
Peter H. Denton

Published online: 11 July 2011
© Peter H. Denton 2011


An author’s last publication tempts its reviewer to think more in terms of eulogy than assessment, because it is as much a personal legacy as a contribution to scholarship. In his last book, published in French nearly six years before he died, Pierre Hadot (d. April 24, 2010) succeeds at both.

The Veil of Isis: An Essay on the History of the Idea of Nature needs to be read at least twice. The first time, the reader can appreciate the magisterial sweep of his topic from the first record of Heraclitus’s cryptic expression through to more contemporary philosophical incarnations of the idea that “Nature loves to hide.” The second time, the reader can work from the philosophical impetus Hadot found in the work of Nietzsche and Heidegger, in particular, back through the ages to find either the genealogy of the idea or similar expressions of it in other times and places.

Hadot’s book is superbly balanced between the twin hazards of caricature and retrojection. Anyone who attempts a magisterial sweep through history risks caricaturing elements to fit them into the pattern, but Hadot instead deftly captures the essential characteristics of what he includes. My regard for his book grew with every example he used, as Hadot moved through the areas of Renaissance and early modern natural philosophy with which I am most familiar. Light on the footnotes that this historical perspective might require in less confident hands, the ideas, theories and

Corresponding Author: P.H. Denton
Red River College and the Royal Military College of Canada
email - phdenton@shaw.ca
scholars he cites judiciously remind the reader that Hadot is aware of the obstacles through which he is navigating.

Similarly, when I reached the more recent period of Nietzsche, Heidegger and others, I was immediately suspicious that there was a degree of retrojection in what Hadot had written. “Retrojection” consists in taking a contemporary concept or idea, especially one that is highly contextual, and throwing it backward into some other historical context in which, once “found,” shows the provenance of the contemporary concept and justifies it by means of philosophical genealogy.

Instead, Hadot takes a more Foucaultian approach to this genealogy, focusing more on the ethos of the twin approaches to Nature that over time become associated with the Heraclitean concept (which he dubs the Orphic and the Promethean) than on a necessarily historical sequence from its origins to the present. Again, his brief analysis is careful, thoughtful and appropriate.

As someone by inclination inescapably an historian, I was both relieved and impressed by Hadot’s method. I have always been utterly sceptical of discourses on Pre-Socratic philosophy, dependant as they are on a paucity of textual evidence – and most of that fragmentary and offered up generations later in derivative texts. Too often I cannot escape seeing parallels to a learned exposition on hobbit epistemology, based on the fragments of a secondary book commenting on the history of Middle Earth as it was recorded in the work of J. R. R. Tolkien. After all, it makes little sense to muse on Heraclitean philosophy if, in fact, there is less evidence of the existence of Heraclitus than there is of Bilbo Baggins.

Taking instead an hermeneutic approach, Hadot uses the Heraclitean phrase in a canonical sense that reminded me of the work of Brevard Childs on the Old Testament: as long as there is a community of people who believe the text to be true and believe in the attribution to a particular source, in terms of how the words function in the ongoing life of the community of believers (or thinkers), such historical questions are far less significant than the hermeneutical ones about how and why these words continue to be valuable to subsequent generations. If the words attributed to Heraclitus had not caught something of a contemporary concern, and if that concern had not continued to be reflected in the intellectual life of successive generations of thinkers, they would have easily vanished into the mist that shrouds much of our intellectual heritage. That they could be rediscovered, and reappropriated – especially after the Renaissance – means that the conundrum posed by “Nature loves to hide” captured in succinct form an ongoing (even if perhaps insoluble) philosophical problem.
That problem is something upon which Hadot says he has been reflecting for more than forty years, “enthralled by the philosophy of nature” and wondering if a renewal of such research might take place in the contemporary world (vii). Working from research on the influence of Neoplatonism on the western philosophy of nature, he had a particular interest in the work of Goethe “who seemed to me to offer the model of an approach to nature that was both scientific and aesthetic” (vii).

