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# Rosetta

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## Playtime with the Pre-Socratics

*Peter Mullen*

I: Thales (626-548 BC)

The pyramids' height, how far are the ships from the shore?  
My Intercept Theorem told me of all these and much more:  
The sun's eclipse, or how to locate the Great Bear  
I diverted the Halys so ships now make sail along there  
I won for my wisdom the Tripod and Great Golden Bowl  
Proved Logos not Mythos is best for the health of the soul  
Gnosthai Seauton: its original coinage was mine  
Asimov said my philosophy was the first sign  
Of science, Psyche's most beautiful daughter  
Begotten when Thales announced 'All is water!'  
By which I meant substance - wherever you find it - is one  
That's my metaphysics all thought and all said and all done  
It makes all our measurements honest, precise and reliable  
Take it from me and then you'll find you're never liable  
    To miscount as I did and fell  
    Down the sluice into Didyma's well.'

II: Anaximander

Where all things have their origins  
There destruction too begins  
According to the bounds of sense  
Each must receive its recompense  
It was necessity gave birth to time  
To remember this I set it down in rhyme  
For poetry is the uterus of thought  
So if it was reality you sought  
Understand this world is plural  
Visit with me Apeiron's mural

That's Delphi's belly-button where creation  
Itself is just one emanation  
Of Chaos into Physis, the universe  
Which is no wild cat and not worse  
Than lawless but a division of power  
Which is, they say, the root and flower  
    Of that democracy so-called by Greece  
    Just let me rest with Thales: give me peace!

### III: Anaxagoras

Not good not bad but 'appen it's as well  
Dante placed me in the very first Circle of Hell  
Things could have been worse – being made to subsist  
Much lower down 'cos I'm an atheist  
There are no gods: Father Sun our Lady Moon  
Are just one cold rock, the other hot at noon  
But Athenians are a superstitious lot  
So a spell in jail is what I got  
Pericles himself got me clear away  
To Lampsacus where friends began to say  
'Our Anaxagoras is one of the best  
Who scaled heaven itself in bis tireless quest  
For the truth. And how he loved to play  
With the kids on every school holiday!  
Atheist? Abjure such a term of abuse  
Anaxagoras believed in cosmic *nous*  
And truth the old boy clearly defined:  
Matter doesn't matter: it's a matter for the mind.'

### IV: Parmenides (515-447 BC)

Aletheia and Doxa is the title of my book  
So if you're into philosophy do take a look  
But if you prefer here's something queer  
Pravda and Izvestia

A similar opposition: 'news' and 'truth'  
My Eleatic School think it uncouth  
Because - you see - historical change  
Is a foolish notion, weird and strange  
Marx a philosopher? But he'd never seen  
Socrates in Athens – a lad nearly nineteen!  
At the 69th Olympiad he asked my game  
I told him: 'To be and to have meaning are the same'  
He said, 'On imagination that shuts the door.'  
It doesn't! That's your disease - now here's the cure:  
I am a doctor and I know my physic:  
For the mind's distemper, take thou logic.

V: Heraclitus (540-480 BC)

There is a hell but hell is here on earth  
I am the Weeper, melancholic, without mirth  
*Panta rhei* alas all's flung in flux  
Life is strife – I cannot give two damns  
Excepting Hermadorus men are bad  
I am misanthrope though gleeful, glad  
With raving lips, unbedizened, unperfumed  
Mirthless, weary and let it be assumed  
Nothing will improve throughout this life  
Whose element is fire, whose purpose strife  
We find strange justice in this heedless rush  
Where hot turns cold and solids turn to mush  
Stare into the vault, fly to the Pleiades  
All noses will still smell down in Hades  
Consider *panta rhei* – that phrase is mine  
Then look forward to a word from Wittgenstein  
'Can it be Heraclitus was a dunce?  
We can enter *the same* river but once!'

VI: Pythagoras (579-495 BC)

I'm sorry my clever calculations  
Turn out to be approximations  
Full circles, ellipses and straight lines  
Are artificial geometric signs  
But they're the best my maths can do  
For the world out there is a little askew  
An opera house of bricks is logistical  
But numbers and music, these are mystical  
Sublunary existence *Sturm und Drang*  
Is salved by heavenly *Spharenklänge*  
The spirit's bondage in deepest night  
Bound now with chords, orchestral moonlight  
The soul is composed in society  
Mind, Passion, Reason in symphony  
Harmonised helpmeets indivisible three  
Chiming pre-echoes of the Trinity  
    Trash all this by every means  
    Just remember: never gorge on beans!

