

The Death of Heraclitus

Janet Fairweather

RECENTLY there has been a revival of interest in a theory, originally put forward by A. Gladisch,¹ about one ancient account of the death of Heraclitus. According to Neanthes of Cyzicus² Heraclitus, suffering from dropsy, attempted to cure himself by covering his body with manure and lying out in the sun to dry, but he was made unrecognizable by the dung covering and was finally eaten by dogs. Gladisch and others have seen in this anecdote a veiled allusion to a certain Zoroastrian ritual, described in the *Vidēvdāt* (8.37f), in which a man who has come into contact with a corpse which has not been devoured by scavengers is supposed to rid himself of the polluting demon, Nasu the Druj, by lying on the ground, covering himself with bull's urine, and having some dogs brought to the scene. The fact that we find both in Neanthes' tale and in this ritual the use of bovine excreta, exposure of a man's body in the sun, and the intervention of dogs has seemed to some scholars too remarkable to be coincidental. Gladisch and, following him, F. M. Cleve³ have seen in Neanthes' anecdote an indication that Heraclitus might have ordered a Zoroastrian funeral for himself. M. L. West,⁴ more cautiously and subtly, has suggested that the story of the manure treatment and the dogs could have originated as an inference from some allusion Heraclitus may have made to the purification ritual in a part of his work now lost, perhaps in connection with his sneer (fr.86 Marcovich=B 5 D/K) at people who attempt to rid themselves of blood pollution by spilling more blood.

There are, however, various reasons for dismissing these theories on the origin of the story as improbable and for adhering to the view that the story is largely the product of illogical deductions from sayings of Heraclitus still extant.⁵

¹ A. Gladisch, *Herakleitos und Zoroaster* (Leipzig 1859) 63–67.

² *FGrHist* 84 F 25=Diog.Laert. 9.4, cf. *Suda* s.v. Ἡράκλειτος.

³ F. M. Cleve, *The Giants of Pre-Socratic Greek Philosophy*² I (The Hague 1969) 33ff.

⁴ M. L. West, *Early Greek Philosophy and the Orient* (Oxford 1971) 196ff.

⁵ This view is widely accepted. For bibliography and discussion of modern interpretations of this type see especially: K. Deichgräber, "Bemerkungen zu Diogenes Bericht über

Neanthes' account is only one of four mentioned by Diogenes Laertius (9.3–5):

Finally, he became a hater of his kind, and wandered on the mountains, and there he continued to live, making his diet of grass and herbs. However, when this gave him dropsy, he made his way back to the city and put this riddle to the physicians, whether they were competent to create a drought after heavy rain.⁶ They could make nothing of this, whereupon he buried himself in a cowshed, expecting that the noxious damp humour would be drawn out of him by the warmth of the manure. But as even this was of no avail, he died at the age of sixty . . . Hermippus (*FHG* III 42 fr.28), too, says that he asked the doctors whether anyone could by emptying the intestines draw off the moisture; and when they said it was impossible, he put himself in the sun and bade his servants (*τοὺς παῖδας*—more likely 'children') to plaster him over with cow-dung. Being thus stretched and prone, he died the next day and was buried in the marketplace. Neanthes of Cyzicus (*FGrHist* 84 F 25) states that, being unable to tear off the dung, he remained where he was, and, being unrecognizable when so transformed, he was devoured by dogs . . . Ariston in his book *On Heraclitus* (Wehrli 6 fr.28) declares that he was cured of the dropsy and died of another disease. And Hippobotus has the same story.⁷

There are two main points to notice here. One is that Hermippus does not include any dogs in his version of the story, yet he is the authority most likely to have known the *Vidēvdāt*⁸ and to have taken an interest in any indications that an early Greek philosopher knew of Persian religious practices, for he was the author of a work *Περὶ μύθων* (Diog.Laert. 1.8) and a commentary on the Zoroastrian scriptures (Plin. *NH* 30.2). The second point to observe is that the episode of the dogs is referred to by Diogenes Laertius in a way that suggests

Heraclit," *Philologus* 93 (1938) 12ff; H. Fraenkel, "A Thought Pattern in Heraclitus," *AJP* 59 (1938) 309–37; G. S. Kirk, *Heraclitus, The Cosmic Fragments* (Cambridge 1954) 4ff; R. Muth, "Heraklits Tod," *AnzAlt* 7 (1954) 250ff; "Nochmals Heraklits Tod," *AnzAlt* 8 (1955) 252; J. Haussleiter, "Zum Tode Heraklits von Ephesos," *Altertum* 10 (1964) 9ff; M. Marcovich, "Herakleitos," *RE Supp.* 10 (1965) 252ff; West, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.4) 196ff; R. Mondolfo, L. Tarán, *Eraclito, Testimonianze e imitazione* (Firenze 1972) 18ff, 292ff, 323ff.

