

Classical Beginnings

Three Heraclitean Elements by John Stathatos

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ONCE THE PAST has happened, it can be retraced in at least two ways: as cultural inheritance, and as personal memory. It is a very special kind of artist in whom both kinds of recall coincide, so that prehistoric conceptions are given the immediacy of our own experience, and this coincidence appears quite naturally between the way Heraclitus thought and the way Stathatos looks at life, with the further distinction that it is modern life with which Stathatos is concerned, and the approximation to ancient thought is not a simple reworking of the past, but an integral point of view in which past and present are seamlessly combined.

Heraclitus lived about 2,500 years ago. His work is largely lost, but his preoccupations come down to us in a famous collection of aphorisms, known for their paradoxical twists. In his own time he was something of a conservative, taking up intellectual arms against the seething intrusion into Greek culture of a new-fangled discipline - for so it turned out to be - called science. Against scientific method and analysis he posited the holistic view that was then his inheritance, that all things known to thought derived from three elements: earth, fire and water, and that the constant state of the world derived from the fact that they were interchangeable. To this broad conception he added his own paradoxical emphasis, which found flux and transience in the permanent state of the world. Such a cosmology may seem, at first, so remote as to be irrelevant, and almost unintelligible; but to the photographer earth, fire and water offer visual equivalences for a contemporary dilemma in which once again a holistic grasp on the facts of life vies with science, and scientific analysis which has, from some points of view, broken down the connections which bind humanity to a natural and inhabitable world.

Stathatos left Greece more than twenty years ago, and returned recently to photograph in the South. Broadly, his work is a very personal blend of loving reminiscence for the country of his childhood, and perception that harsh conditions are a perpetual feature of that primitive setting. Detail is marshalled with immaculate patience and care, suggesting the depth and absorption of his attachment to what he has seen; but intellectually he has selected and grouped his findings into three sets, which correspond roughly with Heraclitus' elements. Seven prints represent a countryside that has

been fired; two show dried up river beds; a third shows seven versions of the earth found inside caves.

To promote the undergrowth on which flocks feed, shepherds have set fire to trees, bushes and scrub. The results are scorched trunks and black branches, on scraggy slopes, between the newly sprouted scrub and stony scree. There is a horizon, and a cloudless sky covers all with a glowing white top. But there is no perspective, for both earth and sky are in the grip of the burnt-out trees, which are the main subject of this set. Stathatos finds a whole range of imagery in them, and in the way they occupy the land. In the first, black filaments take off from the ground, the threadbare remnants of which was once bush or tree; they rise upwards, coil and thrust, full of the energy and dynamic of recovery. And then, mysteriously, as a token of some other force unseen and unknown, they curl inwards, and twine together, so that thrust turns into a gesture of caution and withdrawal.

Occasionally in these shots the leathery membrane which binds the branch splits, revealing a delicate white pith, in which life might be taking a grip, or losing its hold. Branches end in fine swellings, which might be the first sign of new growth, or are they the last vestiges of a burnt-out crop? This unanswerable question matches the central enigma of fire in the classical text: is fire the image of vitality and life, movement and constant change, or the harbinger of destruction and death? The answer given by Heraclitus, and confirmed in a visual statement by Stathatos, is that fire is both. When we think of life, death is implicit in the terms; when we see signs of life, they are equally, in their own way, the signs that all things pass.

Two prints of the *Riverrun* lie on the floor, forcing the viewer to look down into a stream that has dried up. They are lit from behind, as if the fire which had consumed their waters still blazed within the ground. But they are searchingly different. In one the stones have been compressed together into a formation that recaptures the presence of water swirling, shifting, lifting and packing them together. The second print shows likewise a river bed, dried out to a dull matt quality.

