

## The Elemental Sallis: On Wonder and Philosophy's "Beginning"

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One will never be able to interrogate wonder philosophically except by way of a questioning that the operation of wonder will already have determined.

—JOHN SALLIS, *Double Truth*

It is a well-known teaching in the writings of both Plato and Aristotle that wonder (*thauma*) is the beginning of philosophy. But few philosophers have given wonder much thought—certainly, no philosopher that I am aware of has, like Professor Sallis, returned time and again to think through wonder. Sallis's thinking through wonder is guided by his reading of ancient Greek philosophy, and furthermore, as I hope to show, it opens up a reengagement with Greek philosophers—in particular, with those early Greek thinkers who are known collectively as the "Pre-Socratics." In what follows I hope to make clear, first, what Sallis understands by wonder as the *archē* of philosophy and, second, how his own "rememorative" thinking of this *archē*—especially by way of what he calls "the elemental"—remains attentive to the wondrous in such a way as to return us to the insights of Pre-Socratic thought. But to understand wonder in the way that Sallis does requires that we have a sense of what it does *not* mean for wonder to be the beginning of philosophy.

As Sallis reminds us in his book *Double Truth*, Aristotle understands wonder as the beginning of philosophy in *Metaphysics*, book I (982b12ff.), but in such a way that it is *only* a beginning, since it amounts to the initial awareness of one's ignorance that will be overcome by the knowledge that philosophy then makes possible. Sallis captures this Aristotelian take on wonder as follows: "Thus, in the end knowledge is opposed, as the better, to wonder. Though it is through wonder that one comes to pursue knowledge, that pursuit has the effect finally of dissolving wonder. In the end there would be no place for wonder in knowledge, no place for a knowledge to which wonder would be essential and not merely an incitement. In the end there would be only knowledge, beyond the wonder of perplexity, beyond the wonders that comprise *mythos*. Philosophy would achieve its end by putting an end to wonder."<sup>1</sup> But it is not just that Aristotle understands the end of philosophy as a kind of knowledge that has put an end to wonder—he interprets his philosophical predecessors as carrying out philosophy in just this manner, offering us accounts that, if sound, would put an end to the wonder that was their beginning. Of particular importance to Sallis on this point is the fact that Aristotle systematically interprets the earliest Greek philosophers as offering accounts of material causes (*hylē*)—an interpretation that has the effect of putting an end to the encounter with the wondrous that we find when we go back to the Pre-Socratic fragments.<sup>2</sup>

To recover this encounter with the wondrous, Sallis calls into question Aristotle's predetermination, in *Metaphysics* I, that the so-called elements in Pre-Socratic thought (earth, air, fire, water) are to be understood as the "from-which" of composition. On this point Sallis writes: "What is, rather, required of philosophy at the limit is that it turn back to the elements as constituting the from which, not of composition, but of manifestation, that it return to the elements as they bound and articulate the expanse of the self-showing of things themselves" (154–55). To understand the elements as the from-which of composition is to understand them, ultimately, as things.<sup>3</sup> Yet the "elemental," as Sallis calls it—that is, the elements understood as the from-which of manifestation—are not "things." Elementals are distinguished from things not only by an indefiniteness of sorts (lacking or exceeding the proportionality with respect to things and to those to whom things show themselves) but also by what Sallis calls "monstrosity"—that is, "their exceeding the things of nature while also themselves belonging to nature" (158). But herein lies the power of the elemental to evoke wonder

in us, as Sallis describes: “When an elemental obtrudes, it shows itself as prodigious, as hypernature within nature, as of extraordinary extent and/or power, as monstrous, as evoking wonder. If, as Aristotle attests, ‘it is through wonder that men now begin and first began to philosophize,’ then it is less than surprising that the elements figured so prominently in the thought of the early Greeks and that, even now, a certain beginning of philosophy, the palintropic turn of philosophy at the limit, is directly linked to the elemental” (161–62). If philosophy at the limit is shown to return to the elemental in this way, it should also be clear that Sallis’s phenomenological account also allows for a reinterpretation of Pre-Socratic thinking in its encounter with the wondrous.

