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Unity in Difference – Difference in Unity: Heraclitus and the Truth of Hermeneutics

Day and night ... they are one
Heraclitus, B57.

*The obscurity in the philosophy of Heraclitus lies essentially
in the fact that a speculative thought is expressed in it.*
Hegel, Lectures on the History of Philosophy

Heraclitus is called the 'obscure'. But he is the luminous.
Heidegger, Aletheia

Introduction

In an entry in Nietzsche's notebooks from the eighties, the entire spiritual movement of German philosophy is described as guided by nostalgia, by *Heimweh*.¹ It is a nostalgia for "the best", Nietzsche writes, which rejects the present in favor of the past. Ultimately, it is a will to recover Greek philosophy in general, and in particular the philosophy of the presocratics, that "best preserved of all Greek temples". This description is followed by Nietzsche's remarkable statement on the future and value of German philosophy:

Perhaps, that in a hundred years from now one will conclude that all German philosophy has its value in the stepwise recovery of the ancient ground, and that every claim to "originality" will sound petty and ridiculous in relation to that higher aspiration of the Germans, namely to have established again the connection that appeared to be broken, to the Greeks, the hitherto most elevated form of "mankind".²

The note ends with the description of how the Germans are now becom-

ing more and more Greek, first as “Greek-like ghosts”, but eventually also “with our body”. And this he says, is “my hope for the german existence”.

This astonishing prophecy evokes an overwhelming wealth of philosophical and cultural implications, and as such it could be made the starting point of an exploration of German philosophical hellenophilicisms in general. More specifically, it could seem to dictate, like the voice of a goddess, the very movement of Heidegger’s path and its inheritance in philosophical hermeneutics. The last sentence from the yet unpublished manuscript from Heidegger’s pathbreaking course on the basic concepts of Aristotelian philosophy, which he gave in Marburg 1924, sums it up very clearly. After having provided a remarkably inventive reading of the fundamental Aristotelian categories in terms of a praxis of life, in which the groundwork of *Sein und Zeit* is simultaneously presented, he concludes, that it is not about saying something new, but to say that which the ancients already meant, “was die Alten schon meinten”.

The impression which this early work on Aristotle effected on the audience has been documented not least by Gadamer. It was not primarily the theoretical framework of Heidegger’s interpretations that gave them their strength, but what they managed to perform. To his philosophically most sensitive listeners, Heidegger appeared like a greek ghost come alive. Here, as Gadamer writes, Aristotle suddenly began to speak.³ A transmission of heritage and a fusion of horizons had taken place; in a mysterious way the most ancient had become the most present. The Greeks had become more German, and the Germans had become more Greek. It was this experience of the happening of truth that philosophical hermeneutics was henceforth destined to explore.

It is important to note that Nietzsche’s characteristically ironic reference to German philosophy is also and at the same time a confession of his own historical and philosophical predicament. Nietzsche himself is one of these “Greek-like ghost” seeking to come alive. His whole intellectual project could be described in precisely the terms he here sets up, that is, to restore to Greek philosophy its voice in the present, to free it from the chains of past misinterpretations, metaphysical, Christian, and rationalist. His early text on Philosophy in the tragic age of the Greeks marks a very clear statement in this regard.⁴ Here the earliest remains of the Western philosophical heritage are interpreted in terms of his own programme for a tragic, both post- and prerationalist thinking in the present.

By providing a context in terms of a schopenhauerian pessimistic philosophy of the will, the Ionian thinkers suddenly begin to speak in a way very different from the convenient and somewhat complacent Hegelian teleology of Zeller and others.

This early text by Nietzsche is also of a particular importance in the present context, in that it focuses on Heraclitus. Heraclitus is the principal character in Nietzsche's philosophical drama, and will remain so throughout his thinking. Through his tragic wisdom, his affirmation of strife and contradiction, but also for his ability to reflect from the point of view of eternity and in a philosophical love of fate, Heraclitus marks the epitome of ancient Greek intellectual culture. He is its most precious temple. In longing for this lost monument, Nietzsche is of course not only longing for what is past, but also for what is future. For such is the familiar logic of genuine retrieval, that it does not only seek to escape its present, but rather transform it in the direction of that which it strives to appropriate and understand.

Instead of addressing the issue of the present and future of hermeneutics from a general philosophical level, I want to approach it here from what initially may seem to be a rather marginal angle, namely in terms of various readings of the Heraclitean fragments. This angle immediately becomes less marginal when we recall the impressive lineage of readers and interpreters of Heraclitus, which, besides Nietzsche, include most of the canonical writers in philosophical hermeneutics understood in broad terms: Hegel, Schleiermacher, Heidegger, and Gadamer, to name the most important. Gadamer has published several texts on Heraclitus during the last thirty years. In the literature on his philosophical work in general, and his interpretations of the Greeks in particular, these essays do not seem to have been given much attention, compared to the interest generated by his work on Plato in particular.⁵ And yet they contain extremely interesting material not just for our understanding of pre-platonic philosophy, but also for the objectives and means of philosophical hermeneutics in general.⁶

The more general premise of my argument is that Heraclitus, or more precisely the fragmented corpus of texts preserved under his name, has been, and remains a decisive experience for the tradition of philosophical hermeneutics. I would even venture to say, that if we were to indicate one ancient *Urdokument* for this tradition, it would be the Heraclitean fragments, for this is a text in which everyone seems to discover their origin. In their elaborations of this source, the hermeneutic philosophers

have thus not only revealed the object of their concern – that is, Heraclitus’s thought – but also themselves and their own philosophical presuppositions. In other words: as readers of Heraclitus, the hermeneutic philosophers have also been readers of themselves. In a strange chiasmic movement, these textual remains, more perhaps than others, seem to have been destined to disclose their disclosers.

