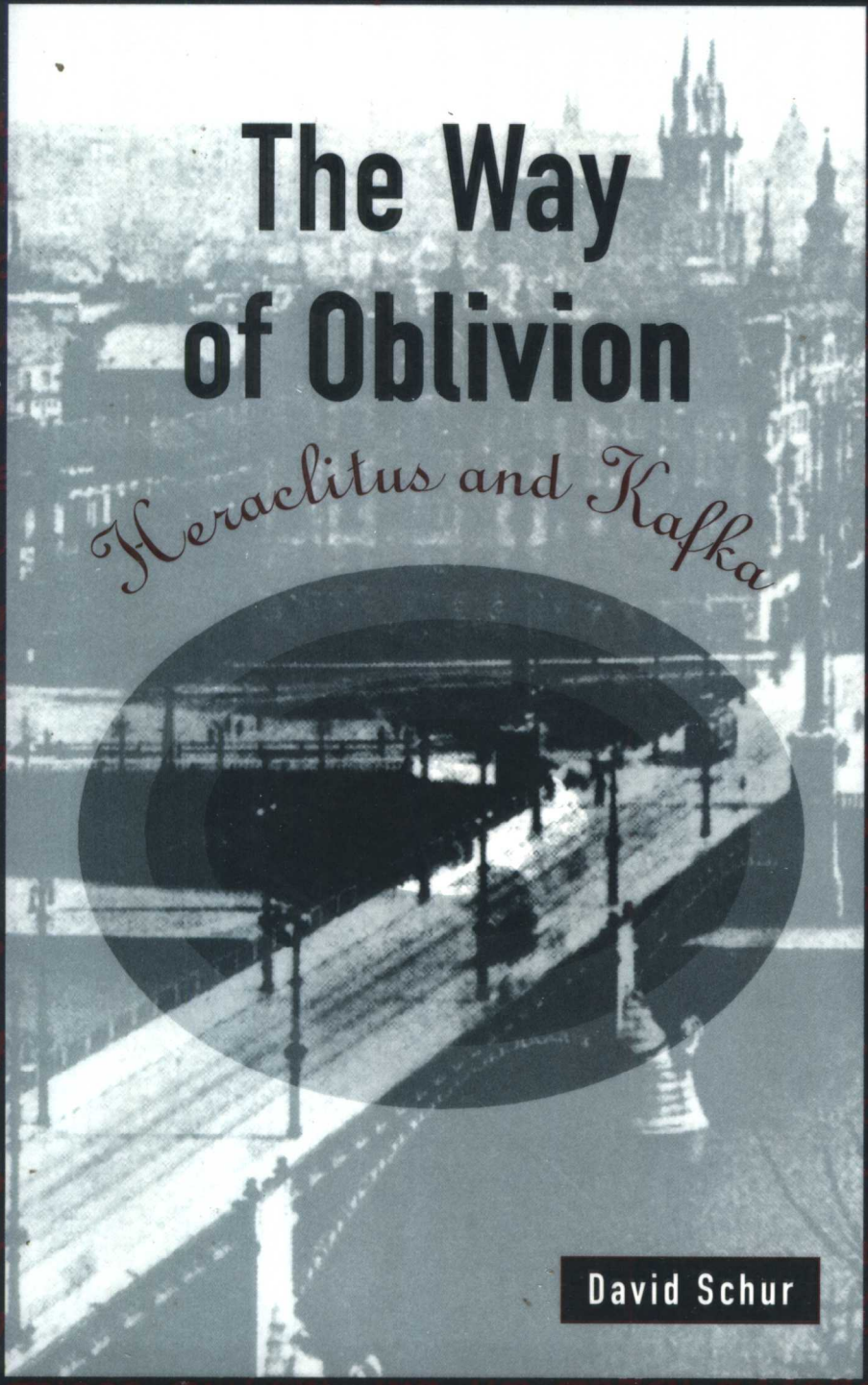
The Way of Oblivion

Heraclitus and Kafka



David Schur

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Abbreviations

DK Hermann Diels and Walther Kranz, eds. *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, 6th ed. (Berlin: Weidmann, 1952).

