HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Heraclitus (536-475 B.C.)

Heraclitus was born in Ionia, on the Asia Minor coast, not far from Miletus. Thus he was a neighbor, and a near contemporary, to Thales, Anaximander, and Anaximines, the so called Milesian *hylozoists* (believers that matter is the prime stuff of life.) However Heraclitus seems not to have known these contemporaries, or to have traveled much in his lifetime. He remains--to judge from his single book, a large papyrus scroll he is said to have deposited in the Temple of Artemis at Ephesus--he remains a complex, poetic and speculative writer, truly an early Greek fusion of poet and philosopher. (Poet 'in spirit,' for it does not appear that he wrote 'poetry' in a formal sense.) Like Anaxagoras, who thought men incapable of thinking past their own anthropocentrism, Heraclitus adopted the general view point that poets are fools: he found Homer incapable of forming a mature attitude toward the gods, and he thought the religious figure Pythagoras a fraud.

Heracleitus considered himself a vehicle of the Truth—as Hesiod considered himself the Muse speaking him.

Of this Word's being forever do men prove to be uncomprehending, both before they hear and once they have heard it. For although all things happen according to this Word, they are like the unexperienced experiencing words and deeds such as I explain when I distinguish each thing according to its nature and show how it is. Other men are unaware of what they do when they are awake just as they are forgetful of what they do when they are asleep.

The most arresting part of Heraclitus' world view is his conviction that the ultimate flux of the universe is *fire*, that like fire the created world is constantly in motion. The river is the perfect example of the endless flow of things, and describes the whole creation, which like a river acquires its identity by ceaseless change. This perception lies behind Heraclitus' view that 'a person cannot step twice into the same river,' a statement which not only characterizes the river, but characterizes the person, whose own stability is sustained by interaction with the flow.