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**Peter Kingsley, *Reality*. Inverness, CA: The Golden Sufi Center, 2003. Pp. 591. ISBN 1-890-350-08-7. \$38.95 (hb). ISBN 1-890-350-09-5. \$19.95 (pb).**

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*Reality* is the culmination of Kingsley's previously published research on both Parmenides and Empedocles, and, to the surprise of no one who is familiar with his work, he holds nothing back. *Reality* is a brilliant and passionately written book that will strike many if not most readers as monstrous, and in the true sense: it is wondrous, portentous, even frightening. For if we read it with care *Reality* will undermine not only our accustomed understanding of Parmenides and Empedocles, it will undermine our habits of rational sensibility, our consensus reality, even our self-identity. As Kingsley puts it: "If you want to keep a grip on what you think you already know, you will have to dismiss what I say" (15), and he breaks scholarly convention by arguing that these ancient authors have something critically important to say to us. While his command of the primary and secondary literature is impressive and his philological insights are illuminating, Kingsley is not interested in giving us information: he wants to change us, to draw us into the initiatory spell cast by Parmenides and Empedocles.

Parmenides' poem is a "sacred text" (199), a book of incantations that initiated its readers into an experience of death and rebirth and provided magical techniques for "dying before you died" (31). Empedocles was a divine magician who aimed to effect the same awareness in his audience. To

say this much may be risky enough, but Kingsley says more. Bound by the spell of these ancient "magicians," Kingsley dares to cast their spell on us, and here is the problem: to maintain our objectivity, our rational, scholarly, stance, we must dismiss Kingsley as an eccentric, perhaps a bit mad. If we do not overcome this impulse, if, for example, we take the trouble to read his endnotes, we may run the risk of finding that his arguments are convincing, and then we will be in real trouble. For if Kingsley is right about Parmenides and Empedocles, we have profoundly misunderstood them. Even more disturbing is the spell into which they invite us and for which Kingsley has become spokesperson, urging us to see the utter emptiness of our lives. Like Parmenides, Kingsley calls us to follow our longing "down to the world of death while still alive" (30), to a transformation and vast awareness most of us have long since denied. To be frank, Kingsley asks too much of his readers. So did Parmenides. So did Empedocles. For the truth is, as Empedocles pointed out, most of us would prefer to remain secure in our "little part of life ... and claim in vain that we have found the whole" (Fragment 2.3-6; 326). Most of us, therefore, will keep *Reality* at a safe distance, perhaps discuss some of Kingsley's philological suggestions, but preserve our good sense by dismissing the tone of this remarkable book as romantic, self-indulgent, raving or employing some other verbal charm to protect us from the ancient magic that Kingsley so richly brings to life.

In his previous book, *In the Dark Places of Wisdom*, Kingsley marshaled recent archaeological discoveries with an acute philological analysis of the first part of Parmenides' poem to argue convincingly that scholars have entirely misunderstood the "founder of Western philosophy." Parmenides was a healer (*iatromantis*) and priest of Apollo who guided initiates into rites of incubation and the stillness of death where they, like he, might receive the words of Persephone, goddess of the underworld. In *Reality* Kingsley recapitulates these arguments and goes even further by examining the main surviving fragments of Parmenides and Empedocles in detail. He walks the reader line by line, sometimes word by word, through Parmenides' much discussed description of the three ways: the way that *is*, the way that *is not*, and the way of mortals that mixes the two ways (60-110). Kingsley's interpretation of these passages, perhaps the most influential lines in Western philosophy, is both well-reasoned and revolutionary. Through an analysis of Parmenides' use of the term *mêtis* and its cognates, Kingsley argues persuasively—against the opinion of scholars from Aristotle to the present—that Parmenides does not oppose reason (*logos*) to the shifting realm of the senses, as if rationality could ever, by itself, preserve us from

sensate confusion. This misreading of the poem, he argues (136-140; 568-569), is based on an error in the Greek text dating back to the time of Posidonius and reflects a tradition of misunderstanding that derives from Aristotle who maintained that Parmenides opposed the senses to reason. But the poem does not support the senses-*logos* dichotomy; it is a riddle, a poetic incantation whose purpose is to shift us out of what Parmenides describes as our habitual way of thinking, "carried along in a daze, deaf and blind at the same time" (Fragment 6.6-7; 83). The poem, Kingsley suggests, is ultimately not even about being informed as to the right path. It is subtler than that. He writes: "We can insist that the goddess has three routes, or two, or one or none. In fact it makes no difference what we say ... at the heart of Parmenides' message is the need to break away from everything we are familiar with, to discover another kind of experience altogether .... All of the goddess' paths are just a trick. The second is an illusion, the third a joke. And as soon as you put one foot on the first, it stops you in your tracks" (109-110).