The images tell of opportunity which has passed, circumstances which have changed, and neatly fit the Heraclitean observation that a stream cannot be experienced twice, for it is never the same again anywhere once it has gone by. But vision is no longer

what it was in the time of Heraclitus; under the impact of modernism it has split and acquired two levels, at least: on one level direct and allusory, pointing to a drought-stricken country and spent forces. On another level, we have been taught to see a surface, and interpret it in a personal way, that cannot always be exactly explained: abstract expressionists have shown us we can take on a surface as an autonomous presence, and search it for the identity of the artist, and our own identity overlapping with it. We can stand back, with just that degree of detachment from Stathatos' photographs, and the textures speak for themselves. Directly through our senses we experience their meanings: they are tough, gritty and harsh, so that we can metaphorise them into random memories and impressions that arise from forgotten experience.

The statement is: somewhere I have felt like this before. I may not have stood on a dried-up river bank in the burning South. But I have felt this force as a kind of despair, and overcome it with the exuberance of the senses and the desire to feel yet more. Stathatos has artfully expanded the theme of transience, with its intellectual and philosophical overtones. We know from what he shows us that the waters have passed on, leaving the stony bed - as happened 2,500 years ago. Everything passes; everything remains the same.

But it is with seven gothic cave interiors that Stathatos brings Heraclitus most clearly into focus with our time, and with a way of thinking and feeling that has been kindled by analytic thought until surreal responses to what we see have become ingrained. The cave walls invoke movement (soaring, crashing, flinging, plunging, coiling, twisting) though nothing has ever been more solid, or more static. Ambiguities come easily to us. What we see in the photographs is both the stuff of dreams in which reality bears down on us oppressively, without explanation, in some perhaps terrifying symbolism; and it is the surface of the earth - cracked, fissured, rutted, crumbling to stones and sand. Our consciousness responds to both interpretations when we see the photographic record. The features of the cave are both real and transfigured; we can grasp them for what they are, and they transcend sense, in just the same way that we live our lives concretely but find them beyond our understanding. In ordinary terms the photographs are both cluttered and clear, plain and elusive, oppressive

and liberating, where oppression is the direct effect of knowledge, and liberation is the catharsis learned from art. The exact balance between the two involves a skillful use of lighting, though we cannot tell whether it is artificial light, deployed by the artist, or natural light which he has skimmed off the rocks just at the point where it is about to die in the darkness beyond.

Among these softly lit pieces is one distinctive masterpiece, which eludes words and description, for it seems to lie outside our experience and even the notion of dreams does not sufficiently contain it. There is a top to it, and a bottom. Top fits over bottom, or descends on it, or rises up out of it. All precise relationships have been lost. Even the textures are so refined that grain and substance cannot be reinterpreted in terms of touch. The photographer has actualised in the caves the transformations of Heraclitus, and discovered a metaphor for a state of mind which is our peculiar response to modern conditions.

The transformations of Heraclitus are these: fire makes the sea, and the sea is half the earth: all things unify in these interactions. Opposites and differences are assimilated into his aphorisms which stress this unity. But the Heraclitean sense of mystery went deeper than the unity of nature, was more pervasive, and anti-scientific, rejecting the Pythagorean idea that accumulation of knowledge was wisdom. Meaning cannot be accumulated - because the meaning of life is inseparable from its wholeness. The sense of the integrated and composite is both on the surface of things and within them. This is as far as opposition can go to postmodern fragmentation. Stathatos makes this statement through art into a matter of fact - visual fact, incontrovertible fact. And yet he does not specify a simple wholeness. There is respect for complexity, visual complexity, complexity of feeling and meaning, though his representations are always accessible. Lyricism and discordance combine without strain or self-consciousness in the rhythms of burnt-out trees, the flaring of patterns of a dry stream bed, the singular unspecifiable shape of the earth in its original convolutions. There is no analysing the vision of this artist who has really assimilated what he loves and believes into one undifferentiated experience, which is his own. Heraclitus himself left us this thought: 'The hidden attunement is better than the open.'



THREE HERACLITEAN ELEMENTS
Part I: Dry Light, # 2
Silver print (135 x 110 cm)



THREE HERACLITEAN ELEMENTS
Part II: Riverrun, # 1
Backlit transparency (135 x 110 cms)



THREE HERACLITEAN ELEMENTS
Part III: Thunder Rules All, # 7