
Heraclitus: Greek Text with a Short Commentary by Miroslav Marcovich

Second Edition, including Fresh Addenda, Corrigenda, and a Select Bibliography (1967–2000). International Pre-Platonic Studies 2. Sankt Augustin: Academia Verlag, 2001. Pp. xxviii+681. ISBN 3–89665–171–4. Cloth € 79.00

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When this book first appeared in 1967, it established itself as the fullest, most thorough edition of Heraclitus ever made. But since it was published in Venezuela it was difficult to purchase, and it has remained a rare book. I spent months searching for a used copy on the internet before I found one. Now it is reissued as a second edition (with minor additions) by Academia Verlag.

Heraclitus has been treated as the Mad Hatter of Presocratic philosophy. Plato and Aristotle attributed to him a theory of radical flux, according to which everything was constantly changing and, hence contradictory statements were true, so that rational discourse was impossible. Karl Reinhardt challenged this view in a book on Parmenides [1916] and a couple of later articles, and he was followed a generation later by Geoffrey Kirk [1954]. According to their interpretation, Heraclitus was a natural philosopher in the Ionian tradition who stressed constancy rather than change and had a rational outlook on the world. Marcovich is an adherent of this revisionary view and he presents Heraclitus as a philosopher with a coherent physical theory (or mostly coherent: he misprizes Heraclitus' consistency at times [cf. 1965, col. 271], though he views him as more properly a metaphysician [1965, col. 295]). Subsequently, Charles Kahn [1979] published an edition of Heraclitus that downplayed his commitment to natural philosophy and stressed his focus on the human condition. This more humanistic philosopher used rhetorical and linguistic tools to present a complex message in which the human microcosm is more important than the cosmos. The view that presented Heraclitus as a physicist and that which presented him as a humanist

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marked important advances in scholarship. But the view of Heraclitus as philosopher of radical flux is not dead: it has been revived or reaffirmed more recently by Jonathan Barnes [1982]. All of these views have something important to contribute to our understanding of Heraclitus, and some limitations.

Marcovich's edition consists of a collection of the fragments and related texts with a brief commentary. He begins with a preamble of only three pages in which he lays out his scheme without any methodological discussion. Here some background is helpful. Convinced that Heraclitus' work consisted of gnomic utterances rather than connected discourse, Hermann Diels arranged the fragments in the (for philosophical purposes) arbitrary order of the alphabetic sequence of the names of the secondary sources in which they were found. Rejecting this approach (for unstated reasons), Marcovich organizes the fragments into groups of thematically related utterances. Today some scholars would defend Diels' curious order on the grounds that it forces us to pay more attention to the sources from which the fragments came, and that this can allow us to understand their meaning better. Yet for the purposes of philosophical reconstruction, Diels' approach is frustrating. For instance, in Diels and Kranz 1951¹ the three alleged fragments about a river, which all seem connected in some way, are given as B12, B49a, and B91; here the order interferes with the interpretation. Marcovich divides Heraclitus' statements into lines, really cola or phrases; but unfortunately he never explains or justifies his practice, nor more generally his hermeneutical principles.

Marcovich's edition ignores the testimonies about Heraclitus except as they immediately bear on fragments. In most cases the biographical testimonies in particular are notoriously unhelpful. But there are interesting background testimonies. Diogenes Laertius [*Vitae philos.* 9.5] says that Heraclitus' book was divided into three sections by topic, but Marcovich ignores this potentially important piece of information. In other writings Marcovich claims that such division is a Hellenistic fabrication, but in the present book he simply ignores Diogenes' report. The result is that, while Marcovich's approach enriches the range of texts under consideration in some ways, in other ways it impoverishes the selection and prejudices the issues.

¹ Hereafter, Diels and Kranz 1951 = DK.

Marcovich puts connected texts together in the same group and thus allows us to compare them. (Of course it is no easy matter to decide which of Heraclitus' often enigmatic texts belong together, but at least Marcovich's method allows for the content to count in the ordering.) Marcovich assigns a fragment number to each separate statement of Heraclitus; and he accompanies each fragment with texts that quote, allude to, or echo it. In this way he sometimes assembles a large number of related texts, which he orders by their value for understanding the original statement and by their connections to one another. This way of assembling texts is the real beauty of Marcovich's edition: it allows the reader to see what words or ideas the ancient sources attributed to Heraclitus, and how they understood those words or ideas.

One example in which Marcovich's method proves itself is in his handling of the alleged river fragments, already mentioned. Following Reinhardt and Kirk, he shows that there is really only one river fragment, his fr. 40 [= B12 DK], which reads, in his translation, 'Upon those who are stepping into the same rivers different and again different waters flow'. Thus, statements that you cannot step twice into the same river are seen to be misreadings foisted on Heraclitus by an interpretive tradition. This point deals a death blow to the theory of radical flux which makes identity over time impossible: the river stays the same even though (or better, because) the waters are always different. Thus Heraclitus balances flux with constancy.