This interest found a focus in an image and a text, and it is worth citing these both at length to identify the core of Hadot’s method. Alexander von Humboldt spent nearly five years (1799-1804) on a journey of scientific exploration in South America and, on his return, published his communication to the Institute of France under the title *Essai sur la geographie des plantes* in 1807. The German version, published in Tubingen the same year, was titled *Ideen zu einer Geographie der Pflanzen*, with a dedication to Goethe “intended to give public recognition to Humboldt’s debt to the author of The Metamorphosis of Plants” (viii). The dedicatory page included an engraving from an allegorical drawing by a Swedish sculptor, at Humboldt’s direction. A nude goddess, “with her hands and fingers spread apart, whose chest bears three rows of breasts, and the lower part of whose body is enclosed in a tight sheath, adorned with the figures of various animals” has placed at her feet a copy of Goethe’s book (viii).

Goethe’s comments in response send Hadot forth on his own exploration: “A. Von Humboldt sent me the translation of his Essay on the Geography of Plants with a flattering illustration that implies that Poetry, too, might lift the veil of Nature” (cited in Hadot, viii). Thirty years ago, Hadot began research into three aspects of what he felt was represented in this image, symbolizing as he thought it did the Heraclitean aphorism that “Nature loves to hide”: an exegetical history of this phrase; the evolution of the idea of a secret of nature; and the figure of Isis in iconography and nature (viii-ix). *The Veil of Isis* is the result.

In Hadot’s words, this is “above all a historical work, which deals especially with the period extending from antiquity to the beginning of the twentieth century and traces the evolution of mankind’s attitudes toward nature solely from the perspective of the metaphor of unveiling” (ix).

Von Humboldt’s frontispiece in homage to Goethe serves as the connecting motif between the historical and the contemporary in Hadot’s book. As an *essai* in the form of Michel de Montaigne’ original idea, he attempts a depiction of two attitudes toward knowledge and the natural world that he finds not only in the mythological past from which they are drawn, but in contemporary philosophy of technology. The Orphic attitude sees Nature as mysterious, as having secrets that need to remain secret as Nature is contemplated and enjoyed both for what is apparent and for what remains a
mystery, fearing the consequences should everything be known. The Promethean attitude, easily found at the heart of post-Industrial Revolution technology, sees Nature as the object of investigation, whose secrets may be wrung from her in the effort to find out everything that humans need to know, with the lack of knowledge as the condition to be feared or avoided. In another sense, should Nature be seen as a goddess to be worshipped, or as an opportunity for the application of human knowledge and skill?

The book is broken out into 23 chapters of widely varying length, divided up into eight parts that are also uneven. In comparison to books where the chapter or section length is conveniently consistent, this one reflects a careful plain style in structure and in language that Michael Chase, in his excellent translation, manages to capture. The reader is left with the impression of an unadorned structure of ideas, in which the author has included only what is absolutely necessary to make his point before moving on.

The essai begins in the first part, titled “The Veil of Death,” with an attempt at linguistic analysis of the words attributed to Heraclites. This first ‘trial’ fails miserably, as there is no linguistic consensus possible about what the words themselves mean neither in the supposed time of origin nor in subsequent periods when a linguistic context can be established. Hadot moves quickly to the second part, to characterize in “The Veil of Nature” whether more concrete commentary might be provided on the concept of Nature, in terms of its expression particularly in the Greek language. While more can be said about Nature than about the words of Heraclitus, there is still a range of possible interpretations and representations, some of which are mutually contradictory. Such variation makes conclusions about a linear progression of any of these ideas, through history, impossible to defend.