The meaning of this speculative claim will be elaborated in what follows. First of all, I simply want to recall Gadamer’s own statement that “Heraclitus research” is “a hermeneutic task of a special kind”.⁷ The immediate reason for this particularity is of course the uncertainty surrounding the textual remains, which are only preserved as more or less reliable quotations in other writers. In relation to the Heraclitean corpus the technical means of the hermeneutic craft are put to work in a very tangible way. These technical-methodological aspects of hermeneutics – especially textual and linguistic criticism – which in Schleiermacher and the forefathers of philosophical hermeneutics are intertwined with the more speculative reflections on the condition and possibility of meaning-retrieval, has never been Gadamer’s primary interest. His scepticism with regard to method in the human sciences in general has instead been a source of provocation to some of his critics. Yet, in his work on Heraclitus, Gadamer has practiced precisely this craft, and also with a substantial result, as he claims to have isolated from one of the known sources yet another authentic fragment, a finding to which I will return toward the end.⁸

I.

What does it mean to assimilate or absorb, *aufzunehmen*, a philosophical position from the past? And how more precisely does absorption relate to understanding in general? Is not understanding inevitably involved in an act of absorption? These questions pertain to hermeneutics in general, but they also have a more immediate reference, namely Hegel’s famous dictum from his lectures on the history of philosophy, that “there is not a single sentence in Heraclitus that I have not taken up in my *Logic*”.⁹ In the most far-reaching system of German idealism, and perhaps of modern philosophy as such, Heraclitus has presumably been entirely assimilated and devoured. What he once thought and spoke now holds a definitive place within the complete system of truth.

Supposing that there is a true system of philosophy, as itself the real-

ization of truth in time, then it follows trivially that all previous philosophical positions constitute integral elements within this evolution. But with Heraclitus it is different; here we are not speaking of any ancient and deficient perspective on truth. Here, instead, we are speaking about what Hegel himself recognizes as the genesis of speculative thinking. If the previous philosophical systems of early Antiquity were characterized by their onesidedness, it is only with Heraclitus that thinking discovers its task, which is not to take side with one of opposing forces, but to think them in their contradiction. Subject is the becoming of object, and vice versa, and truth is this very process. Hegel quotes the famous passage from Plato's *Symposium* where Eryximachos refers to Heraclitus's thought of to *hen diapheromenon apo tautou sumpheresthai*, as exemplified by the bow or the lyre.¹⁰ To think harmony as tension, and to think unity as constituted in and through contradiction, this is Heraclitus's great insight, which Hegel here also defends against Eryximachos dull criticism. The "great principle" of Heraclitus is "that something is the other of something else, and that its identity lies in this".¹¹ For the ordinary understanding this must appear "obscure" – *skoteinos*, as the ancient called him – but to a genuine philosophical understanding it is precisely the opposite.

Had Hegel known about the version of this fragment from Hippolytos (B51), which after Diels is recognized as the canonical version, he would have been both troubled and reassured. It reads: *ou xuniasin hokos diapheromenon eoutoi homologeei*, "they do not understand how a thing agrees at variance with itself".¹² Already Schleiermacher, in his 1807 edition of the fragments doubted that the word "hen", the one, was authentic.¹³ In the version quoted by Hippolytos there is no initial unity, there is only dispersion, which "goes together in thought, or simply agrees as one could translate *homologeei*. There is no original unity, but an ongoing unifying movement in the form a living *logos*. It is this Heraclitean *logos* which Hegel ultimately finds and recognizes as the historical origin of the development which culminates in his own system. The order and unity which manifests itself in the cosmic movement is the universal *logos*, or simply the idea as it is then developed in Plato. With Heraclitus, philosophy thus takes its beginning. In the scattered remains of this text, thinking first enters into its own element and seizes the idea which will henceforth guide it.

In his appropriating reading of the ancient texts, Hegel demonstrates a remarkable philological naiveté. The actual status and interpretability of

these scattered remains is of no philosophical interest to him. Their genuine significance can apparently be elicited and evaluated without the tedious detours of textual criticism. As a clear contrast to this mode of reading, we have the edition of the fragments published by Schleiermacher in 1808, which begins with a detailed analysis of the textual and historical situation. Not least does Schleiermacher pay attention to the problems posed by historical mediation, e.g., the Stoic reception of Heraclitus.¹⁴ Despite the obvious idiosyncrasies of Plato and Aristotle, he also argues for the hermeneutic necessity of basing an interpretation of Heraclitus on their testimony, in view of their historical proximity to the original.¹⁵ As long as these precautions are respected we should, Schleiermacher argues, be able to unite the fragments and testimonies into a true presentation of Heraclitus's wisdom. In a long digression he also discusses the obscurity of Heraclitus, which he holds to be greatly overvalued. Its origin does not lie in an intentional difficulty, but rather in grammatical ambiguity, of a type already pointed out by Aristotle. After then having performed his pathbreaking interpretative organization of the known fragments, Schleiermacher concludes that the core of Heraclitus's wisdom is that the individual must lose itself and retrieve itself in the universal:

“for this is the clearest and most significant point according to his particular view, which always gives precedence to the general, over and above the particular which is deduced and unstable”.¹⁶

In his sober reconstruction of the material, Schleiermacher maintains his distance to Heraclitus. Unlike Hegel, he does not present Heraclitus as the originator of philosophy as such. Yet, in his summary remarks, he nevertheless creates a strange echo between this origin and his own present. For the statement or wisdom attributed to Heraclitus is also in the end a statement which concerns the possibility of Schleiermacher's own craft. Only if the singular and individual can be grasped in its generality, as universal singularity, can it be understood and appropriated. Or to put it somewhat differently: it is in virtue of being generalizable that the individual can be understood in its individuality. Through language, and through hermeneutic reason, the past remnants – *die Trümmern*, to which Schleiermacher refers in the title of his work – can, in principle be gathered and repaired. At the end of his study of Heraclitus, he even concludes that no matter what further fragments we discover, the truth of his interpretation will stand.¹⁷ This may seem remarkably audacious coming

from a conscientious hermeneut. But the audacity betrays his own conviction, that it could not be otherwise.

