

*The Way of Oblivion: Heraclitus and Kafka*

reviewed by Kevin J. Hart

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On the future of aesthetics

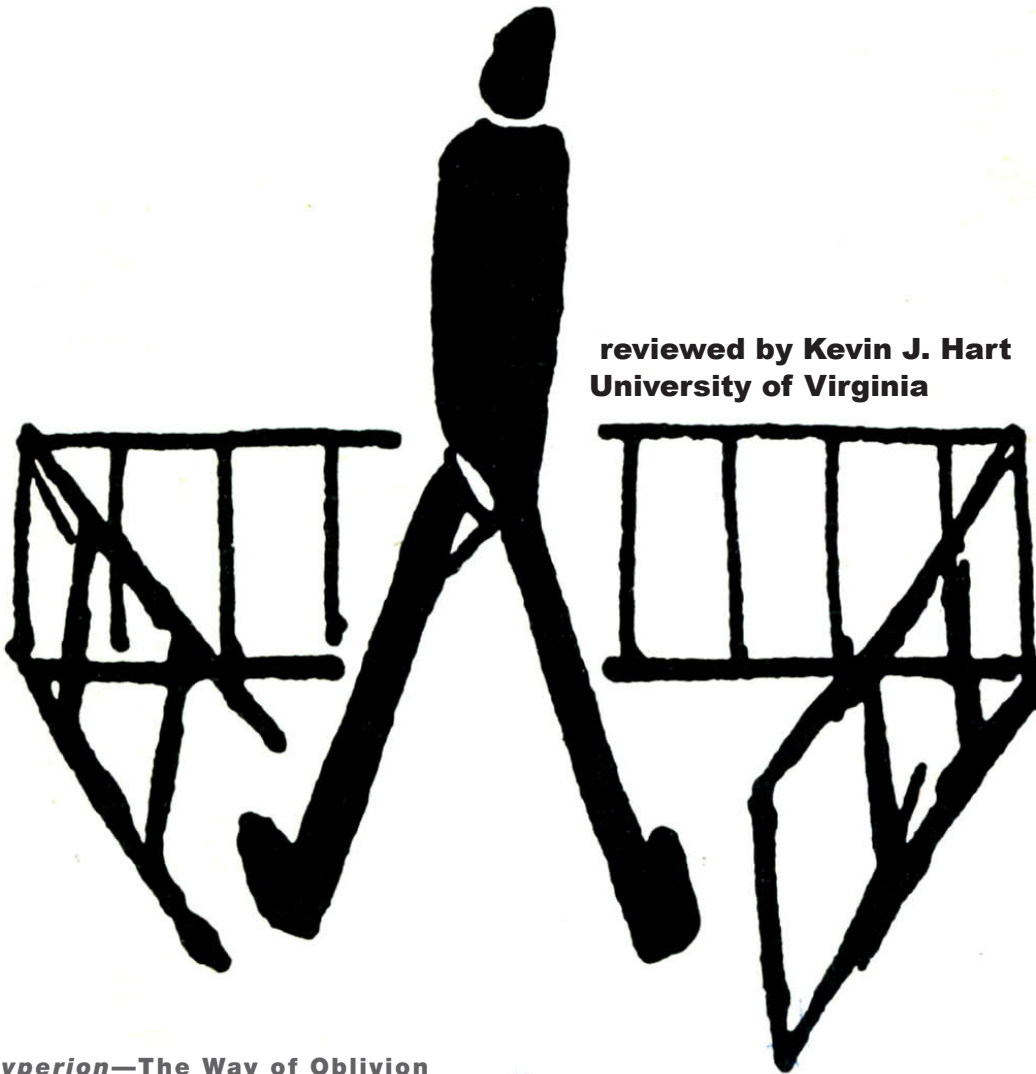
a review of

# The Way of Oblivion: Heraclitus and Kafka

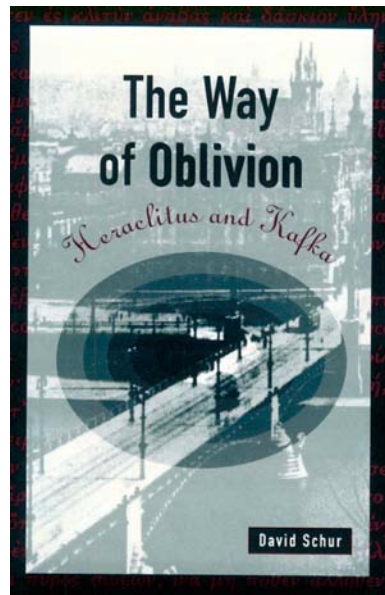
David Schur

Harvard University Press, 1998

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Heidegger and Eugen Fink, *Heraclitus Seminar 1966/67*, trans. Charles H. Seibert (University: University of Alabama Press, 1979): 3.

In 1966, Eugen Fink made some preliminary comments by way of opening the seminar on Heraclitus that he was convening with Martin Heidegger at the University of Freiburg im Breisgau. “Our seminar should be an exercise in thinking, that is, in reflection on the thoughts anticipated by Heraclitus. Confronted with his texts, left to us only as fragments, we are not so much concerned with the philological problematic, as important as it might be, as with advancing into the matter itself, that is, toward the matter that must have stood before Heraclitus’s spiritual view.”<sup>1</sup> The distinction between philology and “the matter itself” is fundamental to phenomenology, and Fink goes on in a manner that would have been entirely familiar to Heidegger, for both he and Fink learned the lesson from Husserl several decades before. “This matter is not simply on hand like a result or like some spoken tradition: rather, it can be opened up or blocked from view precisely through the spoken tradition. It is not correct to view the matter of philosophy, particularly the matter of thinking as Martin Heidegger has formulated it, as a product lying before us. The matter of thinking does not lie somewhere before us like a land of truth into which one can advance; it is not a thing that we can discover and uncover. The reality of, and the appropriate manner of access to, the matter of thinking is still dark for us. We are still seeking the matter of thinking of the thinker Heraclitus, and we are therefore a little like the poor man who has forgotten where the road leads” (3).

One might situate David Schur’s fine book in terms of these comments about method. For Schur, Heraclitus is a self-conscious *writer*, and he takes as evidence Diogenes Laertius’s remark that Heraclitus wrote a book and left it in the temple of Artemis, and that this book was deliberately written in an obscure style so as not to be understood by the vulgar. On this reading, Heraclitus, like Kafka and all moderns, is self-conscious: not only does he see that to write