As a result, Hadot moves in the third ‘trial’ to engages in a kind of allegorical analysis, taking the Heraclitean phrase in the sense proposed by his late friend, Hans Blumenberg, as a controlling transhistorical metaphor or idea. Moving through the classical period, Hadot shows (again) a range of perceptions of what it means for Nature to hide, focusing on the methods that might be used to discover what Nature does not (at least at first) want to reveal. He is concerned to establish a pagan trajectory in the understanding of Nature as personified (especially Nature as goddess) that continues to resonate throughout western philosophical history despite the strong influences of Christian natural theology. He proposes that the “Neoplatonists wanted to protect traditional religion against the invasion of the Christian religion, for they sincerely believed that the cult of the gods was linked to the action of the World soul, which preserved the universe” (75). Thus he says, “they came to make Heraclitus’ aphorism the slogan for a pagan reaction” – something that provides the reader with a philosophical signpost for the direction of Hadot’s argument. He observes not only that
“Nietzsche said that Christianity was a Platonism for the people,” but that “for the Neoplatonist, pagan myths and rituals were also a Platonism for the people, or, even more precisely, a hidden physics” (75).

Alternative understandings of classical physics – alternative to a post-Newtonian conception of mechanics – are of real interest to Hadot, because he would see in these alternatives some philosophical linkage to Einsteinian or quantum physics in the early twentieth century. While he does not do more than hint in this direction, it is clear that the continuity inherent in shared metaphors make him less likely to accept the discontinuities entailed in a Kuhnian model of progress (or even change) by scientific revolution. He argues that ‘pagan myths were ... used to describe physical phenomena” (77), and thus that efforts to dissociate meaning from physical description are a modern quirk out of step with how personified Nature has been involved in the philosophy of nature through to the present time.

So, when Hadot cites Schiller’s 1788 poem on “The Gods of Greece” (81), it is to show how Neoplatonic concepts not only resonate with Renaissance ideas about Nature, but also how Schiller is just one example of a metaphorical bridge to the nineteenth century and thus to Goethe, Nietzsche and Heidegger. Once more, he reiterates the importance of the continuity of metaphors about Nature and how we understand what it (or she) either hides or reveals to interested humans. The key for Schiller, and a crucial element for Hadot, is the idea that nature has somehow lost its divinity as the result of Christianity, leading to the mechanistic representations of living things and the natural world associated with modern science. The point that Schiller deplores “is not just that scientists represent the sun as a ball of fire but that human beings in their daily lives, have lost the poetic and aesthetic perception of this reality” (85). The German Romantic tradition in its different manifestations reflect the mystery of a Nature whose veils and secrets give her a mystery, an allure, that is traceable back to Heraclitus and ancient Greece.

In the fourth section, Hadot moves into the process of “unveiling Nature’s secrets” that leads him to the two poles of the Orphic and Promethean approaches to Nature. If Nature chooses to hide her secrets, one may simply accept this and turn attention to other things. Alternatively, one can engage Nature in ways that amount to wresting away her secrets, adopting the Baconian process of “twisting Nature’s tail” through investigation and experimentation; through mechanical imitation; or through magical manipulation. In all three instances, Nature is in some significant sense an antagonist to humans, keeping from us what we need and want to know. This is what Hadot, following Robert Lenoble, characterizes as a “physics of utilization,” in which Nature is the object of our actions in order that we might in some way use what we learn. He places this approach “under the patronage of Prometheus, son of the Titan Iapetos, who,
according to Hesiod, stole the secret of fire from the gods to improve the life of mankind and who, according to Aeschylus and Plato, brought man the benefits of technology and civilization’’ (95). The Promethean spirit is embodied in experimental science; in one version of the Christian interpretation of the biblical book of Genesis that emphasizes domination over a world created for human use; and especially in technology aimed at using nature for human purposes.

With Lenoble, Hadot sees a fundamental opposition between this attitude and the “physics of contemplation,” a kind of “philosophical physics” that he associates with Orpheus, singing and playing the lyre and thereby learning the secrets of nature “not through violence but through melody, rhythm and harmony.” The “audacity” of the Promethean attitude is contrasted with the Orphic “respect in the face of mystery” (96); when Hadot talks about Promethean attitudes in terms of “will to power,” one gets a hint of the associations to come with the ideas of Nietzsche.