II.

In his 1951 lecture *Logos*, Heidegger approaches Heraclitus in what at least appears to be a very different attitude.¹⁸ Already at the outset he declares that we must not take for granted that Heraclitus is available to our ordinary understanding. The reason for this is not only temporal distance.¹⁹ The task of the interpreting philosopher is not to immediately appropriate this enigmatic quality, but rather to expose himself to it. This advice leads Heidegger to explore the logic of *logos* as *legein*, as that *lesende Lege*, as he eventually translates it.²⁰ The Greeks supposedly made this experience with language, as the gathering presentation, as a "gathering letting-be of the present in its presence", *versammelndes vorliegen-Lassen des Anwesenden in seinem Anwesen*, and yet they were unable to think this essence, which only partly reverberates in Heraclitus's fragments. Just as in his Aristotle lectures thirty years earlier, Heidegger thus establishes a philosophical present into which the ancient material can enter. Through this interpretation, Heidegger writes, Heraclitus "speaks more clearly".²¹ Clearly, he speaks more German, but it is a German which supposedly speaks more Greek. For the philosophical-hermeneutic premise of the interpretation is of course that through this reading a double displacement has occurred. While the ancient material has come closer to us, we have also come closer to it, by distancing ourselves from our present mode of understanding.

What kind of appropriation is at work in this text? And how far from Hegel are we in the end? Simply posing this question may appear as an insult, in view of Heidegger's own harsh judgement on Hegel and his Greeks.²² In his brief reconstruction of Hegel's philosophical approach to the history of philosophy, Heidegger states that its premise is the Cartesian principle of subjectivity. Dialectics is then simply the "process of the production of subjectivity by the absolute subject".²³ For this reason he can argue that despite the fact that *logos* is the *Grundwort* of Heraclitus, and despite the fact that Hegel explicitly claimed to have absorbed every sentence into his logic, *logos* is not what guides his interpretation. *Logos* remains for Hegel simply another name for absolute subjectivity.²⁴ For Hegel the goal of philosophy is truth, and yet he remains – Heidegger states – unable to grasp the original problem of

truth as this was posed by Parmenides in his account of *Aletheia*. Since Hegel supposedly equates truth with “the absolute certainty of the absolute subject” he simply cannot access this origin. What then does it mean to really access it? What “is” truth as *aletheia*, i.e., as “unconcealment”, as *Unverborgenheit*? It is not a matter or theme in an ordinary sense, since it constitutes, as Heidegger writes, a riddle, a *Rätsel*.²⁵ This *Rätsel der Aletheia* also rules over (waltet über) “the movement of philosophy as such”.²⁶

From one perspective it could seem as if though Heidegger had not only discarded Hegel’s reading of Heraclitus in an hastily manner, but also that he had then simply replaced it with his own similar alternative. Whereas Hegel does indeed posit the Heraclitean *logos*, understood as idea, as the originating and guiding principle, Heidegger instead opts for *aletheia*, *Unverborgenheit*, as that which henceforth permeates philosophy. Furthermore, in the text on Hegel he sides with Parmenides, but in the essay *Aletheia* it is again in Heraclitus that this supposedly originary and originating philosophical experience is first articulated.²⁷ In a meditation which moves from fragment B16 to B123, Heidegger here connects Heraclitus’s image of “what never goes down” with *phusis*, as that which in its tendency toward concealment, *kruptesthai*, contains both disclosure und concealment, which is also implied by his chosen term *Lichtung*, clearing.²⁸ Considering that Heidegger also connects this version of the dialectics of being explicitly to *logos*, understood as the *entbergend-bergende Sammeln*, revealing-disclosing gathering, it seems that, apart from a shift in emphasis, the Hegelian reading of Heraclitus had indeed been vindicated.²⁹ At least on a formal level, Heidegger’s appropriation of the fragments seems to constitute a very close parallel to that of his predecessor.

Still, there is a significant difference which deserves to be clearly articulated in this particular context, for it also concerns the nature of Heidegger’s hermeneutic heritage. On a formal level it can be captured in terms of the historical model of appropriation. From the perspective of Hegel, Heraclitus marks an origin, the purpose and outcome of which is the present and precisely its appropriation of this very origin. We here understand what is original in terms of its fulfillment in our own understanding. This is what Heidegger refers to when he speaks of Hegel’s Greeks as a “not yet” of the unthought”, that is, as something not yet fully developed.³⁰ Against this he presents his own approach as the recognition of a “not yet” in regard to which we do not suffice...”.³¹ In

this model, the origin is not isolated to a past, but constitutes instead a prevailing horizon of an ongoing interpretation.

How, more exactly, should we conceive of this image, as well as of its rationale? Is it a truth about the object of interpretation, or rather about the interpreting subject? And what is the nature of its own certainty? Obviously, this axiomatic deferment of sense-fulfillment is not conditioned by ordinary hermeneutic problems, such as textual uncertainties. Of these problems Heidegger is well aware, even though in the end they do not preoccupy him very much. An other alternative would be to phrase the problem in terms of the inescapable finitude of every interpretative quest. No interpreter can ever gather the total range of references and implications which would constitute the full sense of Heraclitus's doctrine, and for this reason we must satisfy ourselves with a perspectival contribution to its elucidation. But even this formulation fails to capture the sense of Heidegger's claim. For it presupposes precisely that which he explicitly discards, namely that there is an objectively correct interpretation, even though we, for contingent reasons, are unable to ever reach it.³²