is to encrypt, to risk meaning one thing and saying another, but also that the writer is someone who, by rhetorical skill, can exploit to his advantage the gulf between meaning and saying. Heraclitus as exemplary modern: this means, for Schur, that the whole of the West is to be contained by Heraclitus at one end and Kafka at the other and that “West” and “modern” are co-ordinate notions. Are there different forms of modernity? Of course: ancient Alexandria is one, Renaissance Italy is another, Jena at the birth of Romanticism yet another. Schur passes over these, for he is concerned to paint with a large brush. What he wishes to represent is what he calls “philosophical method,” and interestingly this method can be found in literature as well as philosophy. Schur has a number of finer brushes, but he prefers to use them for other purposes: chiefly, the close reading of Kafka. We are to be shaken by his first, main point and set to wonder about this philosophical method.

This method expresses itself, Schur argues, by way of “paradoxical metaphors” (3): metaphors, precisely, of the “way.” For “way” is not just one topos among others; it is revealed to be the master topos of method. (“Method,” as Schur reminds us, comes from the conjunction of *meta-* and *hodos*, giving us “a ‘following after, pursuit, esp. pursuit of knowledge, method of inquiry’”(16).) Jacques Derrida had suggested some time back that we look back to the etymology of “method” in order better to understand Descartes’ *Discourse on Method*.<sup>2</sup> In a method, one follows the path or way ahead, but of course the path or way is not necessarily methodical. I mention Derrida not so much to identify an earlier reflection on method that Schur seems to have bypassed (but it is hard to tell: the book has no bibliography) as to signal that Schur has learned from Derrida to pay attention to writing: phenomenal script, of course, and the structure of difference and deferral that gets encrypted in the act of writing. “My method of analysis is primarily philological and rhetorical,” Schur writes. “In reading closely, I attempt to expose significance by focusing on the rhetorical function of specific elements within a given text” (3). So Schur seems to step past Fink and Heidegger, and to pass from a (post)-phenomenological reading of Heraclitus to one that is attentive to philology precisely because of what Derrida has told us. One can relish the irony when Schur speaks of “My method of analysis. . .,” for one can analyze method only by way of method, and show a paradox only by way of a paradox. Karl Reinhardt asks in his edition of Heraclitus’s fragments (the subject of several exchanges by Fink and Heidegger in their seminar) “is the way an image, a parable, or a doctrine?” (quoted, 42). And we too may wonder if Schur’s method of reading philosophical method is an image, a parable, or a doctrine.