GA Martin Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1976–). Volume numbers given, followed by page numbers.

HL Franz Kafka, *Hochzeitsvorbereitungen auf dem Lande*, ed. Max Brod (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1983).

HW Martin Heidegger, *Holzwege*, 6th ed. (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1980).

LSJ H.G. Liddell, R. Scott, and H. Stuart Jones, eds. *Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th ed. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1940).

PF Maurice Blanchot, *La part du feu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949).

SE Franz Kafka, *Sämtliche Erzählungen*, ed. Paul Raabe (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1970).

SZ Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 15th ed. (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1986).

VA Martin Heidegger, *Vorträge und Aufsätze* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1954).

WD Martin Heidegger, *Was heisst Denken?* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1984).

WM Martin Heidegger, *Wegmarken*, 2nd ed. (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1978).

Note: References to volumes by Heidegger follow marginal pagination when possible.

Translations and Conventions

Citations of ancient passages refer to volumes in the Oxford Classical Texts series.

Transliterations of Greek words are printed in bold type, and given in the grammatical form of dictionary entries.

Translations are my own. The following editions, in addition to those cited in the study, were frequently consulted.

Kathleen Freeman, *Ancilla to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1956).

Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962).

Martin Heidegger, *Early Greek Thinking: The Dawn of Western Philosophy*, trans. David Farrell Krell and Frank A. Capuzzi (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1975).

Martin Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?*, trans. J. Glenn Gray (New York: Harper and Row, 1968).

Franz Kafka, *The Complete Stories*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken, 1976).

Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Desmond Lee, revised 2nd ed. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974).

Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Paul Shorey, 2 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1970).

Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1968).

Contents

Introduction

1. Unapproachable Writers

Heraclitus is supposed to have written a book and then hidden it. Diogenes Laertius tells us:

> Some say that he dedicated **[anatithêmi]** it in the temple of Artemis, having endeavored to write rather unclearly, so that only those able might approach it and so that it might not be easily looked down upon **[eukataphronêtos]** by the public.[1]

While simply an anecdote, this story may introduce some of the problems to be explored in this study. It depicts a very early writer's self-consciousness about writing. At about 500 B.C., when writing offered extraordinary new possibilities for publicity and permanence, Heraclitus

[1] ἀνέθηκε δ' αὐτὸ ἐς τὸ τῆς Ἀρτέμιδος ἱερόν, ὡς μέν τινες, ἐπιτηδεύσας ἀσαφέστερον γράψαι, ὅπως οἱ δυνάμενοι <μόνοι> προσίοιεν αὐτῶι καὶ μὴ ἐκ τοῦ δημώδους εὐκαταφρόνητον ἦι (DK A 1.6).

wrote an obscure and unapproachable book. In the anecdote, the prefixes "up" (**ana**) and "down" (**kata**) accompany the reversal of our expectations: the book is dedicated or "set up" (**ana-tithêmi**) for a goddess rather than submitted to a human public that could "easily look down" (**eu-kata-phronêtos**) on it.[2] Though we tend to think of writing as publication, not concealment, Heraclitus may have thought otherwise. From the fragments of his book that have survived, we can surmise that Heraclitus expected to be misunderstood. He may even have viewed obscurity and concealment as unavoidable consequences of writing.

Similar problems concerning the phenomenon of writing arise in the work of Franz Kafka. If Heraclitus is one of our most ancient writers, Kafka seems especially modern.[3] Comparing the two opens a perspective on the philosophical implications of writing from both ends of its historical spectrum. Kafka's reputation is based in large part on texts that he asked his friend Max Brod to burn.[4] Heraclitus's

[2] Compare Plato's *Republic* 521b, where Socrates uses the verb **kataphroneô** (to look down on) to describe the tensions between the life of true philosophy and that of politicians ("Do you know of any life other than that of true philosophy, I said, which looks down on political rulers?" [Ἔχεις οὖν, ἦν δ' ἐγώ, βίον ἄλλον τινὰ πολιτικῶν ἀρχῶν καταφρονοῦντα ἢ τὸν τῆς ἀληθινῆς φιλοσοφίας . . .]).