It is at this juncture that Hadot steps out and offers more of an indication of the metaphorical framework in which he is working:

“By opposing the Promethean to the Orphic attitude, I do not mean to oppose a good and bad attitude. I simply want, through this recourse to Greek myths, to attract attention to these two orientations that can be manifested in the relations between man and nature –two orientations that are equally essential, do not necessarily exclude each other, and are often found united in the same person” (97). Further, “on the one hand, nature can present itself to us in a hostile aspect, against which we must defend ourselves, and a set of resources necessary for life, which must be exploited....on the other hand, nature is both a spectacle that fascinates us, even if it terrifies us, and a process that surrounds us. The Orphic attitude, which respects it, seeks to preserve a living perception of nature” (98).

The Promethean attitude is the subject of the fifth section of Hadot’s book (“Unveiling Secrets through Technology” (101-154)); the Orphic attitude is handled in the sixth section (“Unveiling Secrets through Discourse, Poetry and Art” (155-232)). Both sections elaborate Hadot’s perceptions about the twin attitudes or responses to Nature and her secrets. While this is a synopsis of ideas and expressions from a wide range of sources, Hadot makes his case for two distinct attitudes, even as he shows through examples how these two attitudes can be blurred together in the work of certain individuals. In the seventh section (“The Veil of Isis”), which consists of only one chapter (“Artemis and Isis”), Hadot turns to his third theme of how Nature is personified in the persons of Isis and Artemis and how that iconography serves to link shared metaphors across the sweep of history in a way that makes Humboldt’s frontispiece significant: “In general, this theme of the unveiling of Isis played a crucial
role in the illustration of scientific books in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Yet it was also a very important literary and philosophical theme at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth, which bespeaks a significant transformation of the attitudes of philosophers and poets toward nature” (242-43).

The final section of Hadot’s essay captures in its title the destination of his book and why the reader needs to return to the beginning and reread the whole thing again: “From the Secret of Nature to the Mystery of Existence: Terror and Wonder.” He begins with Goethe and the iconographic representations of “genius unveiling Nature against which Goethe writes several poems that reach other conclusions. Ultimately, Goethe rejects the notion that Nature has secrets, making the problem that humans are unable to see what Nature makes accessible to those who have the eyes to see. Nature’s secrets are not hidden, for Nature instead is “mystery in broad daylight” (260). Hadot sees in this understanding “a sketch of a radical transformation of the notion of a secret of nature,” for there is no secret to discover; nothing is hidden, and we see everything, but what we see is crowned in mystery, and ineffably shows the ineffable and unexplorable” (261). Amid the transition to western industrial culture of the nineteenth century, we also find “the first glimmers of the dawn of a new relation to nature.” Hadot argues “the basic feeling will no longer be curiosity, the desire to know, or to solve a problem, but admiration, veneration, and perhaps anguish as well, in the face of the unfathomable mystery of existence” (261).

Hadot’s argument is that this new perspective is not only solidly grounded in the metaphorical tradition that he traces back through to Heraclitus, but is sufficiently widespread to provide an equally solid transition to Romantic and post-Romantic thought in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The metaphor of Isis as Nature becomes the intersection of various perspectives: “She represents Nature, the object of science, but also nature conceived as the mother of all beings, and finally Nature as infinite, divinized, ineffable, and anonymous, or universal Being. She is also identified with Truth, which is conceived as the ultimate, and perhaps inaccessible, object of the efforts of human knowledge” (269).

In the next sections, Hadot traces the presence of the Orphic and Promethean attitudes toward Nature and her “secrets” in the work of Kant, Schiller, Hegel and others, demonstrating the breadth of these ideas and leading to the conclusion that Nature if not increasingly known, and therefore familiar, but less knowable and therefore frighteningly mysterious. As with Goethe, the study of Nature leads back to “originary phenomena,” which are themselves unknowable: “Once he reaches this originary phenomena, a person need only contemplate, admire, and be astonished, but this astonishment can go as far as terror and anguish” (279). Hadot concludes: “The
unveiling of the statue of Isis tended more and more to lose its meaning of discovering the secrets of nature and gave way to stupefaction in the face of mystery” (283).

