THE ART AND THOUGHT OF HERACLITUS
The art and thought of Heraclitus

An edition of the fragments with translation and commentary

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for Charalampos S. Floratos
a true friend and scholar, master of the
classical tradition and hierophant of
the beauty of Cephalonia
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Preface

Heraclitus was a great prose artist, one of the most powerful stylists not only of Greek antiquity but of world literature. He was also a major thinker, perhaps the only pre-Socratic philosopher whose thought is of more than historical interest today. His reflections upon the order of nature and man’s place within it, upon the problems of language, meaning and communication still seem profound; and many of his insights will remain illuminating for the modern reader, not merely for the specialist in ancient thought.

The aim of the present work is to demonstrate the truth of these claims by making Heraclitus accessible to contemporary readers as a philosopher of the first rank. With this in mind I have tried to re-arrange the fragments in a meaningful order, to give a translation that reflects as far as possible the linguistic richness of the original, and to provide a commentary designed to make explicit the wealth of meaning that cannot be directly conveyed in a translation but is latent in Heraclitus’ own words, in his tantalizing and suggestive form of enigmatic utterance.

The Greek text is given here together with the translation, since any interpretation is obliged to make continual reference to the original wording. And I think it should be possible to read the fragments in a meaningful order, even if one reads them in Greek. No attempt has been made to produce a new critical edition, and I have generally followed the text of Marcovich where he diverges from Diels. But in some nine cases my text differs from both Diels and Marcovich in such a way that the interpretation of the fragment is altered, sometimes radically (see p. 26). The notes to the translation are designed to provide the minimum of information required to understand Heraclitus’ words without a knowledge of Greek. The commentary is there for those readers who would go further. But in the commentary too all Greek words have been given in transliteration, and the element of scholarly controversy has been kept to a minimum (although I have tried to acknowledge my debt to my predecessors, and to take
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some account of their views even where I disagree). The aim throughout has been not to add another book to the secondary literature on Heraclitus but to make the thought of Heraclitus accessible to the general reader in the way that a good translation and commentary on the Divine Comedy tries to make the poetry of Dante accessible to one who knows little or no Italian.

The comparison to Dante is chosen deliberately. Despite the vast difference in scale between the two works, and despite the fact that our text is only partially preserved, even from these shattered remains we can see that the literary art of Heraclitus’ composition was comparable in technical cunning and density of content to that of Dante’s masterpiece. As a thinker, Heraclitus was even more original. And in both cases the reader who approaches his author without any scholarly assistance is likely to get quickly lost. May this serve as my excuse for such a lengthy commentary to such a brief text.

The first draft was written in Athens in 1974–75, when I held a senior fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities and was in residence as visiting professor at the American School of Classical Studies. I am happy to express my appreciation to the Endowment for its support, and to thank the American School, its then director James McCredie, and the staff of the Beugen Library for their friendly help and hospitality. I am greatly obliged to the Research Center for Greek Philosophy and the Academy of Athens for cordial assistance, and in particular to Dr E.N. Roussos of that Center who permitted me to use his typescript of Wiese’s dissertation, *Heraclit iet Klemens von Alexandrién*. Among the colleagues who improved this work by their criticism I must mention G.E.L. Owen and Edward Husocy. The translation has benefited from suggestions by Diskin Clay, Jenny Strauss Clay, Martin Ostwald and John van Sickle. Barbara Hermstein Smith kindly served as my Greekless reader, and made many valuable suggestions for a more idiomatic translation as well as for the presentation of notes and commentary. Finally, both the reader and I are indebted to R.J. Mynott of the Cambridge University Press for showing me how to condense the commentary; it is not his fault if it is still a bit long.

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Charles H. Kahn
A free man thinks of death least of all things, and his wisdom is not a meditation upon death but upon life.

Spinoza, *Ethics IV.67*

The longing not to die, the hunger for personal immortality, the effort by which we strive to persevere in our own being, this is the emotional basis for all knowledge and the intimate point of departure for all human philosophy.

Unamuno, *The Tragic Sense of Life*
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AJP: American Journal of Philology


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