Erin O’Connell, Heraclitus and Derrida: pre-socratic deconstruction-Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., New York 2006 Pp. 186 $… ISBN 0–8204- 7492-4 (cloth).

A return to Heraclitus?

Toward the end of 19th F. Nietzsche recommended the return to Presocratics. Today, in a provocative, but also well- argued gesture, as an alternative to logocentrism, the history of Western philosophy can be framed, on the one hand by the Presocratic Heraclitus, and on the other by Jacques Derrida. That is what Erin O’Connell proposes in her book.

Some wrote that Derrida is like a Parisian Heidegger, others put him in company with France philosophers M. Foucauld, F. Lyotard, G. Deleuze. Erin O’Connell goes further on and proposes the Presocratic deconstruction of Heraclitus and the comparative analysis of both the Heraclitus’ philosophy and Derrida’s.

The book can be divided in two parts: the first, from chapter one to four, is the deconstruction of Heraclitus’s thought, the second, from chapters five to six, presents the Heraclitean Derrida, that is the abundance of Heraclitus in Derrida.

1) O’Connell writes that the two philosophers share a distinctive and similar view of the relationship between knowledge and language, and both at the same time reject the premise of logocentrism ‘Among their most salient similarities is the fact that each engages in the work of rational philosophy while simultaneously rejecting the logocentrism promise of certain knowledge. Each author takes up a self-consciously ironic position with respect to his own content and style, knowing that he cannot completely transcend the systems of logic that he critiques, and that he must use language to question language’ (3)

The most recent scholarship has argued that Heraclitus’ever living fire must be not understood as a generic Milesian *archê*, and the material monism of Heraclitus doesn't refer to any single primary cosmogonic material or substance. Following the incomparable reading of Heraclitus by C. H. Kahn we have: ‘Heraclitus aim is not to improve the Milesian cosmology by altering a particular doctrine but to interpreter its total meaning by a radical shift in perspective’ (6) which means that the root fire is above all a sort of cosmological principle, a force, a continuous process.

No doubt, the deconstruction of Heraclitus’ thought gives us a critique of human reasoning and leads us to discover the very value of logos as a ‘harmonious tension of strife in flux’ that resembles to Derrida’s conception of different plays. According to both philosophers the logos is subjected to a permanent *aporia* that determines the continuous uncertainty of human understanding. Humans do not put together empirical or theoretical information accurately, even though they have sufficient information, even though they have enough experience. This is the meaning of the famous Heraclitean fragment: Although the logos is common [shared], the many are living as if they have their own[private] intelligence [thought](D. 2).

Given that the logos per se is neither arcane nor esoteric but experienced in common, according to Heraclitus the real problem is thinking well and pay attention to bad learning. The relation between the two opposites means that the full nature of each term is only accurately understood with reference to its constant and contingent ‘other’, to its continuous and *discrete* value. For instance, the difference between life and death is not only unavoidably obvious, but also one which provokes profound emotional and philosophical reactions, and is deeply important to human beings. The fullest sense of the meaning of one term cannot be experienced or defined without reference to the other. In this way Heraclitus deconstructs the incipient logocentric conception of eternal transcendental presence.

2) Looking for a philosophy after the philosophy, Derrida when asked: would you count yourself as a philosopher? Answered: ‘I have attempted more and more systematically to find a non-site, or a non- philosophical site, from which to question philosophy. But the search for a non-philosophical site does not bespeak an anti-philosophical attitude. My central question is: how can philosophy as such appear to itself as other than itself, so that it can interrogate and reflect upon itself in an original manner?’ (107). Often Derrida allies himself with Nietzsche and Heidegger when he describes their deconstructionism expressed in many cases as *destruktion*, but he is more cautious and prudent and admits that deconstruction does not and cannot destroy structures from the outside. He is aware that we have no language-no syntax and no lexicon-which is foreign to our history. To de-construct is to analyze (from the Greek: *analuô*, unloose, set free). ‘A deconstruction is analytical critique, in which a text, a concept, a word, is undone or taken apart in order to understand how and of what it is made’ (113). In such a way Derrida subverts the authority of the classical metaphysical account that posits Being as Presence. In the Afterword to *Limited, Inc.* he writes that deconstruction makes *destabilization* is its principle theme, but it is destabilization that is already on the move in the things themselves. Writing and speech, for instance, have a common root, there is no purely phonetic writing, and speech is just as representative as writing and writing is just as effective as speech (if not more so). If the word logos is a verb, ‘The nature of *différence* as being somehow always in motion and as producing and organizing relationship is also well illustrated by Derrida’s own diction. In the context of this reference to Heraclitus *diapherein*’, he refers to “the history of being ”as an epoch of the *diapherein*’. (153) That is the one differing from himself, the one in difference with itself.

Erin O’Connol concluding her rigorous and fascinating study writes: ‘While both Heraclitus and Derrida can be said to announce the loss of pure language, they also show such an entity has never existed, except by fiat or feint. Nevertheless… both Heraclitus and Derrida keep the dream of a purer language very much alive’. (169) It seems to me the same dream or mood of the imaginary Platonic *theophiles,* the philosopher seeing Beauty and Good in their purity*.*

Prof. Francesco Tampoia