Perhaps Heraclitus was the progenitor of a “paradox of method,” namely “consciously trying to convey one thing” and “unconsciously convey[ing] another” (6). I am not sure that the modern duality of conscious and unconscious quite works here, any more than it would for the parables of

<sup>2</sup> See Jacques Derrida, “La langue et le discours de la méthode,” in *Recherches sur la philosophie du langage*, Cahiers du Groupe de recherches sur la philosophie et le langage (Paris: Vrin, 1983): 35-51.

Jesus. What would be lost by focusing entirely on writing and leaving the manifest and latent out of play? The appeal to modernity would be one thing. Consider one fragment that is important for Schur's case. It begins:

“

For while all things happen in accordance with this *logos*, they are like people without experience when experiencing the sorts of words and deeds that I set forth by distinguishing each thing according to nature. (44-45)

Schur notes that Heraclitus uses the first person (“I”) and describes his “method of description.” Yet, we are told, “Heraclitus cannot successfully communicate what he has investigated” (45). There is a gulf between description and communication. The fragment concludes:

“

But what they do when awake escapes the notice of [*lanthanō*] other people, just as they forget [*epilanthanoma*] what they do when asleep. (45)

Communication fails, then, because other people do not take due notice of the *logos*. Investigation uncovers *logos* but exposition allows it to remain in oblivion. Such is the “paradox of method.” To which one might say to Heraclitus (or to anyone): be a bit less snooty and take greater pains to be clear. A modern might respond by reminding us of the necessity of indirect communication, irony, the gap between latent and manifest content, the impossibility of reading, or something of the sort. The explanation can be a response to the mediocrity of one's peers as readers, or to the constitutive gap between what one wishes to say and what one actually says. Doubtless there are people for whom either or both is true, though I am doubtful that one *has* to hold that one's readers are always inadequate. A *philosophical* method would be one that is firmly grounded on recognizing that the gap between investigation and exposition is a principle of discourse, not on thinking that, because one is a philosopher, one therefore has better ideas than other people, ideas that they will never grasp or take seriously.

Be that as it may, Schur locates the paradox of method with Heraclitus's fragments, and then examines the “philosophical method” in Plato, Heidegger, Blanchot, and Kafka. The sequence has a logic of its own, needless to say (Heidegger as reader of Heraclitus and Plato; Blanchot as reader of Heraclitus and Heidegger, as well as of Kafka), but one cannot help but note the vast

leap from Plato to Heidegger. One is left to imagine what wondrous book would have emerged had Schur folded into his reflections St. Augustine on *modus sine modo* (a way without a way) and the complex heritage it bequeathed to St. Bernard of Clairvaux, St. Bonaventure, Jean Gerson, and Meister Eckhart. Not that this heritage remains always within the firm grip of Christian theology. It is Blanchot and Lévinas who retrieve it, perhaps without knowing that they are doing so, in their syntax of “X without X,” and that Derrida turns into a non-methodical method in his discussion of *le pas au-delà* as a step beyond and a step not beyond: a step without step, as it were.<sup>3</sup> What Schur says about “Heidegger’s Way of Waylessness” in his third chapter could be explored in intriguing ways in many late patristic and medieval works, as well as in other areas of discourse. For example, one might also wonder how this book would appear with a chapter on the poetry of René Char: Char as reader of Heraclitus and Heidegger, Blanchot as reader of Heraclitus, Heidegger, and Char. As the new critics knew, lyric poetry is an ideal place to study the ways in which discourse reveals and conceals itself.