The insufficiency which, according to Heidegger, characterizes us as interpreters of Heraclitus is thus to be sought elsewhere; not in the object, nor in the subject, understood in a conventional way, but rather on the level of the matter itself. That which is to be thought essentially holds itself back, and presents itself only in withdrawal. *Aletheia* itself constitutes such a *Rätsel* since it is constituted by the dual movement of *Entbergung* and *Verbergen*.³³ We remain faithful to the *Sache* of this thought not by claiming to have finally articulated it, but by recognizing it as somehow always remaining to be experienced. There is thus neither *Aufhebung* nor *Aufnehmung* of this past, but rather a circular return to an always prevailing demand (*Anspruch*). This situation implies a philosophical way of relating to history, in an explicit recognition of the historicity of thinking, which is obviously different from that of Hegel. Yet in one respect the parallel remains intact; namely, the way in which this truth of philosophy as such also has its counterpart and origin in Heraclitus. It is in the Heraclitean fragments that this philosophical experience of truth as withdrawal, concealment and deferment, is first captured. Over and against the identity in difference which Hegel elicits from these remains, Heidegger indicates an irreducible difference in identity. But what does it mean to give voice to such a truth? What does it mean to say the truth of truth, if this truth is itself essentially and irre-

ducibly also thought as untruth, or as other than truth? This question opens up a vast territory, which can here only be thus indicated.³⁴

The issue of truth can also be articulated in terms of its temporality, as yet another example of the unity in difference between Hegel and Heidegger. For Hegel, Heraclitus is the thinker of an eternally living *logos*, as also an eternally living truth. The time of truth is the *aei* which is said to characterize *logos* in fragment B1. For Heidegger, on the other hand, the temporality of understanding and of truth is a much more complex issue, as can be traced already in the lectures from the twenties and their discussion of the kairological temporality of *phronesis*. From *Sein und Zeit* we have the detailed discussion of the *Augenblick* as the temporality of authentic disclosure (*eigentliche Erschlossenheit*). This preoccupation with the temporal nature of disclosure as also the temporal mode of truth, culminates in the detailed explorations of *Lichtung* and *Ereignis* in his work from the mid-thirties onward.

The full story of this theme in Heidegger's thinking would require a lengthy study in itself, which I can not pursue here.³⁵ The important point is simply that also in this respect Heraclitus eventually provides an origin and a homecoming, not through fragment B1, but instead B64: *panta oiakizei keraunos*, "everything is governed by lightning". Here Heidegger finds the most condensed attempt to think the relation between being and the temporality of disclosure.³⁶ Already in the 1943 lectures on Heraclitus, he speaks of how this fragment permits us to think how "the momentaneous of the enflaming opens the space of appearance".³⁷ In the 1966/67 *Seminar* with Eugen Fink, the entire discussion takes its starting point in this particular fragment which then guides the attempt to link *panta*, *hen*, and *pur*, into a full interpretation of Heraclitus's thinking.³⁸

III.

Hegel, Schleiermacher, and Heidegger – together they constitute not only a system of parallel perspectives on Heraclitus, but also the key figures in what today is known and recognized as philosophical hermeneutics, or hermeneutic philosophy, as this has been elaborated in the work of Gadamer. Heidegger's text "Hegel und die Griechen" was first published in the *Festschrift* for Gadamer in 1960. Thirty years later Gadamer composed a text, "Hegel und Heraklit", which could be read as a reply and commentary to Heidegger's judgement.³⁹ Here Hegel's appropriation of the fragments is treated with a certain indulgent sympathy. We can see,

Gadamer argues, how Hegel recognizes his speculative dialectic in Heraclitus's concept of the one as a unity of opposites. Yet, at the same time we must wonder, he continues, why it is that Hegel's speculative genius was so insensitive to the deeper dimension, the *Tiefendimension* in Heraclitus, the flickering flame of life and death, light and darkness.⁴⁰ This aspect of the Greeks is first sensed in Nietzsche's Dionysos, as the god of creation and destruction. But it is only with Heidegger, and his image of *Sein als Ereignis*, that "Heraclitus suddenly begins to speak". The condensed formula for this new reading, what Gadamer also refers to as the very formula of the post-Hegelian insight is fragment B123: *phusis kruptesthai philei*, "nature loves to hide".

After having paid this tribute to Heidegger, who is here again credited with the ability of performing the wonder – of making the Greeks speak – Gadamer nevertheless voices his doubts. In his attempt to reach for the roots of Heraclitus's thinking, Heidegger has to some extent reached too far, into "an original articulation of a world experience". In regard to this original experience Heraclitus himself remains, Gadamer retorts, a "later thinker", a thinker from a "flourishing city of trade and commerce". Perhaps we can add: something more like Breslau, than, e.g., Schwarzwald. As such a city-dweller he did not so much give voice to an "original articulation of being", as rather to the "riddle that we are the mortal and also thinking beings".⁴¹ It is not altogether unfair to suggest that in this little miniature dispute over the true nature of Heraclitus's cultural belonging, Gadamer is also restaging his own complex relation to Heidegger and his thinking. In this respect, however, he also aligns himself with the tradition of philosophical readings of Heraclitus, in which the interpretation of an ancient material and a certain self-grounding on the part of the interpreter seems to be an inevitable fate.

How do we bring Heraclitus to speak? By making him more like ourselves, but also by making ourselves more like him. The speech which Heidegger brings about, according to Gadamer, comes from too far, and thus also perhaps reaches too far. Implied in this argument is of course also that he who reaches beyond the tradition as such, can no longer develop this tradition. For we are, as we know, *ein lebendiges Gespräch*, a living dialogue. In order to hear Heraclitus himself we must not only see him in his human, mortal context, but also in the context of the tradition. Consequently, Plato as well as Hegel, are here reinvented by Gadamer into a dialogue on the fate of the mortal soul, which in the night "strikes a light for itself" (fragment B26), and which seeks itself (B101),

but which is unable to find its limits (B45). In Heraclitus, he concludes, an experience is articulated of the limit and finitude of life and understanding itself. This is his riddle, as well as ours.⁴² In other words, in Heraclitus philosophical hermeneutic also recognizes itself.

