately, just for them, the bar that bolts  
the gates. and as the doors flew open, making the bronze  
axles with their pegs and nails spin - now one, now the other -  
in their pipes, they created a gaping chasm. straight through and  
on the girls held fast their course for the chariot and horses,  
straight down the road.

and the goddess welcomed me kindly, and took  
my right hand in hers and spoke these words as she addressed me:

"welcome young man, partnered by immortal charioteers,  
reaching our home with the mares that carry you. for it was  
no hard fate that sent you travelling this road - so far away  
from the beaten track of humans - but Rightness and Justice.  
and what's needed is for you to learn all things: both the unshaken  
heart of persuasive Truth and the opinions of mortals  
in which there is nothing that can truthfully be trusted at all.  
but even so, this too you will learn - how beliefs based on appearance ought to be believable as they travel  
all through  
all there is."

"i will do the talking; and it's up to you  
to carry away my words once you have heard them.  
what i will tell you is which roads of inquiry,  
and which roads alone, exist for thinking.  
the one route, that *is and is not possible not to be*,  
is the way of Persuasion; for Persuasion is  
Truth's attendant. and as for the other,  
that *is not and is necessary not to be*:  
this, i can tell you, is a path from which no news  
returns. for there is no way you can recognise  
what is not - there is no travelling that path -  
or tell anything about it."

"see how it is that things far away are firmly  
present to your mind. for however much you want to,  
there is no way you will manage to cut being off  
from clinging fast to being."

"what exists for saying and for thinking must be.  
for it exists for it to be; but nothing does not exist.  
you ponder that!  
this is the first road of inquiry that i hold you back from.  
but then i hold you back as well from the one that

mortals fabricate, twin-heads, knowing nothing.  
for helplessness in their chests is what steers their  
wandering minds as they are carried along in a daze,  
deaf and blind at the same time: indistinguishable,  
undistinguishing crowds who recon that being and  
non-being are the same but not the same. and, for  
all of them, the route they follow is a path that keeps turning  
backwards on itself.”

“from this path of inquiry hold your mind away.  
and don’t let much-experienced habit force you to  
guide your sightless eye and echoing ear and  
tongue along this way, but judge in favour of the  
highly contentious demonstration of the truth  
contained in these words as spoken by me.”

“there is only one tale of a path  
left to tell: that *is*. and along this way there are many,  
many signs that as well as being birthless it’s also deathless  
and whole and of a single kind and unmoving - and neither  
is it incomplete.”

“it never was  
and never will be because it is now, all together,  
one, holding to itself. for what possible birth of it  
will you look for? in what way could it have grown?  
from what? to say or think “from what is not”  
is something i won’t allow you, because there  
is no saying or thinking that is *not*. and besides:  
if it started out from nothing, what could have  
made it come in being later rather than sooner?  
so it must either be, completely, or not be.  
neither will the strength of persuasive proof ever permit  
anything to come into being out of non-being  
alongside it. and this is why Justice has not allowed  
freedom for creation or destruction by relaxing her  
constraining grip. instead, she holds fast.  
and the decision in these matters comes down to  
this - *is* or *is not*. but it has already been decided:  
the judgment has already been passed as necessary  
that the second of these paths is to be dismissed  
as unthinkable and unnameable because it’s no true way  
while the other is to be allowed to be, and really  
be. and how could it be that being could be at some  
later time? how could it come into being?  
for if it came to be, it is not; and if at some point it  
intends to be, then again it is not. so it is that creation  
has been extinguished, and of destruction there is  
not a word to be heard.”

“and also: there is no dividing it

because it's all alike. there is nothing more here  
that could stop it from holding together with itself  
or less there. but all of it is full of being. so it is that  
everything is continuous with everything because  
being draws near to being.  
and what's more: motionless  
in the bonds of great fetters it has no beginning or end  
because creation and destruction have wandered far  
far away. and true and persuasive evidence is what has  
driven them out. it stays just the same in the same  
unaltered state, lies by itself on its own and so remains  
constantly where it is. for mighty Necessity holds it  
fast in the fetters of a bond that shuts it in from all  
around; and this is why it's not right for it to be  
incomplete. for there is nothing that it wants to lack - but  
non-being would lack everything."

"because there is an ultimate  
binding limit, this means it's perfectly complete -  
just like the bulk of a sphere neatly rounded off  
from each direction, equally matched from the middle  
on every side."

"and what exists for thinking is the same  
as the cause of thought. you won't find thinking  
without the being in which it has been uttered.  
for there is nothing else and will be nothing else  
apart from being. because Fate has bound it to be  
whole; unmoving. its name shall be everything -  
every single name that mortals have invented  
convinced they all are true: birth and death,  
existence, non-existence, change of place, alteration  
of bright colour."

"and from this point on  
learn the opinions of mortals by listening to the  
deceptive ordering of my words"

"Hôs Ou Mē Poté Tis Brotôn Gnômēi Paralassēi" -

"so that nobody among mortals will ever manage,  
in practical judgment, to ride on past you."