#### VII: Empedocles (494-434 BC)

Heraclitus says throughout this tedious life  
The only motive force is painful strife  
A man with such a view might take a knife  
Except perchance he has a little wife  
In fact there is much else, life is a mix  
(My grandad won on a horse at the Olympics)  
So Heraclitus says there's only fire?  
He has an axe to grind – the man's a liar  
For I have found Earth, Water, Fire and Air  
Add love to strife – you'll find they are a pair  
Such is the wonder every man might sing  
Beholding the fourfold root of everything  
Shining Zeus and Hera banishing our fears  
Nestis moistens our mortal springs with tears

Philotes and Neikos, all the gods etc  
I'm up to here with the lot of 'em – I'll chuck myself in Etna!

VIII: Protagoras (490-420 BC)

Philosophy is academic and abstruse  
But I make sure I put it to good use  
Intelligence and wit provide me with my stash  
For I know that where there's brains there's cash  
Plato called me a Sophist and, to be brief,  
That's what I am, the next thing to a thief  
For 'brief' it is, in truth my trade is law  
Rich in fees by fluency, jaw, jaw  
I can think on my feet and I know how to speak  
Here's one I did with Pericles – only last week:  
'A runner in the games was killed by a spear  
Who was to blame then? Let me make it clear  
It wasn't the spear and it wasn't its thrower  
I blame t' Polis Council, for they have the power  
To secure 'elf-'n'-safety and in this they failed  
M' Lud, hang the lot of 'em - or let 'em be jailed!  
I'm the canniest lawyer and the last to let on  
The style of my motto: Anthropotos Metron.'

IX: Democritus (460-370 BC)

Just read me, you'll get my gist  
I am the first Greek Atomist  
Which won me only dirty looks -  
Plato incinerated all my books  
Damn Parmenides and his sidekick Zeno!  
Or Protagoros – what does he know?  
Just motionless Monism in a mist  
But I proved that nothing *can* exist  
Nothing *is* and it can be seen  
Nothing is the gap that's in-between

The atoms containing all the stuff  
Of Reality. That should be enough  
To settle the Monists, call their bluff  
But if they want to cut up rough  
Ask Heisenberg, Einstein and Neils Bohr  
All three of them – they know the score:  
Matter is a matter of mathematical signs  
(That Socrates nicked my best lines)  
Now he lies dead, his ignorance vincible  
I live on in the Indeterminacy Principle

X: Gorgias (483-375 BC)

Philosophy it wore me out, a yoke  
I threw off – just like that – with a joke:  
Nothing exists and there is no such thing  
I told Alcidas who told a foreign King  
In Thebes. And if anything *did* exist  
We couldn't know it: so it would be missed  
Beyond our ken, transcendent, out of reach  
Unutterable in any human speech  
You say that's silly? I say it's for the best  
To answer all conundrums with a jest  
I am a performance poet, my patter is bold  
That's why my Delphi statue is pure gold  
Plato named me his 'polytropic quarry'  
(I hid for a week in the back of a lorry)  
He pursues me in his epistemological raids  
But I have Penelope while he makes do with the maids!  
Let them all behold my statue, measure its weight  
And stuff the scoffers: I lived to be a hundred-and-eight!

Envoi: Retep J. Nellum (AD 1942-)

What were they on about these old Greek men  
Their language fanciful their thoughts insane?

'Everything is water'; 'Nothing moves' and then  
'All is in flux' – such ideas defy the brain  
For how do we conjecture things absurd?  
Their nonsense rather is what leaps to mind  
Analyse them? I wouldn't trust a word  
Impenetrability is all I find.  
But I am starting from another place  
My thoughts arise within a different time  
The answers given to questions posed in Thrace  
Will never fit into my Eastbourne rhyme  
Philosophy denotes the love of reason  
And reason is the leaven in the dough  
Questions, answers, each must have its season  
But there are things we know we *cannot* know.