Sallis has carried this out with greatest detail in his interpretation of Anaximenes, the sixth-century B.C. Milesian thinker, in the essay “Doubles of Anaximenes.”<sup>4</sup> In his essay, Sallis takes up the tradition according to which Anaximenes is said to have identified air (*aēr*) as the *archē*, while at the same time questioning its Aristotelian interpretation: “Presumably Anaximenes was setting forth air as the source or origin from which all things somehow come forth into their presence, their manifestness. But how, precisely, is one to understand *archē* without merely assuming for it the sense that was later to be explicitly determined for it by Aristotle?”<sup>5</sup> Understanding the *archē* that is *aēr* as a from-which of manifestation, not composition, Sallis writes: “Is not the very openness, invisibility, and transparency of what is called *aēr* precisely what makes it possible for things to come forth in their manifestness? Is it not *aēr* that grants the open place for manifestation? Is it not precisely *as* such an open place that *aēr* is *with* all things?”<sup>6</sup> To support this interpretation Sallis cites Fragment B2—the fragment in which Anaximenes writes of our soul, being *aēr*, holding us together—and offers the following gloss on the fragment: “For then Anaximenes would be saying: as *aēr* empowers the coming of things into their manifestness, so does it, as soul, gather each of us and draw us to that manifestation in such a way that we are gifted with the power of apprehending what comes to presence.”<sup>7</sup> It should be clear that, on this reading of the Pre-Socratic thinking of *archē*, the point of such an account of the *archē* is not—*pace* Aristotle—to put an end to the wonder with which we begin to philosophize but, rather, to encounter the wondrous in thinking in such a way as to address it fittingly. In Sallis’s thought we find at once—and working in tandem—the phenomenological project to encounter the wondrous and the hermeneutic project of returning to the earliest

thinkers in how they addressed the wondrous without necessarily putting an end to wonder. Both projects operate deconstructively, as they must work through the conceptualities that block our access to the elemental.

One of the most illuminating analyses—at once phenomenological and hermeneutic—that we find in Sallis’s writings is his account of the elemental character of time, as developed in *Force of Imagination* and also in *Platonic Legacies*.<sup>8</sup> In carrying out this analysis, Sallis guides us through detailed readings of Plato’s *Timaeus*, Augustine’s *Confessions*, and Heidegger’s *Being and Time*—among other classic texts in the history of philosophy. Heidegger’s analysis is of greatest importance to Sallis, since the elemental character of time is indicated at key points in *Being and Time*, as when Heidegger writes: “In its thrownness Dasein is delivered over to the change of day and night. Day with its brightness gives the possibility of sight; night takes this away.”<sup>9</sup> More startling, though, is the way in which Heidegger articulates what Sallis calls “uranic time” a short time later in *Being and Time*: “‘Time’ first shows itself in the sky, that is, precisely there where one comes across it in directing oneself naturally according to it, so that time even becomes identified with the sky.”<sup>10</sup> But Sallis’s sketch of uranic time in *Force of Imagination* goes a great deal further than Heidegger’s, as it lays out many facets of time’s elemental character. Consider the following:

Homer’s “circling years” belong to elemental time, for it is in the sky, in the declinatory cycle of the sun’s course, that the circle is drawn most distinctly, traced out in an openness where any who persist will be able to follow its trace. Yet it is also traced on the earth, in the comings and goings of the seasons, in the ways in which the comings and goings of the seasons are signaled by natural, more or less elemental occurrences: in the fresh rains and the buds and blossoms of spring, in the brilliant foliage and the shortening days of fall, in the stark outlines and the desolation of winter, in the gentle warmth and the exuberant bounty of summer. . . . Days too are traced elementally—most distinctly, in the quotidian progression of the sun but also in the way that sunlight runs together with other, more terrestrial elements, their concurrences and coincidences determining the varying quality of the light in the course of the day. . . . To say nothing of the shortening and lengthening of shadows in the course of the day: merely casting a shadow suffices to make the stone and indeed virtually anything a kind of natural clock. (192–93)