The key that unlocks the power of Parmenides' poem is *mêtis*, a term meaning "cunning, skillfulness, practical intelligence ... trickery" (90), an "intense awareness" that makes humans "equal to the gods" (90). *Reality* is a study of Parmenides and Empedocles as founders of western philosophy, but for Kingsley it is specifically their *mêtis* that we need to learn, and he elucidates its varied meanings masterfully. *Mêtis* is both the deceptive power that creates the illusion of our world and—like the Buddhist *upâya*—the ability to navigate through it, the skillful means to awaken others, often through trickery, in the midst of illusion.[1] It is precisely this *mêtis*: an intense, embodied, *living* awareness, that both Parmenides and Empedocles possessed and which they transmitted "deceptively" in their writings to anyone who possesses the *mêtis* to see it. Kingsley traces the use of this term and highlights subtle allusions, particularly to Homeric passages, that illuminate previously unexplored parts of Parmenides' poem.

For example, when the goddess turns Parmenides' attention from reality to the unstable realm of human opinion, and states that her purpose is "so that nobody among mortals will ever manage, in practical judgement, to ride on past you (*parelassêi*)" (221), Kingsley focuses on the allusion to Homer's use of *parelaunein* in the chariot race of *Iliad* 23 which itself forms part of an extended encomium to *mêtis* (221-224; 578-579). *Nobody rides past* the charioteer who is skilled in *mêtis*, and thus, Kingsley suggests, the goddess is about to bestow on her charioteer Parmenides "a supreme exercise in *mêtis*

" (224). But there is more. The phrase "so that nobody" (*hôs ou mê pote tis*) also recalls the famous scene in the *Odyssey* when Odysseus, exercising faultless *mêtis* (228), tells Polyphemus his name is Outis, Nobody, so when the Cyclops cries out that Outis is trying to kill him, his brethren reply that "nobody (*mê tis*) is stealing from you or trying to kill you ..." (226). Kingsley highlights the *mêtis* in Parmenides' use of *ou mê tis* in Fragment 8.61, a piece of subtlety and humor that has gone entirely unnoticed by scholars (227). Here and elsewhere in *Reality* Kingsley's command of the philological sources is impressive, especially his ability to communicate their existential significance. Through his voice the ancient texts come alive.

The connection between *mê tis* and *mêtis* is far more than word play, it lies at the heart of Kingsley's reading of both Parmenides and Empedocles. The *mêtis* that allows Parmenides or anyone else to experience reality in the midst of illusion does not develop out of intellectual sophistication; it grows where it has a ground for germination: in our recognition of death, hopelessness and incapacity to see or know anything. Only a nobody (*mê tis*) can possess *mêtis*, only someone whose utter bondage and nothingness is consciously exposed can transform his bonds into vehicles of release (285-293). The exposure occurs through the *elenchos* of the goddess (149-156) and Kingsley compares Parmenides' *elenchos* with the famous *elenchos* of Socrates. It is a remarkably ignored fact that Socrates' practice of *elenchos* continued a tradition that had its philosophic roots in the *elenchos* of Parmenides, and for both these fathers of philosophy *elenchos* was far more than a rational exercise. It was practiced under divine command, it exposed a state of utter ignorance, and it evoked an unbearable longing for the divine. As Kingsley remarks: "For both of them, arriving at the knowledge of knowing nothing meant confronting utter helplessness" (154), and both understood philosophy as learning "to die before we die" (155). Yet, Kingsley points out, this tradition of philosophic initiation through *elenchos* was lost, and the existential helplessness of Socratic *aporia*, necessary for self-transformation, was turned into an intellectual puzzle. Philosophy became a conceptual enterprise.

