

John Stathatos

Three Heraclitean Elements

with a text by Ivan Gaskell

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'Incredibility escapes recognition'

Thoughts on Three Heraclitean Elements

IVAN GASKELL

*The lord whose oracle is at Delphi
neither declares nor conceals, but gives a sign*

Delphic, oracular, Heraclitus gives us signs. Fragments of his thoughts have teased and enthralled for nearly 2,500 years. Now photographers give us signs. Signs, whether philosophical utterances or photochemical traces, require interpretations. Surface meaning alone is inadequate, as Oedipus, who consulted the oracle at Delphi, discovered to his cost. Yet no two interpretations, whether of a riddle or of a photograph, ever entirely coincide. One cannot interpret a sign in the same way twice. Or, as George Eliot has it, 'Signs are small measurable things, but interpretations are illimitable.'¹ Each interpretation has its own scale, its own economy, its own time. Each interpretation takes place in time and depends on memory.

Roland Barthes pointed out that the importance of a photograph lies not so much in its being an analogue of reality as in its connection to reality via memory. The artist who uses photographs can intentionally exploit this relationship with memory. He employs photographs rooted in reality to create photographic metaphors, loaded images - signs - begging for interpretation. The artist is able to introduce a conceptual imperative. 'The value of a photograph to an artist,' writes John Stathatos, 'resides in the raw material of its metaphorical associations, in the resonances and accretions of meaning which are part and parcel of the image.'² The most useful photographs for the artist working in this way are plain and unalloyed. Through the

operation of memory such photographs escape representation. Then we recognize the metaphorical weight of the sign and experience an emotionally charged awareness of the past as a process of change.

A photograph is a mark set against time. It is always the past, however recently made. It promotes awareness of change, though we never see change itself. To perceive moments which differ one from another is not necessarily to perceive the process of change.

Heraclitus, 2,500 years ago (it is worth repeating), introduced the world to the constancy of change, of flux. *One cannot step twice into the same river, nor can one grasp any mortal substance in a stable condition, but the waters scatter and gather, approach and depart,... come together and stream away.* No point of repose exists and the perceptions of a moment are irrecoverable.

And change must lead to death. *What awaits men at death they do not expect or even imagine.* In John Stathatos's words: 'Appreciating change is also an acceptance of decay: you can't have memory unless you accept that you and your work will die at some time. Any application of memory,' he continues, 'has an elegiac tone to it. This is so both in the Hellenistic and in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, sometimes with a degree of sadness, sometimes with a degree of joy.' Because ours is a culture which exalts instant gratification, we postpone cultivation of an awareness of mortality. Above all, we do not see death as life's fulfilment, rather as its negation, a cancelling out.

Change is a procession of many lives, many deaths. *Death is all things we see awake.* Death leaves its mark in memories, memories which flow, ebb and disperse. Each life, each death, leaves its mark, not only in a memory, but on the land. A field boundary, a path to a stream, upturned sods, a dusting of ash: the passage of life, of death, is one and the same. The land is the physical register of mankind's transit, in life and death.

The land is the repository of history. John Stathatos's art is an art of landscape as history. He has said, 'If you ask me what is the one thing I am interested in as an artist, more than anything else it is processes of history.' Land which bears no trace of human presence, however slight or distant in time, is land without history. Such land exists in parts of the globe, but not in Europe. 'There is nowhere in Europe you can photograph where you won't be photographing human history,' is how Stathatos puts it.

The land Stathatos photographs is generic, not specific. It is Mediterranean. We see the grass blades, shrivelled boughs, dry river scum and the living rock of Magna Graecia. Here soil is thin, brush fires strike and water is precious, intermittent. This land is everywhere Greek, from Pythagoras's southern Italy to Heraclitus's Asia Minor. Yet each photograph cannot be other than somewhere particular, somewhere specific within the artist's experience. Each photograph must be his trace, his trace in history. His access to those places, though, is not unique. His feet follow those of countless generations. Shepherds fire the brush to ensure new season's growth. They lead their flocks to water when the river runs. They have done so since Hesiod - two centuries, even, before Heraclitus - taught the origins of the gods and the practical lore of farming. *The teacher of most is Hesiod.*

Just as mankind marks the land by passage in life and in death, so the land marks minds. Conceptions modulate to the ground bass of the land's specific physicality. As well as working within this landscape, John Stathatos works this land. The intellectual and physical environment are one. The most intimate experience of a particular topography - sharp stones underfoot and soil beneath the fingernails - prompts the deepest thoughts about the flow of time, about the nature of existence.