To get at the wondrous character of uranic time, we might begin by recalling the wonder that Augustine expresses in his *Confessions* about what time is: “What, then, is time? I know well enough what it is, provided that nobody asks me; but if I am asked what it is and try to explain, I am baffled” (XI.14). As Sallis shows in *Platonic Legacies*, Augustine moves from this initial bafflement to offering an account of the soul as “the place where each of the parts of time would be sheltered from not being and so would be present.”<sup>11</sup> The significant implication of Augustine’s account is that he comes to understand time as nothing other than a “distention,” *distentio*, of the soul—in which case, as Sallis rightly remarks, “time will be deprived of its direct engagement with things. . . . [T]ime will no longer be taken to impart itself to their comings and goings.”<sup>12</sup> The direction of Sallis’s critique, in going back to uranic time, is made very clear when he writes: “As if time’s being amidst things were not attested by the things themselves, by their giving a measure by which time is determined. As the sun provides the measure for the time of day.”<sup>13</sup> Time can be neither identified with the soul’s distention nor assimilated to Dasein’s temporality—as Sallis writes: “Could the sheer radiance of the sky, its pure shining, the radiant shining that is the sky, ever be mistaken for something at hand in the narrow human world? Then, neither could the time it gives be assimilated to Dasein’s temporality. And then, one would need to say that the time given by the sky, this uranic time, is, in a way both remote and wondrous, an other time.”<sup>14</sup>

Two points are essential in marking out what is distinctive about the elementals: one is their *anteriority*—a point that Sallis is highlighting here in showing that the sky constitutes time before Dasein gives itself time. But also, there is a depth to the elementals, a depth that makes them both “remote and wondrous,” as Sallis says—and it is precisely this remoteness of the elementals that makes myth a fitting discourse in which to address the elemental. On this latter point Sallis writes: “The monstrous depth that this retreat opens within elemental nature is what makes the elemental a primary site or ambience of the mythical. Beyond the surface of the otherwise ordinary elemental phenomena, as the very depth of the elemental, there is harbored what is least ordinary, the monstrosity as which the mythical gods can—and to the Greeks did—appear. From this depth they shine forth with (or in or as—none of these prepositions quite suffices) the elemental: Zeus with the thunderbolt, Poseidon with the sea” (159).

To my mind, this interweaving of myth and the encounter with the elemental is one of the most fascinating points in Sallis's discussion, and it continues the philosophical attention to myth that is a running motif in his writings—certainly from *Being and Logos* onward. Furthermore, it is worth remarking, I believe, that within ancient myth itself the identification or association of the elementals with traditional mythic figures (for example, in the quotation above, the association of Zeus with the thunderbolt and of Poseidon with the sea) is itself put into question. Among other ancient sources I have in mind the fascinating passages in *Prometheus Bound*—traditionally ascribed to Aeschylus as author<sup>15</sup>—where Prometheus calls out to the elementals to witness the injustice that he is suffering at the hands of Zeus. Prometheus says:

Bright light, swift-winged winds, springs of the rivers, numberless  
laughter of the sea's waves, earth, mother of all, and the all-seeing  
circle of the sun: I call on you to see what I, a God, suffer  
at the hands of Gods—  
see with what kinds of torture  
worn down I shall wrestle ten thousand  
years of time—  
such is the spiteful bond that the Prince  
has devised against me, the new Prince  
of the Blessed Ones. Oh woe is me! (ll. 89–98)

Not only here, early in the play, but also in the very last passage, the elementals are summoned once again:

Now it is words no longer: now in very truth  
the earth is staggered: in its depths the thunder  
bellows resoundingly, the fiery tendrils  
of the lightning flash up, and whirling clouds  
carry the dust along: all the winds' blasts  
dance in a fury one against the other  
in violent confusion: earth and sea  
are one, confused together: such is the storm  
that comes against me manifestly from Zeus  
to work its terrors. O Holy mother mine,  
O Sky that circling brings the light to all,  
you see me, how I suffer, how unjustly. (ll. 1080–92)