[3] "Kafka's most marked contribution to modern art and culture is to the way in which the subject of writing has become Writing, the way in which reflection on the act of writing has become ontological, not psychological, ranging from metaphysical reference to technical aspects of its production" (Stanley Corngold, *Franz Kafka: The Necessity of Form* [Ithaca: Cornell UP], 2 n. 5).

[4] Kafka left behind several notes indicating what he wanted burned. See Max Brod, "Nachwort zur ersten Ausgabe," in *Der Prozeß*, by Franz Kafka, 5th

withdrawal into obscurity has a modern parallel in Kafka's unfulfilled request for oblivion. Both writers supposedly did not want their own works to reach the general public, and what remains of their writings is fragmentary. Yet both have been deluged and supplanted by vast traditions of transmission, publication, translation, and interpretation.

The works of Heraclitus and Kafka share in a struggle between disclosure and obscurity that is perhaps as old as writing itself. Broadly speaking, it is the rhetorical and thematic implications of this conflict that I propose to investigate. Specifically, my study compares Heraclitus and Kafka by focusing on their literary depictions of philosophical method. My primary goal is to demonstrate that they use similar paradoxical metaphors to describe similar paradoxes of philosophical method.

2. A Shared Approach

Given the unusual disparity of the works analyzed in the following study, my approach requires some explanation. My method of analysis is primarily philological and rhetorical. In reading closely, I attempt to expose significance by focusing on the rhetorical function of specific elements within a given text.

Although the practice of scrutinizing texts is shared by classical scholarship and literary criticism, each academic

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ed. (New York: Schocken, 1946), 315–323; Heinz Politzer, *Franz Kafka: Parable and Paradox* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1962), 296–298; Marthe Robert, *Seul, comme Franz Kafka* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1979), 129.

field currently has a different outlook on interpretation. One sign of this, pertinent to the work at hand, is the fact that Martin Heidegger's interpretations of Greek authors are rarely acknowledged by classical scholars. Meanwhile, largely through the publications of Jacques Derrida, Heidegger has had a tremendous impact on literary criticism. My work in both fields has been guided by the following considerations.

In the field of classical studies, the theory that early Greek poetry was originally transmitted in an oral tradition has opened the way for previously unimagined significance to be found in ancient compositions.[5] Supported by this theory of oral composition, philologists can attribute extraordinarily sophisticated networks of meaning to the hand (or the voice) of tradition: compositions which were honed in the process of transmission are seen to have consummate artistic integrity.[6] Their accidental quality removed, so to speak, Greek epics abound in meaningfully interrelated specifics.

In effect, the oral tradition is seen as a muse, speaking through an oblivious author.[7] In some of its implications, this view is surprisingly compatible with the radical methods of reading introduced by Freud and Heidegger.

[5] See Milman Parry, *The Making of Homeric Verse: The Collected Papers of Milman Parry*, ed. A. Parry (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971); Albert Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1960); Gregory Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1979).

[6] Cf. Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans*, 4–6.

[7] Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans*, 16.

Put simply, both Freud and Heidegger propose that humans are oblivious to realms of significance hidden in what they say.[8] This proposed realm of hidden significance offers numerous vistas. What we strive to reveal may become obscured in the attempt; at the same time, our attempts to hide something may reveal it.[9] In light of such theories, we might set the unconscious, or language itself, beside the muse of oral composition, acknowledging that even oblivious methods of composition justify careful methods of interpretation. And while the "streamlining" effect of oral performance is an example that appeals to one's everyday notions about the expression of meaning, the muse should play no less a role in written composition.