⁶ The riddle story was known to Plutarch (*de Tuenda San.* 136B and the author of the sixth ps.-Heraclitan letter, cf. Mondolfo/Tarán, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.5) 18 n.8.

⁷ Transl. R. D. Hicks (LCL 1925).

⁸ The *Vidēvdāt* was probably compiled after the time of Heraclitus but may have been available to Hermippus, cf. West, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.4) 31 n.3.

that it was an optional extra added to Hermippus' account by Neanthes.⁹ This is probably exactly what it was.

It is just possible that the episode could have been suggested to Neanthes by Hermippus' work on the Zoroastrian scriptures, but I doubt it. Another addition of an episode concerning dogs to an originally independent death story may be found in the biographical traditions about Diogenes the Cynic. In one account Diogenes dies as the result of eating raw octopus (Diog.Laert. 6.76; Ath. 8.341E); in another he dies from a dog-bite (*Suda s.v. Διογένης*); in yet another, while he is trying to distribute an octopus to his dogs, he is so severely bitten by them that he dies (Diog.Laert. 6.77). I would suggest that Neanthes' addition of the dog episode to the story of Heraclitus' dropsy treatment was probably just as arbitrary as the combining of the dog-bite story with the octopus tradition in the case of Diogenes. We are certainly not obliged to look for a single explanation for Neanthes' story which will account for both the dropsy-cure and the dogs. Most probably the two stories had quite separate origins.

Let us look at the dropsy-cure tradition first. It is generally agreed¹⁰ that this story belongs to the class of anecdote in which a philosopher's death is brought about when some famous idiosyncrasy or saying of his rebounds on him, a type particularly well illustrated by the anecdotes recorded by Diogenes Laertius (8.39–40) in which Pythagoras' famous respect for beans is indirectly the cause of his death. It is obvious that Heraclitus' fruitless encounter with the doctors should be understood as serving him right for the obscurity of his writings and for the hostility towards the medical profession seen in fr.46=B 58. The idea that he died of the dropsy most probably originated as an ironical inference from his teaching that "For souls it is death to become water" (fr.66=B 36). There are certain other fragments on which the dropsy story might be said to provide an ironical commentary: fr.68=B 118, "A dry soul is wisest and best"; fr.96b=B 136, "Souls slain in battle are purer than those which die of diseases"; fr.42=B 126, "Cold things become warm, warm thing becomes cold, moist thing becomes dry, dry (parched) thing becomes wet"; fr.53=B 31, *πυρὸς τροπαί· πρῶτον θάλασσα, θαλάσσης δὲ τὸ μὲν ἤμιου γῆ, τὸ δὲ ἤμιου πρηστῆρ*

⁹ Probably the younger Neanthes, cf. F. Jacoby, *FGrHist* IIc (1926) 144f; R. Laqueur, "Neanthes," *RE* 16 (1935) 2108ff.

¹⁰ Cf. bibliography in n.5. The recognition of the nature of the story goes back to a remark by F. Lassalle, see Lassalle, *Gesamtwerke* VI (Leipzig 1905) 58 n.1.

(cf. Diog.Laert. 9.3 *περιτραπείς εἰς ὕδρον*), but it seems most natural to suppose that it was the vivid concept of death as a consequence of becoming water that provided the original inspiration for the story. It has sometimes been suggested that the dropsy death is to be understood as retribution for Heraclitus' teaching about fire¹¹ (so M. Aurelius 3.3, who reckons it was ironical that Heraclitus should have died in this way after writing so much about *ἐκπύρωσις*),¹² but the reflection that water is, in a sense, the opposite of fire would hardly have been sufficient to inspire the whole dropsy story.

So far we are on firm ground. It is over the question why Heraclitus chooses to cure himself by the application of dung that disagreement arises. It is because the answer is not obvious that M. L. West and, before him, H. Fraenkel have resorted to the hazardous procedure of reconstructing 'lost' Heraclitan sayings on which the story could have been based.¹³ Of course, there is no reason to deny the possibility that parts of the biographical tradition may be based on sayings now lost, but the mystery of the cure can be explained satisfactorily enough from extant fragments.