In these passages Prometheus calls on chthonic powers—other than the gods who oppose him and see to his punishment—to witness his suffering. These chthonic powers of the elementals are not asked to side with him against the Olympians; rather, they are summoned as something anterior to the Olympians, which they are, so as to witness injustice even as they are remote from the conflict. The elementals invoked here are remote from their association with specific mythic figures, and yet they are addressed as something ultimate—an archē of sorts anterior to any possible justice or injustice. In this ancient text myth offers us a discourse wherein to address the wondrous character of the elementals, and the wonder is not put to an end. As Aristotle aptly said it, *Myth is composed of wonders*.

#### NOTES

1. John Sallis, *Double Truth* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 195.
2. John Sallis, *Force of Imagination* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 174; hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by page number. In an essay on Charles Scott's *The Lives of Things* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), John Sallis writes: "What is wrong with 'nature' is that it denotes, not nature, not the natural lives of things but the nature beyond nature, which overrules things and reduces their unappropriable quality. One could add that a primary instrument for carrying out this reduction is the word *hylē*, which has the effect of keeping nature at the limit of being. This is the word that, with Aristotle, came to replace *chōra*, before then being translated into 'materia' and 'matter.' Thus one could also say that matter is what's the matter with nature" (*Platonic Legacies* [Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004], 142). See also the continuation of the debate between Sallis and Scott in Sallis' "Once Again: What's the Matter with 'Nature'?" *Epoche* 17, no. 1 (2012): 155–66.
3. Sallis illustrates the way in which an elemental can be turned into a thing in his account of rain and meteorology: "Not that certain meteorological measures could not be applied [to the elemental force of rain/wind]: yet as soon as the rain and the wind are submitted to such measure, their character as elemental will have been reduced and the difference, sustained at every site of manifestation, between elementals and things will have been leveled out" (*Force of Imagination*, 158).
4. John Sallis, "Doubles of Anaximenes," in *The Presocratics After Heidegger*, ed. David C. Jacobs (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 145–52. The methodological problem that Sallis lays out in this essay with regard to interpreting Anaximenes holds true for Pre-Socratic philosophy as a whole:

For interpreting his basic thought, one has no choice but to rely on a few passages from much later authors that summarize his thought, these summaries in turn relying in most cases on still earlier reports, especially those by Aristotle's pupil, Theophrastus. Consequently, Anaximenes' thought as transmitted through these reports and summaries is cast for the most part in an Aristotelian language and conceptuality that almost certainly could not have been proper to it originally. Thus, any effort to gain access to his thought must systematically deconstruct these sources in such a way as to inhibit the otherwise natural tendency to read back into the earlier thought later conceptualities that first became possible on the basis of the earlier thought and of what came directly in its train. (146–47)

5. Ibid., 147.
6. Ibid., 151.
7. Ibid.
8. It should be said that both books reference the account of uranic time in Plato's *Timaeus*, which John Sallis draws out interpretively in *Chorology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999). Fittingly, Sallis's account of the elemental in *Force of Imagination* (chap. 6) transitions immediately into his account of the elemental character of time (chap. 7). Sallis marks this transition in the book when he writes: "This elemental spacing bears on the constitution of time. For it is primarily the sky that gives to those whose vision is drawn upward from the earth the measure of time, if not indeed time itself" (ibid., 183).
9. Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 11th ed. (Tuebingen: Max Niemeyer, 1967), 412.
10. Ibid., 419.
11. Sallis, *Platonic Legacies*, 112.
12. Ibid., 114.
13. Ibid., 115.
14. Ibid., 125.
15. For my purposes here, it will not matter whether Aeschylus or some other tragedian is credited with authoring *Prometheus Bound*. Quotations from *Prometheus Bound* are taken from David Grene's English translation, in *Greek Tragedies*, vol. 1, ed. David Grene and Richmond Lattimore, 2nd ed. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press), 1991.