It is finally in Chapter 22 (“Nature as Sphinx”) that Hadot reaches Nietzsche and relates the historical trajectories of his metaphors about Nature to what he finds in Nietzsche’s work. It is a short chapter (284-99), but it deserves a whole review article of its own to do justice to the ways the themes are related to a thoughtful, contextual analysis of Nietzsche and especially the origins and philosophical linkages between the “will to power” and the Dionysian attitude. It is an excellent piece of work, because while it is commonplace to read of how successors incorporate Nietzsche’s thought, it is more unusual to find a persuasive argument for how Nietzsche is himself in a philosophical tradition that can be seen in a trajectory from the classical period.

Not content with this as conclusion, Hadot then moves to show how Heidegger’s concept of Being is understandable in this same tradition, not as a reaction to nineteenth century industrial culture but as a natural extension of the Orphic attitude. This is followed by similar extensions to Merleau-Ponty and to Wittgenstein, in particular, who “reproaches modern science for giving the impression that everything has been explained, whereas this is by no means the case: for we cannot step outside the world in order to treat it as an object of study. We are in the world as we are in language” (313). Hadot concludes his sketch of these two philosophers “in order to show a glimpse of a specific tendency in twentieth century philosophy, which consists in renouncing abstract explanations of the world’s existence, to open the possibility of an experience of the mystery of existence in the world, and of a lived contact with the inexplicable surging-forth of reality, or phusis in the original meaning of the world” (314).

In the conclusion to The Veil of Isis, Pierre Hadot notes that Heidegger’s thought may be seen to be inspired by his reflection on a 2500-year old maxim, observing “a good maxim endlessly nourishes an entire series of generations [even if] its nutritive substance has undergone many an unexpected mutation over the centuries” (315). The history of Heraclitus’ three word maxim is “the history of a series of misunderstandings, but creative misunderstandings, insofar as these three little words have served to express, but also perhaps to cause to appear, ever new perspectives on reality, and also some very diverse attitudes with regard to nature, from admiration to hostility to anguish” (316). Similarly, the metaphor of the secrets of nature has evolved, changed and influenced currents of thoughts about nature and human responses over time. While it has led to the two attitudes Hadot depicts as “Orphic” and “Promethean,” he is determined to provide a philosophical alternative to the enthusiasm for science and technology that has led (in other mythological terms) to the opening of Pandora’s box: “If Nature seeks to hide, it is, in particular, because the discovery of her secrets is dangerous for man. By intervening technologically in
natural processes, man risks discovering them and, what is worse, unleashing unforeseeable consequences” (317). Hadot concludes: “Besides scientific truth, we will thus have to allow for an aesthetic truth, which provides an authentic knowledge of nature” (317). Ultimately, therefore, “the veil of Isis... no longer signifies the secrets of nature but rather the mystery of existence” (318), which absorbs us in contemplating both the miracle of life and the mystery of its meaning and purpose or end.

At the end of his book, and at the end of a distinguished career, Pierre Hadot diffidently identifies two things on which he has dwelt both in his life and in this book, “one idea and one experience,” that allow him to have the last word in this review and to remind us that we are still not finished with Heraclitus’ maxim and its metaphorical implications: “An idea: nature is art and art is nature, human art being only a special case of the art of nature, an idea that, I believe, enables us better to understand both what art can be and what nature can be. An experience –that of Rousseau, Goethe, Hölderlin, van Gogh and many others –an experience that consists in becoming intensely aware of the fact that we are a part of nature, and that in this sense we ourselves are this infinite ineffable nature that completely surrounds us” (319).