Two fragments in particular should be considered. The author of the fifth pseudo-Heraclitan Epistle¹⁴ presents 'Heraclitus' explaining to one Amphidamas that he is intending to cure himself of the dropsy along lines suggested by his cosmic theories. His argument is that the human body must be governed by the same principles as the universe. At one point he writes: *καὶ ἐν τῷ παντὶ ὑγρὰ αὐαίνεται, καρφαλέον νοτίζεται*.¹⁵ The allusion is clearly to fr.42=B 126, *τὰ ψυχρὰ θέρεται, θερμὸν ψύχεται, ὑ<γρὸν> αὐαίνεται, καρφαλέον νοτίζεται*. Could this saying of Heraclitus about the natural interchange of hot and cold, wet and dry, have suggested the cure story?¹⁶ It seems a strong possibility, but perhaps it is not the strongest one.

Maybe it was fr.66=B 36, the saying which most probably suggested the idea that Heraclitus contracted the dropsy, that also inspired the story of the cure.¹⁷ (We have no evidence, incidentally, that a story in

¹¹ F. Wehrli, *Die Schule des Aristoteles VI* (Basel 1952) 65, on Ariston of Ceos fr.28; R. Muth, *AnzAlt* 7 (1954) 250ff.

¹² A characteristically Stoic interpretation, cf. Kirk, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.5) 335ff.

¹³ Fraenkel, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.5) 323ff.

¹⁴ Now edited by L. Tarán, Mondolfo/Tarán, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.5) 323ff.

¹⁵ *Ep.* 5 lines 12f Tarán.

¹⁶ Cf. Mondolfo/Tarán, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.5) 293.

¹⁷ Cf. Mondolfo/Tarán, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.5) 19 n.8d.

which Heraclitus simply died of the dropsy ever existed without the story of the cure.) In this fragment Heraclitus, after declaring *ψυχῆϊεν θάνατος ὕδωρ γενέσθαι*, goes on to say that it is death for water to become earth, *ὔδατι δὲ θάνατος γῆν γενέσθαι*. Now, the dung with which Heraclitus covers himself is a species of ‘earth’, and it could be said to be intended to be death to the water (*i.e.* the dropsy) which is threatening to be death to his soul. Our storyteller may have had the subsequent words of the fragment in mind as well, *ἐκ γῆς δὲ ὕδωρ γίνεται*, *ἐξ ὕδατος δὲ ψυχῆ*. His interpretation of these words (we need not worry whether it was the right one) could have been that they referred to a process of evaporation, such as naturally occurs when manure dries out.

Why should Heraclitus be supposed, though, to have used manure rather than ordinary earth for his cure? The hypothesis that the idea was suggested by fr.76=B 96, “Corpses are more fit to be cast out than dung,” cannot be dismissed simply because it takes an illogical step to arrive at our story from this saying.¹⁸ Greek storytellers were not the most logical of people. I tend to believe, however, that the dropsy-cure story, manure and all, was most likely inspired by a single thought: the original storyteller knew of a remedy for dropsy involving the external application of manure; he attributed its invention to Heraclitus because the failure of such a cure provided a splendid way to make his teaching that “For souls it is death to become water, for water it is death to become earth” rebound on him. R. Muth has pointed out in this connection that manure is recommended in ancient medical sources as a cure for just about all ills, and that it is to be applied externally in the case of dropsy (Plin. *NH* 28.232; Diosc. *de Simpl.* 2.65).¹⁹

Who the original storyteller was must remain a mystery. It should be mentioned, though, that he may have lived long before the third-century B.C. writers named by Diogenes Laertius, and that he need not have been a learned literary scholar. The anecdote may have been one of those popular yarns made up and circulated in the fifth and fourth centuries by the “scatterbrained Ionian sailors or . . . dubious dilettanti and sophists” whose contribution to the rise of Greek biog-

¹⁸ Cf. West, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.4) 198 on Kirk’s interpretation.

¹⁹ R. Muth, *Träger der Lebenskraft* (Wien 1954) 129ff; *AnzAlt* 7 (1954) 250ff, criticized by West, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.4) 198.

raphy A. D. Momigliano discusses in a recent book.²⁰ Alternatively, it may have originated in a scene in some comedy, or in some other type of humorous work²¹ (hence, perhaps, the logic of 'pantaloon' which M. L. West detects in the thought-processes which would lead from extant Heraclitan sayings to our anecdote).²² Certainly the dropsy-cure story affords enough opportunities for jokes about Heraclitus' sayings to give scope for quite an extended piece of satire.