This conclusion should not, however, be understood to mean that Gadamer's thought has indeed also been proven to be characterized by a logic of appropriation. Rather, I would like it to stand as an introduction to precisely the issue of the more precise nature of appropriation in hermeneutics, and what the reading of Heraclitus can teach us about this issue. In the contemporary discussion and debate on the art and standing of hermeneutic philosophy, this is one of the truly pressing questions. Does the philosophical hermeneutics of Gadamer imply a totalizing and unifying image of the tradition? Does it neglect the irreducible difference at play in every definitive meaning-ascription, as well as the impossibility of ever specifying the limit and totality of a textual corpus? These issues were raised and articulated not least in the debate with Derrida in 1981, which has eventually generated a substantial critical literature on the relation between these two most inventive inheritors of Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology.⁴³

In a recent text on *Die Komplexität philosophischer Hermeneutik*, Günter Figal outlines three different types of hermeneutic thinking, in terms of how they combine time and presence, namely: of historical happening, of perspectival integration, and of constellations.⁴⁴ Behind these general labels we can distinguish the exemplary figures of Gadamer, Nietzsche, and Benjamin. In the first type the emphasis is on tradition and its continuity, which guarantees the dialectical reproduction of its own meaning over time. Or as Figal writes: "the hermeneutics of a history of effect lives of its fate in the completeness and continuity of traditions".⁴⁵ This fate is combined with the premise that understanding is necessarily partial and conditioned by already belonging to that which is to be understood. Still, what this approach to some extent neglects, Figal suggests, is the active role played by the one who understands. This latter aspect is however emphasized in the hermeneutics of perspectival integration. As the dialectical third party in this presentation we then get the hermeneutics of appearing constellations, in which the moment of understanding is conceived of as an unpredictable event in which text and interpreter come together in a way that was never guaranteed by the tradition.

Figal's sketch highlights a significant question concerning the more

precise methodological presupposition of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics. What does it mean to rely in this way on the continuity and unity of tradition? Does this mean that one is not genuinely attentive to the finitude of understanding, despite explicitly recognizing this condition? As Figal rightly points out, we find in Gadamer's thinking a persistent emphasis on the necessity of a partial estrangement with regard to the tradition and one's own horizon, as well as a recognition that understanding is always an understanding differently. In this respect there is a thought of difference operating also in Gadamer's version of hermeneutics, based on a principle of dialogic reason, rather than on a conception of an original *Verborgenheit*. And yet there is this strong undercurrent of faith in a supraindividual *logos* which reverberates throughout his entire project. Between these two aspects or tendencies, a tension is acted out, in Gadamer's writings, as well as in the critical discussion. In the following and concluding discussion, I want to examine how this tension is in fact also acted out in an exemplary manner in Gadamer's reading of Heraclitus.

IV.

To begin with, Heraclitus constitutes a very provocative challenge to the hermeneutic idea of understanding as understanding differently. For in the case of Heraclitus there is no available evidence which has not already been filtered precisely through this self-differing nature of historical mediation. All the extant texts are more or less free variations on a presumed original, by other authors using Heraclitus to articulate their own present and their own philosophical projects. Heraclitus has always already been "applied", by Plato, by the stoics, by the fathers of the Christian church. But whereas this general condition is affirmed by hermeneutics as an inescapable principle, in the case of actually trying to access this material, it nevertheless constitutes an obstacle. There is a certain irony in Gadamer's remark on the hermeneutic difficulty which arises from Plato's way of citing, in which the elegance of writing recommends that one does not report a citation literally, but rather "es in den eigenen Gedankengang einbaut".⁴⁶ In other words, that understanding here is always literally understanding differently.

Whereas this principle may be said to designate the deeper transcendental conditions of historical understanding and appropriation, on the practical level of critical textual exegesis it is nevertheless what must be

conquered. In working his way toward the historical reality of Heraclitus's thinking, Gadamer practices in an exemplary manner precisely the traditional virtues of textual and historical critique, which his more conservative critics have sometimes argued are ruled out by his theoretical model of historical transmission.⁴⁷ The goal is explicitly declared to reach beyond the fore-understanding suggested by the citing authors, and to reach a historically appropriate and philosophically powerful understanding of Heraclitus.⁴⁸ And just as Schleiermacher before him, he also argues for the necessity of moving by way of Plato. Despite the fact that Plato in his citations is notoriously free, he still constitutes our oldest preserved source of knowledge of Heraclitus. For a general background, Homer, Hesiod and the other known fragments from the earlier philosophical writers are of course significant witnesses. But from a more strictly applied hermeneutic criterion, it is through Plato that we must work in our attempts to recreate a supposedly original meaning.

In this hermeneutic movement through and beyond Plato, the image of Plato himself does not remain intact. On the contrary, it is one of the more remarkable aspects of Gadamer's appropriation of Heraclitus that he manages to retrieve a more Heraclitean Plato whom tradition has buried, and whom perhaps even Plato himself sought to conceal. It is in the *Sophist* that we have the first reference to the remarkable thought of a unity in difference, ascribed to the "Ionian Muses", and which in Plato's words reads: *diapheromenon aei sumpherethai*.⁴⁹ Gadamer's Plato is a thinker preoccupied with the same attempt to gather life, soul, and being in a vision of nature as rhythmic movement, as the one that once supposedly motivated Heraclitus. In his thought of a unity in and through difference, Plato in fact managed to pass beyond the Parmenidean One by absorbing the teaching of Heraclitus. At the end of his interpretation, Gadamer even suggests that had only Heidegger discovered this aspect of Plato, he would not have had to return all the way to Heraclitus in order to reach beyond metaphysics.⁵⁰

In the various philosophical and hermeneutic attempts to approach Heraclitus which have been examined so far, we have seen the same tendency to seek a "basic thought". Even in Schleiermacher's pathbreaking collection of the textual sources, the same totalizing effort eventually manifested itself. We also saw how precisely this aspiration to determine the core of the fragments is what later tends to recoil on the interpreter himself in the subsequent critique. How does Gadamer's interpretation stand in this respect? A first and tentative response is that in his reading,

too, we find a totalizing ambition. Heraclitus is said to discover everywhere the same unity, and “his *logos* is one”. The “totality of the Heraclitean doctrine” is said to be contained in the idea of a participation in a “common day and world”, *gemeinsamen Tage und Welt*.⁵¹ In another text he speaks of one and the same thought, *eines und desselben Gedankens*, as that of identity in difference.⁵²