<sup>3</sup> See Derrida, “Notices (Warnings),” *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987).

It is part of the magic of *The Way of Oblivion* that the reader does not simply contemplate the doubling at the heart of method—straight way, crooked way; true way and false way; the way up and the way down; the way that leads ahead, the way that makes one stumble as one goes—but that one immediately wants to test the method for oneself. For Schur himself, the end of his study (both *telos* and conclusion) is the reading of Kafka’s narratives. What he calls, in one of the moments in the book that strongly recalls Paul de Man, “the rhetoric of method,” opens up, “several previously ignored avenues of research” in Kafka studies. One of these is the exploration of transcendence in Kafka, a transcendence that hides itself in negation where, paradoxically, it multiplies its power over us. It was Blanchot who first saw how to value transcendence in Kafka, as Schur realizes: the path had already been opened, though few had ventured down it. Consider this passage from Blanchot’s extraordinary essay “Reading Kafka”:

“

Kafka’s entire work is in search of an affirmation that it wants to gain by negation, an affirmation that conceals itself as soon as it emerges, seems to be a lie and thus is excluded from being an affirmation, making affirmation once again possible. It is for this reason that it seems so strange to say of such a world that it is unaware of transcendence. Transcendence is exactly this affirmation that can assert itself only by negation. It exists as a result of being denied; it is present because it is not there. The dead God has found a kind of impressive revenge in this work. For his death does not deprive him of his power, his infinite authority, or his infallibility: dead, he is even more terrible,

<sup>4</sup> Maurice Blanchot, "Reading Kafka," *The Work of Fire*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995): 7.

<sup>5</sup> Derrida, *Edmund Husserl's "Origin of Geometry": An Introduction*, trans. and pref. John P. Leavey, Jr., ed. David B. Allison (Stony Brook, NY: Nicolas Hays, Ltd., 1978): 153.

more invulnerable, in a combat in which there is no longer any possibility of defeating him. It is a dead transcendence we are battling with, it is a dead emperor the functionary represents in "The Great Wall of China," and in "The Penal Colony," it is the dead former Commandant whom the torture machine makes forever present.<sup>4</sup>

This is what Schur calls Kafka's use of "Heraclitean rhetoric to discuss transcendence as a paradoxical way beyond the everyday world" (188). I do not know if we need to evoke Heraclitus here. Is it not sufficient to read or re-read Blanchot's essays on Kafka? True, Blanchot admired Heraclitus, but the originality and force of his reading of Kafka is deeply his own.

Following the discussion of negative transcendence, Schur proposes to read Kafka's story "The Judgment" as "Heraclitean in its depiction of transcendence as inseparable from oblivion" (188). "Like Blanchot," he says, "I read the story on what is ultimately a metaphorical level" (188). The close reading of the story is impressive; Schur has learned from Blanchot without repeating his insights or his tone. One only wishes that he had devoted a chapter or more to *The Trial* and *The Castle*. At the end of *The Way of Oblivion*, one looks back on highly intelligent, close readings of Heraclitus, Plato, Heidegger, Blanchot, and Kafka, and one has seen many examples of Heraclitus's paradoxical method. It has turned out to be rather flexible. At no time, though, has one encountered any counter-examples to this method. The reader is likely to wonder what, if anything, escapes this wild method, and therefore to question the specificity of the particular trajectory that Schur has us follow. At the same time, the reader is likely to ponder other texts, some of which I have indicated, that might well be read according to this method.

Schur has apparently placed himself outside the phenomenological reading of Heraclitus that was the beginning of Fink and Heidegger's seminar. Yet, as Derrida showed as early as his reading of Husserl's "The Origin of Geometry," close reading occurs at the limit of phenomenology. *La différance* becomes manifest only in the transcendental reduction, albeit a reduction that is (as Merleau-Ponty recognized) never complete. "The Reduction is only pure thought as that delay," Derrida writes, "pure thought investigating the sense of itself as delay within philosophy."<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the sort of philological reading in which Schur excels is made possible by his reductions. That he does not draw attention to them is of course merely a part of his method.

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