These philological, Freudian, and Heideggerian theories thus share the premise that coherent arrangements of significance (so coherent as to rule out coincidence con-

[8] Freud introduces such a model of reading in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (*Die Traumdeutung*, in *Gesammelte Werke*, vols. 2–3 [London: Imago, 1942]). Heidegger's theory and practice of literary study is prominently displayed in *On the Way to Language* (*Unterwegs zur Sprache* [GA 12]). While Freud reads the unconscious, particularly as manifested in dreams, Heidegger eventually seeks the significance of Being as expressed in language itself. Although Heidegger concedes that humans speak continuously, "when awake and when dreaming" (*im Wachen und im Traum*), he prefers to focus on language itself, proclaiming that "language speaks" (*die Sprache spricht* [GA 12.11, 12]).

[9] As Michael Gelven formulates one of Heidegger's insights: ". . . we often reveal ourselves most clearly when we try to hide or conceal ourselves" (*A Commentary on Heidegger's* Being and Time, revised ed. [DeKalb: Northern Illinois UP, 1989], 224). R.G. Collins speaks similarly of "the hidden relevance of the irrelevant" as a paradoxical principle in Kafka's work ("Kafka's Special Methods of Thinking," in *Franz Kafka's* The Trial, ed. Harold Bloom [New York: Chelsea House, 1987], 49).

vincingly), inaccessible and unforseen by an author's consciousness, may be found in that author's verbal composition. And this premise has guided my own analyses in several respects. First, it has encouraged me to take rhetoric seriously. Instead of dismissing a given word or phrase as formulaic or somehow inconsequential, I have often tried to establish its significance within a wider context of which the author may or may not have been aware. Second, and this remains to be substantiated, I have found that Heraclitus and Kafka themselves accept the premise that authors unknowingly hide as much as they knowingly reveal. Having found this to be so, I have felt justified in giving them the sort of scrutiny invited by their own theories.

Consequently, it is on a shared premise that I base my endeavor to read ancients and moderns with equal care. I do not treat this premise as an invitation to interpretive license. It does, however, permit me to discuss Heraclitus's paradox of method as a persistent current of thought, flowing through Continental philosophical literature and reaching an unacknowledged crest in Kafka's writings.

3. A Paradox of Method and Paradoxical Rhetoric

The idea that an author who is consciously trying to convey one thing might unconsciously convey another sounds paradoxical. Let us call it a paradox of method, a methodological paradox. In the following chapter, I shall argue that Heraclitus expresses a version of this paradox by using a distinctive kind of paradoxical rhetoric to describe

method. Subsequent chapters will examine the role of this particular combination of rhetoric and paradox in writings by Plato, Heidegger, Maurice Blanchot, and Kafka. By taking a moment here to explain my use of such terms as method, philosophy, and paradox, I wish to prevent misunderstanding and to introduce some points of reference for my argument.

Since their first recorded efforts, Western authors, especially speculative thinkers, have relied heavily on the metaphor of the "way" when describing their methods. Indeed, the Greek word **hodos** ("way" or "path") gives us our own word "method" (from **methodos**, "a following after" [LSJ]). This kind of "way" is primarily mental rather than physical; otherwise, we could not call it a metaphor. For example, when Herodotus says that he has many ways [**hodos** plural] of words to tell, or when Descartes resolves to follow "the straight path" (*le droit chemin*), he is referring to a nonphysical, verbal, or mental "way." I shall not hesitate to call any such way meant to determine the nature of truth, judgment, or immortality a philosophical method.

If we accept that the way is a common metaphor for method, what happens when this rhetorical commonplace is turned into a paradox? For instance, what happens when a writer says that his "way" is both crooked and straight? The result is a paradox about method. What I shall be calling the Heraclitean paradox of method throughout this study is a particular, paradoxical version of methodological rhetoric. To begin with, it is a paradox of method, saying that oblivion is an essential component of philosophical

method. It is also an example of paradoxical rhetoric, in which metaphors of locomotion or orientation are made to appear paradoxical.