This is not fresh, this intersection of mind and physical experience. It is a process which has never stopped. It is subject to tradition. It is a process which, in this instance, is specifically Greek. This matters. By locating resonances of early Greek thought in a landscape, Stathatos discovers the fundamental Greekness of that thought within a particular mental and physical economy. The thought, the land, its measure by the footfall, are the elemental constituents of what it is to be Greek; Greek within the fused Hellenistic and Judaeo-Christian tradition.

John Stathatos reminds us of the value of tradition: not as authority, but as an ever-renewable repository of specific responses in given circumstances. In his words: 'I think one has to resist the temptation to reduce all cultural history to a common soup. It's as important to emphasize the differences as it is the common strands.' And different cultural traditions provide different voices, which together can form a clearly articulated heterophony. We must look for what is of value in various cultural sources, but always take into account - and

respect - the specific traditions of those sources. Here the tradition is uncompromisingly Greek: the warp on which three thousand years of culture - for good and ill - has been woven.

All who think within our culture turn to the dawn of thought, to Heraclitus. This has always been so, from Plato to Heidegger. To cope with the elemental, none can evade Heraclitus's presence. *Thinking is shared by all.*

Thought about change must stretch even beyond the bounds of history. It must embrace cosmology, the totality of human conception regarding the material and immaterial universe. Here, our parameters of thought in time are marked by Heraclitus 2,500 years ago and, in our own century, by Albert Einstein. With both Einstein and Heraclitus we acknowledge the imperative of the interconnection of the cosmos. We see a harmony of conflict, an unavoidability of flux, a necessity of proportion. Further, we acknowledge a conservation of, and equal exchange between, elemental forces, whether energy or matter. *Earth melts into sea, keeping to the measure it possessed before becoming earth.*

For Heraclitus, process, quality and substance were indistinguishable. Fire was both the principal element, as a component of the cosmos, and the agent of the process of change. *Fire when it comes will judge and convict all things.* We too experience conceptual ambiguity. Are certain mathematically-suggested concepts forces or matter? Ambiguity even enfolds our conception of light, the very stuff of photography. In cosmological discussion physicists now even write of 'one or more flavours of light'.³

The cosmology may have changed since Heraclitus, but the poetics remains the same. Above all, John Stathatos responds to poetics. He has said: 'Some of the best translations of pre-Socratic fragments have been by poets rather than by professional philosophers or classicists.' These fragments, known solely through the writings of others, provide not only matter for philosophical analysis, but have their own poetic independence. Like photographs, they are the survivals of processes of choice and chance, as much as of determination. Through poetics these photographs and fragments resonate memories and rhythms.

In the land and in the mind with which Stathatos confronts us each phenomenon has its own rhythm, its own purchase on time. Countless aeons wear the living rock, gouging earth's armature towards

the very omphalos of the world. Rivers rush with winter's season, exhaling mists before their utter desiccation by (in Hesiod's phrase) 'the sun's sharp fury'. *The sun is overseer and sentinel of cycles, for determining the changes and the seasons which bring all things to birth.* Brought to birth is fresh vegetal growth, in the shadow of the skeletal remnants of the previous year's incinerations. These brittle crowns mark fire's visitation and the swiftness of its scorching progress across the scrub. It dashes faster than a man can run, expiring within the photographic frame's parameter in moments. Faster still, though, is the photograph's exposure, the matter of an instant.

From the hundredths of a second of a photograph's registration to the millions of years of the earth's encrustation, each process is subject to its own appropriate measure and its own internal succession of events. Together these compose the planet's complex fugue. From the slow convulsion of geological strata to the snap of a shutter, all things have their harmony and proportion within time. And throughout time we seek to come to terms with the paradoxes of change within changelessness, variations within repeated cycles, harmony within ceaseless conflict.

While we read the signs and seek meanings, conscious that we cannot interpret a sign twice in the same way, we dimly become aware of photography's peculiar place in the economy of mind and matter. We think of our debt to tradition, to originary thought. *The hidden attunement is better than the obvious one.*

The translations of Heraclitus's fragments quoted here (in italics) which are not by John Stathatos are taken from C.H. Kahn, *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus: an Edition of the Fragments with Translation and Commentary* (Cambridge, 1979). The quotations from John Stathatos are derived from a conversation with the author in London in December 1990.

¹ George Eliot, *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life*, I, (Edinburgh and London, 1871), p. 34.

² John Stathatos, 'Representation and metaphor: photography in Britain during the 1980s', *European Photography*, 43, July-September 1990, p. 25.

³ G. Efstathiou, W.J. Sutherland and S.J. Maddox, 'The cosmological constant and cold dark matter', *Nature*, 348, 20-27 December 1990, p. 707.

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