In this attempt to create yet another monolithic Heraclitus, Gadamer’s reading is reminiscent of the tradition. Yet, in the interior of this monolith, we can sense what is also uniquely Gadamer, namely the aspiration to generate a dialogue between philosophical forefathers. The Heraclitus which Gadamer presents to us is first introduced with the philological rigour of Schleiermacher, to which Gadamer can rightly lay claim (as opposed to Hegel and Heidegger). Furthermore, it is a Platonic as well as a Hegelian Heraclitus, in the sense that he here appears as the herald of a dialectical conception of being, in which contradiction and tension is gathered in a unified and unifying *logos*. Still it is a Plato, and also a Hegel, filtered through an experience of tragic loss, finitude and historicity as anticipated by Nietzsche and systematically articulated by Heidegger. In his Heraclitus, Gadamer has thus also managed to unite the differing sources of his own thinking, in and through their most ancient common inheritance.

Perhaps the philosophically most interesting and challenging aspect of this polyphonic Heraclitus concerns the latter aspect, having to do with finitude and temporality. For Gadamer, too, Heraclitus’s thought is a thought of fire and lightning, as guiding metaphors. They are metaphors for being and truth as such, but also for the “incomprehensible and unmediated transition”, to quote one formulation.⁵³ Heraclitus’s preoccupation with contradictions concerns the problem of change and transformation, of *metabole*. And the nature and temporality of these processes, Gadamer stresses, is that of suddenness, *Plötzlichkeit*.⁵⁴ Heraclitus’s truth is therefore not just a truth of a unifying *logos*, but a truth of the suddenness and unpredictable nature of being. Gadamer connects his preoccupation with this theme to Heraclitus’s style. In his play on words he brings about “truth by means of the sound of words”, as when the bow (*bios*) as the instrument of death also carries the name of life (*bios*).⁵⁵ It is the truth of the sudden and unpredictable transformation of one thing into its opposite, which Plato also sought to capture, Gadamer points out, with his notion of *exaiphnes*, suddenness.⁵⁶ But what kind of truth is this really? In this question much more is at stake, than what may first be

apparent. Gadamer gives us a few different alternatives. The most commonplace version is the idea that the sudden change from one thing to its opposite proves that the hidden opposite “was already there”, in other words a truth of the limited nature of the human perspective on things.⁵⁷ In another context, and in a somewhat more open formulation, Gadamer connects the “paradox of the transition” with the “unity of being”.⁵⁸ But to speak of the unity of being against the background of change is to bring to the fore precisely the nature of this unity. What does it mean to be one, when this unity is never available except through unpredictable transformation? In this paradigmatic dialectical question the very meaning of unity is put at stake. Here we can not simply rely on a concept of “unity” and “oneness” in order to secure what is to be thought.

The question concerning the nature of this unity, it should be clear, is not simply a question which concerns Heraclitus scholarship. It is a question for dialectics, for philosophy, and not least for philosophical hermeneutics. What does it mean to affirm the unity of tradition, of *logos*, and of understanding, in the face of the experience of its continual transformation and self-differing? Is this not precisely the question on which much of the critical approaches to Gadamer’s work has based itself, in other words the indication that in his thinking difference, discontinuity, and estrangement is not conceptualized radically enough. When Gadamer himself comes up against the challenge of Heraclitus – that prevailing demand on all thinkers, this *beständige Herausforderung für jeden Denkenden*, to use his own words – he could be said to give us both the confirmation of this propensity to rely on the continuity of tradition, as well as the tools with which to question the meaning of this faith. For whereas the logic of the sudden on the one hand points to the persistence of the one, it also signals the limits of our discursive mastery of its being. The transformation itself, Gadamer repeatedly argues, is incomprehensible, *Unbegreiflich*. We cannot properly master change in words, as we are exposed to its vicissitudes. And while “the one” appears to be what prevails throughout this change, its own mode of being must remain a riddle.

Perhaps the most challenging formulation provided by Gadamer in this respect is his reference to that “secretive ”itself””, *geheimnisvolle ”sich”* which is said to mark Heraclitus’s entire depth, his *ganze Tiefsinn*, manifesting itself throughout the ever living fire, throughout life, and thinking itself.⁵⁹ Somewhere at the bottom, or at the source of these transformations and transferrals, something manifests ”itself”.

Still, the nature of this itself remains a riddle, always already on the way to become something else, to adopt another guise, another image, another word. It is the same, and yet this sameness evades us, in a self-differing, self-deferring movement. At the very source of the tradition of philosophy, this thought at once confirms and upsets the belief in its own unity, precisely by forcing us to think unity itself as difference. In his symphonic reading of Heraclitus, Gadamer elucidates and confirms the radicality and actuality of Heraclitus's thinking, at times even in a way which seems to take us beyond the limit of Gadamer's own explicit recognition. When philosophical hermeneutics recognizes itself and its origin in Heraclitus, it also makes itself the inheritor of a thought which could truly be said to remain a demand, a *Herausforderung*.