It is this rationalized version of Parmenides and Socrates that we have grown comfortable with, making the founders of western philosophy like us: enlightened, rational, sober. Kingsley, however, provides evidence (570) that the initiatory tradition continued in Hermetic circles; it should be noted that it was also revived by the 4th century AD theurgist and philosopher Iamblichus, who criticized Greek philosophers using almost the same

terms—and tone—as Kingsley. The Greeks, he said sharply, had become mere logicians and followers of discursive innovations. Even worse, because of their intellectual hubris they had lost touch with their own mysteries and were corrupting the initiatory rites of others.[2] It is not surprising, perhaps, that until very recently Iamblichus has been dismissed by scholars as irrational and superstitious. Nor is it surprising that his reputation has risen as scholars have been trying to turn the theurgist and wonderworker into a rational philosopher.[3] It is not easy to follow a path that requires a recognition of our nothingness, our incapacity to save ourselves, but this is what Iamblichus, Socrates, and Parmenides taught.[4] The wisdom of Parmenides and Socrates grew out of utter stillness and emptiness, and what makes them so difficult to understand, especially for scholars, is that we pride ourselves on knowing something, not nothing, on being somebody, not nobody, yet Kingsley argues, there is "only one way to wisdom: by facing the fact that we know nothing and letting our reasoning be torn apart" (156).

For Empedocles the power that tears our reasoning apart, that separates, divides, and destroys all harmony, is death-bringing Strife. In direct opposition to a unanimous tradition of interpretation, Kingsley says it is Empedoclean Strife that frees the soul while unifying Love captures us in the snares of illusion (368-370; 407-408). According to Empedocles, each cosmos begins under the power of Love, pulling all things into unity, and ends with Strife separating them again at the end of the cosmic cycle. Empedocles says that under Love's power "what before had learned to be immortal all of a sudden became mortal" (352), yet despite what Empedocles says about Love causing immortals to fall into mortality, all scholars without exception have mistakenly praised Love and condemned Strife (350-351; 415-417). For Kingsley, Empedocles continues the tradition of trickery and subtlety exemplified by Parmenides. This is why he begins his own poem by giving a central role to *mêtis*, which was also "the key to the poem of Parmenides" (335). For Empedocles, who was in full possession of his own divine nature, we human beings possess a poor excuse for *mêtis*: our lives are a mess and will remain a chaos of bumping confusion until we "come aside" (326) and receive the guidance of a divinity (335-337), until we possess *mêtis* equal to that of the Love goddess who traps us in her world of deception.

The scholarly tendency to separate Empedocles' scientific from his magical writings is an error, Kingsley argues, that reflects our privileging of anything that appears rational (322-325). But it is Empedocles as magician who

knows how souls come to be bound under the spell of Love and how to free them. As Kingsley points out, the cosmological writings of Empedocles cannot be separated from his magical interests: "[t]he cosmology was being offered not for its own sake but ... to indicate where we belong, where we don't, what things bind us and how .... Everything—the composition of flesh and bone, the harmonies and imbalance of the body, the nature of the sun and moon and stars—was being explained to help us learn what we really are and be free" (323). Reasoned argument cannot break the spell of Love, nor can our own reasoning fathom the *mêtis* of Empedocles (319). Indeed, our reliance on rationality is part of the problem; addressing us as part of Empedocles' audience, Kingsley says: "our proud belief in the ability to argue our way to the truth is an essential part of the deception" (482). Again, what is required to receive the teachings of both Parmenides and Empedocles is a precondition outlined in the introductory passages of their poems: to take the first step in wisdom we need to die before we die.

A striking example of the positive role of Strife for Empedocles is his brief autobiographical statement in the famous Fragment 115. After describing how immortal souls are forced into mortal bodies and later are tossed by Strife from element to element, he says: "This is the way that I too am now going, an exile from the gods and a wanderer, placing my trust in mad Strife" (431). Kingsley maintains that despite the fact that Empedocles says he places his trust in Strife, with the implication that Strife will help him, this line has been misunderstood because it has seemed impossible that any sane person would put his trust in Strife. Here again, Kingsley's philological expertise opens a deeper meaning of the text, for his examination of the term *pisunos*, "placing one's trust in," in the literature of the time shows that this is precisely what Empedocles intended to say (430-433; 588-589). Even a great mystic like Plotinus misread this passage to mean that Empedocles was exiled from heaven *because* he relied on raging Strife (438), but in the late 10th century, Kingsley notes, Arab writers *mistranslated* Plotinus' misunderstanding of this passage to recover its original, and correct, meaning. According to these writers, Empedocles came down to this world and, like a madman, called upon people to recover their divine nature (442-443).