For our purposes, the term "paradox" has several applications. Etymologically, a para-dox is something that contradicts a commonly held opinion. Applying this definition of paradox, I shall argue that Heraclitus's use of metaphor is seen to be paradoxical when considered in the wider context of Greek literature. But a second, solely descriptive definition of paradox will also prove helpful. Even when dealing with early Greek authors who had no acquaintance with Platonic or Aristotelian logic, it is possible to distinguish statements that, from a modern point of view, are illogical and contradictory.[10] As long as we keep in mind that this view is purely descriptive and diagnostic, there will be no cause for anachronistically attributing modern notions to ancient thinkers. In my opinion, Heraclitus's characterization of method is paradoxical in this second broad sense as well.

More specifically, Heraclitus's metaphors of locomotion and orientation are contradictory in terms of direction, connection, and closure. These blanket terms, which I shall be applying to a wide variety of metaphors, are meant to include their contradictory permutations. For example, a contradictory account of a method's direction may involve

[10] I see no reason to adopt a more technical definition of paradox, but Aristotle's "principle of non-contradiction" may serve as a commonly held reference point, especially since Aristotle considers Heraclitus a prime violator of that principle. See Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1005b.

indirection. Or a method may appear as a paradoxical kind of connection because it is also characterized by disconnection or mnemonic connection. And closure may refer to open-endedness or disclosure in method. Expressions such as "the Heraclitean paradox of method" will therefore serve as abbreviations for a broad but distinctive range of paradoxes concerned with oblivion in method.

4. Overview

To reiterate the argument before proceeding, my study compares Heraclitus and Kafka on the basis of paradoxes they raise about philosophical method. I argue that both writers use rhetorically similar paradoxes to express problems of human oblivion. Notwithstanding the huge amount of scholarly research devoted to these writers, my focus on the rhetoric of method has opened several previously ignored avenues of research. On the broadest level, I find that the Heraclitean paradox of method has played a noteworthy role in Western (specifically, Continental) philosophical literature from ancient times to the present.

There are two main parts to my study. The first part details the nature and development of Heraclitus's paradox of method; the second investigates the role of this paradox in texts by Kafka. In the first chapter, I establish that the metaphor of the "way" is used by Greeks such as Homer and Hesiod to describe method in terms of memory and oblivion. Then I argue that Heraclitus, using this metaphor in a contradictory manner, formulates a paradox of

method. Heraclitus emphasizes oblivion when he describes method as a "way" that is both straight and crooked or upward and downward.

Chapters on Plato's *Republic* and Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* (*Sein und Zeit*) investigate the development of Heraclitus's paradox into an important account of method. Plato's upward path toward truth is consistently and paradoxically accompanied by a downward inclination toward oblivion and ignorance. Heidegger, attributing crucial insights to Heraclitus, describes how humans are caught in a downward movement of forgetfulness that is concurrently a trend of upward disclosure.

My consideration of methodological metaphors in *Being and Time* is followed by a chapter on Heidegger's interpretation of Heraclitus. With Heidegger's theories in mind, I conclude this part of the study by analyzing an episode in Homer's *Odyssey*. My analysis confirms the value of Heidegger's insights into the Greeks' understanding of oblivion and truth as concealment and disclosure.

A chapter on Maurice Blanchot serves as a transition to three chapters on Kafka. In Blanchot's essay "The Reading of Kafka" (*La lecture de Kafka*), I uncover an implicitly Heraclitean view of Kafka. Blanchot finds that a paradox of survival and oblivion is both described and enacted in Kafka's writings. By showing that this paradox is Heraclitean, I prepare the way for a Heraclitean reading of Kafka.

"The true way," writes Kafka, "goes over a rope which is stretched not up above but close over the ground" (*Der wahre Weg geht über ein Seil, das nicht in der Höhe gespannt ist,*