Marcovich's interpretations are not, however, always so successful. Take for instance B36 = 66 M, which he renders as follows:

For souls it is death to become water,
for water it is death to become earth;
but out of water earth comes-to-be,
and out of water, soul.

Marcovich turns this into a physiological discussion, in which water stands for blood and earth for flesh [363], and he infers that Heraclitus may have agreed with the Homeric view that souls in Hades can be nourished by blood offerings [362]. But in the first line, 'water' may well mean just water, and the last two lines closely parallel the earth-water-fire scheme of B31 = 53 M. So it is not clear why we need to bring in flesh and blood, given that there is no warrant for this in the other fragments. We need to drink water to live. So why not take

water as a source of soul? If in the preceding instance Marcovich is too speculative, some of his interpretations on other occasions seem too literal. For example, when Heraclitus says that the width of the sun is the length of a human foot [B3 = 57 M], Marcovich takes him as meaning precisely that the sun is the one foot in width. Now, given the unusual statements we find in Heraclitus, we cannot rule out the literal interpretation *a priori*. But at least one would like to know what implications such a doctrine had for Heraclitus' physical theory in general, and what other doctrines might entail or at least be consistent with it. Marcovich gives us no help. Marcovich's Heraclitus is also sometimes less than the sum of his doctrinal parts. B3 should now be joined with B94 = 52 M, as indicated by a reading in the Derveni Papyrus [*P. Derv.* IV.6–9: see Sider 1997].

In sifting through textual variants, Marcovich is painstaking and usually reliable. However, he sometimes misses some valuable corrections. In B51 = 27 M, he argues for *παλίντονος* ('back-stretched') rather than *παλίντροπος* ('back-turning') as an epithet for the structure of a bow or lyre. Although his arguments are attractive, they overlook a simple point made by Vlastos almost a half century ago [1955, 348]: the only real quotation we have is from Hippolytus, who actually had a book of Heraclitus' sayings in front of him (as we can see from his series of lengthy quotations)—and he writes *παλίντροπος*. All the other citations are partial citations from memory (mostly from Plutarch, who gives both readings in different places and is notoriously cavalier). Thus, it is not the case that Plutarch's text of Heraclitus has a different reading from Hippolytus'; Plutarch has no text at all and he cannot remember just how it goes. (Kirk never appreciated the point either, ignoring Vlastos' decisive argument in his rejoinder: see Kirk, Raven, and Schofield 1983, 192n1).

Overall, however, Marcovich is reliable in his textual criticism and in his treatment of Heraclitus' physical doctrines. The realm in which his commentary seems most inadequate is in his treatment of Heraclitus' expressions, his rhetoric and verbal techniques. Marcovich often observes word play and ambiguity. But he does not ever seem to recognize the full significance of Heraclitus' expression. In this area Kahn has made a major step forward. Marcovich [1982] wrote a scathing review of Kahn's book, faulting it for everything from bad textual readings to inadequate translations to an indefensible hypothesis about the order of Heraclitus' discourse. But the

most innovative thing about Kahn's approach he does not mention: Kahn takes Heraclitus' verbal techniques to be integral to his message rather than extrinsic to it. Whereas scholars had standardly argued about whether *αἰεὶ* ('always') in B1 = 1 M went with the preceding or the following words, Kahn made a good case for taking the wording as ambiguous by design. Kahn's treatment of B12 = 40 M is masterful: the whole fragment is syntactically ambiguous, yielding two mutually reinforcing statements. Heraclitus' Logos has multiple meanings that careless readers miss, as sleepwalkers miss the significance of experience; his texts are microcosms rich with 'meaningful ambiguity'. The subtlety and sensitivity of Kahn's readings do not appear in Marcovich's account.

One final observation: the present work is called a second edition. Yet there is no real editorial intervention in the 1967 text. What Academia Verlag gives us is the original edition with addenda, corrigenda, and an updated bibliography. One important addendum is the collection of new fragments from the Oxyrhynchus Papyri [*P. Oxy.* 3710.2.43–47, 3.7–11], which reveal an interest in practical astronomy previously unattested. (These new texts tend to undermine Kahn's over-emphasis on Heraclitus as philosopher of the human condition.) But these fragments are difficult and no commentary is offered. If one already has the 1967 edition and access to articles on the new fragments, it is not clear that one needs to purchase the so-called second edition. Yet this book has been unavailable for far too long, and deserves a place on the shelf of every serious student of Heraclitus. Serge Mouraviev is currently engaged in producing a new edition of the fragments and testimonies for Academia Verlag which may one day supersede Marcovich; but until that time Marcovich provides the best access to the texts of Heraclitus.

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