

On the greatness and misery of philosophy

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Modern or "Faustian" man is, owing to his very nature, enchanted by a headless or limbless ancient torso, rather than by some wholly preserved or successfully restored sculpture dating back to the same remote culture. Torsos have their own fate and they are surrounded by an aura, as Oswald Spengler argues. Torsos convey to us the charm of antiquity, but they also remind us of the one-way direction of time and, consequently, of the transitory nature of all worldly goods and ideas. First and foremost, it is, however, the empty space of the torso's missing head or limbs that attracts our attention. An optic and optimal reproduction is constructed in the mind of a devout visitor to galleries of ancient art. The factually empty space around the torso is filled with the tempo and rhythm of invisible lines. Similarly and quite analogically, modern man, whom we, following the footsteps of Goethe and Spengler, call "Faustian" and whose main characteristic is restlessness and "concern" (German "Sorge"), feels attracted by the badly broken lines of graphic symbols, i.e. by those ancient texts which have come down to us in scanty fragments or textual torsos. They, too, have their own fate and aura.

For his doctoral thesis on Heraclitus of Ephesus, the Ionian philosopher of "flux", Spengler tried to find an all-embracing outlook on the world (Weltanschauung) in Heraclitus' book 'On the nature of things', which is, for the most part, lost for us. There are, however, about 130 short fragments, the discussion on which has not, by any means, been completed but is continuing still. The most famous fragment reads as follows: "This world-order, which is the same for everybody, was created neither by any god nor by any human being but has always been, and is still, and will be an ever-lasting fire, ignited by measure and extinguished by measure." This fragment or literary torso was to become the core of Stoic cosmology; much later, it was regarded as an excellent expression

of dialectical materialism by Vladimir Lenin. In general, the close reading of Heraclitus' fragments shows that many of them are mutually, or even dialectically, contradictory, and that the overall impression of them verges on the absurd. On the one hand, Heraclitus seems to have been furious not only with all ordinary people but also with all the other philosophers that he happened to know. On the other hand, he seems to have firmly believed in the excellent cognitive capacity of his fellow human beings. The reason for this paradoxical fluctuation of opinions has remained a mystery. Perhaps Heraclitus' work "On Nature" was left unfinished by the author himself due to some illness, such as melancholy, which he suffered from. Or perhaps he wrote his last reflections on life at the time of his death; or he may have composed a contradictory or enigmatic piece of work quite intentionally, in terms of his alleged misanthropy; or who knows if a number of fragments from some, even hostile, sources of the virtually ever-untrustworthy copying tradition were erroneously or fraudulently included in Heraclitus' literary life's work.

Heraclitus, well aware of the capacity of his eagle eye to penetrate into the depths of cosmos, regarded himself as the wisest of all mortals. According to numerous anecdotes, which started to live their own lives after his death, Heraclitus' hubris was in due course followed by the curse of the avenging Nemesis.

In philosophy, Heraclitus represented materialism. According to a somewhat macabre anecdote, he was the only ancient philosopher whose dead body was devoured by wandering dogs.