Perhaps it requires a kind of madness to bring Empedocles back to life, to rekindle this magical tradition for our time (438, 549). But readers should be warned: neither Empedocles nor Kingsley is trying to inform or educate us. They are trying to drag us into the abyss, initiate us, pull us into our

repressed longing for truth even if it tears our life apart. Which brings us back to Strife. If Love binds and Strife frees, is Empedocles urging us to flee from the bonds of Love? No, for there is no place to run: Love and Strife are two sides of one reality. The key, Kingsley explains, is *mêtis*: "The real axis around which Empedocles' teaching revolves is not the polarity of Love and Strife. They are just two flags flapping in the wind. It's *mêtis*—the single principle running through the universe that we either learn to use [as magicians] or reconcile ourselves to becoming victims of" (455). Paradoxically, it is only by fully recognizing our helplessness in the face of Love's deceptive *mêtis* that we can begin to exercise divine *mêtis* ourselves (472, 495).

Embracing Love's bonds as a way of release was part of Empedocles' repertoire as a magician. He knew the art of working with the dual powers of binding/releasing, attracting/repelling that sustain the magician's cosmos (446-448). Iamblichus revived this art among the later Neoplatonists and integrated it with Pythagorean and Platonic teachings. The Syrian theurgist taught that although matter effects the soul's confusion it is divine, and when material objects are properly engaged they become tokens ( *synthêmata* ) given by the gods to awaken our divinity.[5] This theurgical practice follows the Empedoclean principle, stated in Fragment 3.9-13, that physical sensations are "assurances" given by the Muse to awaken our forgotten divinity (507-509; 590). For both Empedocles and Iamblichus this awakening was not an escape from the world but its transformation. Far more than a conceptual understanding, it was a lived experience that allowed Empedocles to know his own divinity and Iamblichus, as theurgist, to perform divine action. Both translated the material bonds of sense experience into vehicles of liberation. According to Kingsley, it was *mêtis* that allowed Empedocles (and, I would argue, the theurgists) to know how to engage the senses in a divine way. Thus, they resolved the dualism of matter *vs.* spirit and body *vs.* soul so dominant in western philosophy not by rational explanation but through their expertise and experience as magicians. For Empedocles and Parmenides, Kingsley says, "illusion is engrained in reality," reality is engrained in illusion (494). There is no escaping Love's illusory world, but by descending into Persephone's abyss one may be initiated into the cunning power of *mêtis*, a power that must be lived to be known. *Mêtis* is the power that makes one a magician, as able to weave the webs of illusion as to dissolve them.

*Reality* is a work of rare genius: it is both a brilliant scholarly argument and

a fascinating read—a story that takes us far outside the boundaries of scholarly conventions. Although there is no index, no enumeration of fragments for easy reference to the original Greek texts, and the endnotes—which attest to the thoroughness and depth of Kingsley's research—are not referenced to page numbers, these annoyances are beside the point. Kingsley has written much more than a well-researched book on Parmenides and Empedocles. He has brought to life a tradition that lies at the roots of Western culture, a culture that has become a monument to the glory of abstract and discursive reason. Kingsley has dared to reveal its foundation stone, the *living logos* hidden beneath the immense conceptual edifice within which we wander, deaf, dumb, and blind. He has given voice to a magic that we will need to learn or find a way to silence. Perhaps it is time for us in the West to learn to speak again. Kingsley has already started.

### Notes:

1. *Upâya* is a Sanskrit term meaning "skill in means or method," from trickery to straightforward talk. *Upâya* is also described as "the activity of the absolute in the phenomenal world." See *The Encyclopedia of Eastern Philosophy and Religion* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 1994) 393-394.
2. For Iamblichus' tirade against Greek philosophers see Iamblichus: *De Mysteriis*, translated with introduction and notes by Emma Clarke, John M. Dillon, and Jackson P. Hershbell (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003) 259.5-14; henceforth to be cited as *DM*. In *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery, and Magic* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995) Kingsley already suggested that there is a "symmetry between Neoplatonic and pre-Platonic traditions" (131;103). Iamblichus, as spokesman for the tradition of Hermes, Pythagoras, and the ancient Greeks (*DM* 1.4-3.4) is perhaps the best example of this symmetry.
3. This point has been well argued by Emma Clarke, Iamblichus' *De Mysteriis: A manifesto of the miraculous*, (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2001) 1-2.
4. For the comparison between Iamblichean and Socratic "nothingness" see G. Shaw, "After Aporia: Theurgy in Later Platonism," *Gnosticism and Later Platonism: Themes, Figures, and Texts*, edited by John D. Turner and Ruth



Majercik (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001) 57-82.

5. For a description of the *synthêmata* in Iamblichean theurgy see G. Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus* (University Park: Penn State Press, 1995).

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