This remark can in fact be illustrated by the aforementioned result presented by Gadamer in his 1974 essay "Vom Anfang bei Heraklit", in which he claimed to have elicited a hitherto unrecognized fragment from Hippolytos. I end my discussion with an interpretation of this finding, which in a remarkable way could also be seen to summarize the argument presented here concerning the importance of Heraclitus for philosophical hermeneutics. It is noteworthy that Hippolytos's *Refutatio omnium haeresium* was a text to which Schleiermacher did not have access when he established his edition of the fragments, but which after its discovery has become considered to be among the most important sources for our knowledge of Heraclitus's fragments, including B64 on the governing lightning.⁶⁰ At one point Hippolytos refers to Heraclitus's thought of opposites and then he enumerates several such opposites, some of which are found in the fragments B50-67. On the basis of a stylistic analysis, Gadamer argues that beside those already recognized as authentic we should also reclaim a fragment which was unjustly considered to be only a Christian addition by earlier editors, namely one that speaks about the relation between father and son. In his reconstruction of a likely wording, where he seeks "to eliminate the Christian painting over", Gadamer comes up with the following suggestion: *dikaios pater prosegoreuto gennetheis huios heautou*, which in his translation reads: "Mit recht heißt einer Vater erst dann, wenn er es geworden: Sohn seiner selbst".

I.e., justly one is called a father only when one has become the son of oneself.⁶¹ Or in the shorter version to which he refers in a subsequent text: *pater huios heautou*, *Der Vater is Sohn seiner selbst*, the father is the son of himself.⁶²

Gadamer's own interpretation and philosophical justification of this possibly authentic fragment relies on the straightforward idea that it is only when the father has a son, that he actually becomes a father. In this sense it makes sense to say that he gives birth also to himself, and thus that he is his own son. Gadamer does not make much more philosophically of this finding which he presents with a certain philological modesty. But once we accept his argument for the possible authenticity of such fragment – and I see no reason not to do so – its philosophical implications are in fact quite striking. Much more than a simple dialectical riddle, it seems to contain – in an almost haunting manner – the very program for philosophical hermeneutics itself. For who is this father, who becomes his own son? Is he not the active reader and interpreter of a tradition, which only through his own activity becomes precisely the father of himself? Does not this riddle capture in the most precise terms the very ethos of making oneself the inheritor of that which only becomes available as inheritance through one's own active appropriation of it? And has not Gadamer, unknowingly, made himself read by precisely the text, which he, through the meticulous work of the philological hermeneut has made readable again? And is not this very event a remarkable illustration to that hypothesis with which this text started out, namely that the relation between Heraclitus and hermeneutics is one of a profound and apparently inexhaustible circularity, in which his philosophical readers continue to father him as their own *herausfordende* father.

If Heraclitus marks the destiny of philosophical hermeneutics, from Schleiermacher and Hegel, over Nietzsche, to Heidegger and Gadamer, then perhaps it is not unreasonable to suggest that it is to these fragmented writings that we should again turn to listen for the answer to where this tradition is moving. In continuing Nietzsche's prophecy of a gradual reappropriation of the Greeks, we are then faced with the thought of a *hen diapheron heautou*, of a one differing in itself. What this ancient cipher implies is not only that of a unity in difference, preserved through and beyond the vicissitudes of time and history, but also – and simultaneously – of a difference in unity. In such a chiasmic statement, which is nowhere yet to be found in the known fragments, but which could nevertheless be said to be implied by their context, we can also anticipate the fate of a hermeneutic thinking which still remains to be fully articulated.

Noter:

¹ Kritische Studienausgabe [KSA] Vol. XI (de Gruyter: Berlin/New York, 1988), p. 678f. The text was also included as aphorism no. 419 in *Der Wille zur Macht*. All translations are my own, when not otherwise indicated.

² Ibid: "Vielleicht daß man einige Jahrhunderte später urtheilen wird, daß alles deutsche Philosophieren darin seine eigene Würde habe, ein schrittweises Wiedergewinnen des antiken Bodens zu sein, und daß jeder Anspruch auf 'Originalität' kleinlich und lächerlich klinge im Verhältnisse zu jenem höheren Anspruche der Deutschen, das Band, das zerissen schien, neu gebunden zu haben, das Band mit den Griechen, dem bisher höchst gearteten Typus 'Mensch'".

³ Cf., e.g., "Die Marburger Theologie", in *Gesammelte Werke 3* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1987), pp. 197–208.

⁴ See KSA I, pp. 799–872.

⁵ When the ancient roots and principal preoccupations of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics are debated we are accustomed to hear of Aristotelian phronesis and Platonic dialectics. This is also the case in two recent fine studies in English, James Risser's *Hermeneutics and Voice of the Other* (New York: SUNY Press, 1997), and Rod Coltman's *The Language of Hermeneutics* (New York: SUNY Press, 1998). Both, in their different ways, discuss the way in which Aristotelian phronesis has been fused with a Platonic and Hegelian dialectics in order to shape Gadamer's particular dialogical form of Heidegger's hermeneutic ontology. Yet none of them mention the Heraclitus material.

⁶ The texts of which I am aware, and to which I will refer here are: "Vom Anfang bei Heraklit" (1974), "Heraklitstudien" (1984), and "Hegel und Heraklit" (1990). They are to be found in Vols VI and VII of Gadamer's *Gesammelte Werke*. The first two are also available in a separate volume *Der Anfang des Wissens* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1999), the first of them under the title "Zur Überlieferung Heraklits".

⁷ *Heraklit-Studien*, cited from *Der Anfang des Wissens* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1999), p. 39. In another essay, Gadamer also speaks of the fragments as a Schulbeispiel from a hermeneutical-technical standpoint. In *Zur Überlieferung Heraklits*, *ibid.*, p. 19.

⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 23f.

⁹ *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*, ed. Hoffmeister (1940), Bd I, p. 328, "...es kein Satz des Heraklit, den ich nicht in meine Logik aufgenommen habe".

¹⁰ *Symposion*, 187a.

¹¹ *Vorlesungen* Bd 7, ed. P. Garniron & W. Jaeschke (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1989), p. 75, "...daß etwas das Andere von etwas Anderem ist, liegt eben ihre Identität". It is noteworthy that this new critical edition of the lectures does not contain the famous statement on Heraclitus cited earlier.

¹² Diels, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, Bd. 1 (Hildesheim: Weidmann, 1951, 6th rev. ed by W. Kranz), p. 162.