The episode about the dogs is a story of a rather different type. The usual explanation for it, indeed, is that it was derived from a Heraclitan saying, fr.22=B 97: *κύνες . . . καὶ βαῦζουσιν ὃν ἄν μὴ γινώσκωσι*, and it seems certain that this saying did influence Neanthes' account: he mentions that Heraclitus was made unrecognizable by the dung. The dogs in our anecdote, however, do not merely bark at one they fail to recognize; they eat them. To account for this fact, O. Gigon and M. Marcovich have suggested that the idea of the dogs' dinner is a motif transferred to Heraclitus' biography from the traditions about Diogenes the Cynic.²³ This explanation seems on roughly the right lines, but we should note that Diogenes and Heraclitus are not the only people to be torn to pieces by dogs in ancient biography: Euripides and Lucian share this fate.²⁴

In fact, as D. R. Stuart and W. Nestle have observed,²⁵ tearing to pieces by dogs was a type of death which ancient popular moralizing reckoned appropriate for enemies of religion. The motif has a mythological prototype in the legend of Actaeon, killed by his hounds as a punishment for impiety.²⁶ The biographer of Lucian states explicitly that the dogs were a punishment for the satirist's hostility to the truth

²⁰ A. D. Momigliano, *The Development of Greek Biography* (Cambridge [Mass.] 1971) 21, cf. ch. ii pp.23ff.

²¹ For evidence of the extent to which Hellenistic biographers were prepared to use comedy as a source see especially the use of Aristophanes, *Thesm.* in Satyrus, *Life of Euripides* (P.Oxy. 1176) ed. G. Arrighetti, *Studi classici e orientali* (Pisa 1964). Cf. K. Lehrs, *Populäre Aufsätze*² (Leipzig 1895) 395ff, on comedy as a possible source for death stories. H. Diels may be right in his suggestion in *Herakleitos von Ephesos* (Berlin 1909) 3 (cf. *Vorsokr.*⁵ I p.140) that Hermippus got his information "aus einem . . . parodischen Buche *περὶ θανάτων*," but he adduces no positive evidence.

²² West, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.4) 199.

²³ O. Gigon, *Untersuchungen zu Heraklit* (Leipzig 1935) 133; Marcovich, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.5) 253.

²⁴ Cf. Satyrus, *Life of Euripides* (*supra* n.21) fr.39 xx-xxi; *Suda* s.v. *Λουκιανός*.

²⁵ D. R. Stuart, *Epochs of Greek and Roman Biography*, (Sather Lect. IV, Berkeley 1928) 146-47; W. Nestle, *Griechische Studien* (Stuttgart 1948) 585f.

²⁶ Stesich. fr.59 Page; Eur. *Bacch.* 337ff; cf. Deichgräber, *op.cit.* (*supra* n.5) 17.

and blasphemies against Christ in his life of Peregrinus.²⁷ Euripides, of course, was notorious for his unorthodox religious views. So was Diogenes,²⁸ though perhaps one should say that, given a man who associated himself with dogs in the way that Diogenes did, it was inevitable that some ancient storyteller would bring dogs into his death story, whatever his religious beliefs. Heraclitus will have been numbered amongst the impious on account of such sayings as fr.86=B 5 (against the use of blood in purification rites and the practice of praying to statues) and fr.87=B 14 (against the Mysteries).

We do not have to discount the possibility that the story of the dogs was first suggested by fr.22=B 97. It was quite possible for a biographer to get the germ of an idea from some famous saying, and then to expand the idea into a story of a traditional type. It seems likely that it was a passage in Lucian's *de Morte Peregrini* (2) in which he says he narrowly escaped being torn to pieces by Cynics ὡςπερ ὁ Ἀκταίων ὑπὸ τῶν κυνῶν, that was the initial inspiration for his death story.

Neanthes' account of the death of Heraclitus is, I suggest, a conflation of two stories: in one Heraclitus' saying about the death of souls and water rebounds on him; in the other he is punished for his impiety. Neanthes may have made up the episode of the dogs himself, as an improvement on Hermippus' account, or he may have taken it over from an earlier tradition, distinct from the dropsy story. Any resemblance between Neanthes' anecdote and Zoroastrian ritual is, I believe, purely coincidental.²⁹

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²⁷ *Suda* s.v. Λουκιανός.

²⁸ Cf. Diog.Laert. 6.73.

²⁹ I am indebted to Professors W. J. Slater and H. Jones of McMaster University for criticism of this paper, and to Professor L. Tarán for allowing me a preview of his and Professor Mondolfo's findings.