¹³ *Herakleitos der Dunkle, von Ephesos, dargestellt aus den Trümmern seines Werkes und den Zeugnissen der Alten*, in *Sämtliche Werke* III:2 (Berlin: Reimer, 1838), p. 65.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 145; "Denn so ist dies der hellste och bezeichnendste Punkt für seine eigenthümlichste Ansicht, welche überall dem allgemeinen den Vorzug einräumt, das besondere aber als abgeleitet und in sich nicht bestehend schlechtin unterordnet".

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

¹⁸ Printed in *Vorträge und Aufsätze* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1954), pp. 199–222.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 200, "...in der gedachten Sache selbst, wo einige Rätsel bleiben".

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

- ²¹ Ibid., p. 216.
- ²² See "Hegel und die Griechen", in *Wegmarken, Gesamtausgabe* Bd 9 (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1976), pp. 429–444.
- ²³ Ibid., p. 430; "Prozeß der Produktion der Subjektivität des absoluten Subjekts".
- ²⁴ Ibid., p. 436.
- ²⁵ Ibid., p. 440.
- ²⁶ Ibid., p. 444. "dem Gang der ganzen Philosophie".
- ²⁷ "Aletheia", in *Vorträge und Aufsätze* (Tübingen: Neske, 1954), pp. 249–274.
- ²⁸ Ibid., p. 262.
- ²⁹ Ibid., p. 272.
- ³⁰ *Hegel und die Griechen*, op. cit., p. 444: ""Noch nicht" des Ungedachten".
- ³¹ Ibid.: ""Noch nicht", dem wir nicht genügen und kein Genüge tun".
- ³² For such a criticism of an objectivist conception, cf. *Aletheia*, op. cit., p. 252.
- ³³ A very clear statements in this respect is to be found in the 1957 lecture "Die Onto-Theologische Verfassung der Metaphysik", in *Identität und Differenz* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1957), p. 38. In explicit address to Hegel, Heidegger writes: "Für uns ist die Maßgabe für das Gespräch mit der geschichtlichen Überlieferung dieselbe, insofern es gilt, in die Kraft des früheren Denkens einzugehen. Allein wir suchen die Kraft nicht im schon Gedachten, sondern in einem Ungedachten, von dem her das Gedachte seinen Wesensraum empfängt."
- ³⁴ For a valuable elaboration of the evasive logic of Heidegger's truth, cf. John Sallis's *Double Truth* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), especially Chapter 6.
- ³⁵ For a more substantial discussion of this theme, see Chapter 5 ("The time of historicity: Augenblick") in my *Enigmatic Origins. Tracing the Theme of Historicity through Heidegger's Works* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1994), and also "The Moment of Truth: Augenblick and Ereignis", *Epoche* 1999.
- ³⁶ Not least from Gadamer, we know that this was also the quotation inscribed in a tree near the entrance of Heidegger's Hütte, cf. *Zur Überlieferung Heraklits*, op. cit., p. 17.
- ³⁷ *Gesamtausgabe* Bd 55 (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1987, 2d rev. ed.), p. 161f: "das Augenblickhafte des Entflammens eröffnet den Spielraum des Erscheinens".
- ³⁸ *Seminare, Gesamtausgabe* Bd 15 (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1986).
- ³⁹ In *Gesammelte Werke* VII (Tübingen: Mohr, 1991), p. 32–42.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 38.
- ⁴¹ Ibid., p. 39: "...Rätsel, das wir als die sterblichen und gleichwohl denkenden Wesen uns sind".
- ⁴² Ibid., p. 42.
- ⁴³ The texts from the encounter as well as several commentaries were gathered in the English volume *Dialogue & Deconstruction*, ed. Michelfelder & Palmer (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989).
- ⁴⁴ *Der Sinn des Verstehens* (Stuttgart: Reklam, 1996), p. 22: "1) Eine Hermeneutik wirkungsgeschichtlichen Geschehens, 2) Eine Hermeneutik perspektivischer Integration, and 3) Eine Hermeneutik sich ereignender Konstellationen.."
- ⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 24: "Die Hermeneutik der Wirkungsgeschichte lebt also vom Vertrauen auf die Geschlossenheit und Kontinuität von Traditionen".
- ⁴⁶ "Heraklit-Studien", *Der Anfang des Wissens* (Stuttgart: Reklam, 1999), p. 41.
- ⁴⁷ I am thinking in particular of the critique which was voiced already in the sixties by the American philosopher and literary scholar Eric Hirsch, who argued that Gadamer's hermeneutics failed to account for what it could mean to achieve "validity" in interpretation. See in particular the long appendix on *Wahrheit und Methode*, included in Hirsch's *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1967).
- ⁴⁸ "Heraklit-Studien", op. cit., p. 39: "...was uns durch die zitierenden Autoren an

Vorverständnis suggeriert wird ... historisch angemessenen und dennoch philosophisch aussagekräftigen Verständnis Heraklits".

⁴⁹ *Sophist* 242e.

⁵⁰ *Heraklit-Studien*, op. cit., p. 94.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

⁵² *Zur Überlieferung Heraklits*, op. cit., p. 17. The exact formulation reads: "...des Gedankens des Einen und Desselben, das in der Differenz, der Spannung, der Gegensätzlichkeit, der Folge und des Wechsels das allein Wahre ist..."

⁵³ *Zur Überlieferung Heraklits*, op. cit., p. 32: "Unbegreiflichkeit des vermittlungslosen Übergangs".

⁵⁴ *Heraklit-Studien*, p. 43.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 51. The fragment which speaks of the the dual meaning of bios is B48.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

⁶⁰ Not least considering the immense importance of this particular fragment for contemporary readings, it constitutes a somewhat ironic corrective to Schleiermacher's above cited certainty that no further findings should change the image of Heraclitus.

⁶¹ *Zur Überlieferung Heraklits*, op. cit., p. 24.

⁶² *Heraklit-Studien*, op. cit., p. 50.