

ARTUR PRZYBYSLAWSKI

THE BOW OF HERACLITUS: A REFLECTION ON THE LANGUAGES OF BECOMING

I.

Declination of the Greek name 'Hermes' combines feminine and masculine endings. It seems not accidental since Hermes was a hermaphrodite. The grammar is the embodiment of mythology, or even the god himself. The only thing necessary to understand the name of Hermes is its declination. Hence the reference to mythology, the reference to Hermes himself, is not needed here. Can we say that Greek *logos* was mere language of description of reality? It was not a set of labels attachable to things. *Logos* was rather self-sufficient, it had its own wisdom --wisdom present in its texture. The status of language becomes even more enigmatic when we enter the world of Heraclitus.

Heraclitean Becoming disrupts the traditional referentiality of language. Becoming remains unnameable because the name always requires something that exists, a stable correlate and nothing like that is to be found in the Heraclitean cosmos. It is worth noticing that the word 'Becoming' does not appear in Heraclitean fragments. It is the invention of commentators. It is impossible to speak about Becoming because in fact there is nothing to speak about. Becoming neither is nor is not. Yet Heraclitus speaks. To give justice to his experience of Becoming, he should be silent, or he must be conscious of the paradox of his situation, perfectly aware of the contradictions he is telling, and turn the paradox into subtle strategy. As it is impossible to overlook contradictions in the discourse of Heraclitus, the real Heraclitean riddle is the status of his discourse, the status of *logos*.

To call something by its name seems very simple. You can keep it in your hand to be sure that its name is valid. Taking the bow, Greek would say '*toxon*.' There is no contradiction in the bow. Bow exists and its name can be supported by the thing that is self-identical. But according to Heraclitus, this is half-truth only. He says:

They do not comprehend how a thing agrees at variance with itself; it is an attunement turning back on itself, like that of bow (*toxon*) and the lyre. (DK 51)

Hence the bow not only agrees with itself, but it is at variance with itself. And as different from itself it lacks identity, so we cannot say that it exists. To name the bow is to affirm the fact that it agrees with itself; it is to confirm its existence, to give it life:

The name of the bow is life.... (DK 48)

One has to remember that because of Becoming, despite the affirmation expressed by the name, the bow does not exist, indeed. Such a discovery is to be made by every archer stretching the bow. This is the moment when the bow is at variance with itself. It stops agreeing with itself because the bow that is stretched and the one that is not, Heraclitus would certainly say so, no longer remain the same bow. There are two different bows at variance with each other. All the more, when you use the bow (affirming its existence), its destruction is at stake because the string can be broken. The existence of the bow, its identity, requires its usage. But that usage changes the bow into something different and that usage contains the possibility of its damage, its destruction:

The name of the bow is life; its work is death. (DK 48)

The functioning of the bow falsifies its self-same identity, and yet at the same moment the bow establishes itself in shooting. The work of the bow is death, but that death is its own death. The bow is self-contradiction, is an attunement turning back on itself, like that in fragment DK 51.

As Gilles Deleuze puts it: "Heraclitus expresses two thoughts, which are like ciphers: the first, that there is no being, everything becomes; the second, that being is being of Becoming as such."¹ He expresses them at the same moment. And that is why there are no traditional names in Heraclitus, because traditional names affirm only one side of reality, being, and ignore that it is the being of becoming, which in fact destroys that same being. Traditional names show only the less important side of reality, which is forced by naming. Traditional names cover becoming, attempting to stop universal flux. Becoming calls the referentiality of language into question, making the claim that it reflects reality dubious because there is no stable object to be expressed in words. When the referentiality is disrupted, one must be silent, despite the will to speak about reality. This silence now speaks to the inability of language to express reality. Language can give up extralinguistic claims, and concentrate on itself. It stays within itself.

So the *logos* of fragment DK 48 announces the death of the traditional name. The work of the name in Heraclitus is death, its own death. Language does not speak about reality. It is silent. As Heraclitus says: "It is wise, listening not to me but to the *logos*, to agree that all things are one" (DK 50). Because there is no difference between language and reality, there is nothing to refer to. There is only *logos*, one alone in the face of Becoming, that celebrates its nonexistence within the extralinguistic field.

II.

Only a small difference of accent, not written in the time of Heraclitus decided that the word '*bios*' was understood either as bow or as life. That word is ambiguous not by mere chance. At first sight the ambiguity is rather strange since the word combines opposite meanings. But '*bios*' means life, that is particular, concrete, individual existence, i.e. life that is finite, in which death is implied. So *bios* is not the exact opposition of death. That opposition is *dzoe*, the infinite life of Greek

gods.² So it is obvious that '*bios*' as a finite life has to be ambiguous in that way. There is no *bios* without death. Once again we see the mythological logic of the Greek language. And the only thing Heraclitus does is to point at it; he makes it manifest. It is as if he says: Look, the word '*bios*' is ambiguous. From that moment on, the only speaker is language itself, language that is the embodiment of Greek experience. Heraclitus is silent, *logos* speaks. Hence we can say that Heraclitus does not want to be the author of the fragment "listening not to me but to the *logos*..." (DK 50). The only author now is *logos* itself.³

Fragment DK 48 is the shortest treatise on philosophy of language derived from the assumption of universal Becoming. It is because of the ambiguity of the word '*bios*' that we can see the ambiguous status of the name in general, the name that, supposing referentiality, is not able, so to speak, to hit its correlate, the name that slides into the emptiness-nonexistence-death symbolized by the bow. The name postulates existence-life of the named, but it can not be reassured by Becoming that negates all permanence, by Becoming that is like death.

The name of the bow is life; its work is death. (DK 48)

The ontological status of the bow is put in question, so the only thing that can be expressed now is the doubt concerning the validity of its name. The only thing fragment DK 48 can speak about is naming and its impossibility. As Paul de Man says: "All language is language about denomination, that is, a conceptual, figural, metaphorical metalanguage."⁴ Since language does not speak about reality, it can speak only about itself, because there is nothing except it. And it is not Heraclitus who speaks about language. It is the metalinguistic feature of language that manifests itself in the word '*bios*.'

There is no correspondence between name and the named. The order of names and the order of the named are in fact divergent, since the name expresses something completely opposite to the named. Death is called life. Becoming is turned into being. So fragment DK 48 speaks about naming and its failure.

The fragment, however, seems to maintain the validity of naming at the same time. Moreover, it mentions the name that is to denote the bow in a proper way. The name of the bow is '*bios*.' But it is not the name in the traditional sense because, as it is clear now, it does not point beyond itself. And it does not need to do that because the contradiction known to the archer is placed in the very word '*bios*.' The ambiguous word '*bios*,' maintaining life and death at the same time, presents or embodies that attunement turning back on itself that is found in the bow existing in so far as it negates its own existence. '*Bios*' is the name of the bow, but not because it refers to it perfectly. It is the name of the bow because it has the structure of the bow, because it is the very bow, and that is why it does not need extralinguistic referent. There is no difference between bow and its name. Heraclitean *logos* is language and reality at the same time (cf. DK 50). The interplay of death and life in the word '*bios*' is the same interplay of variance and agreement in the bow. There is no need to search for something behind the language, to pass the words through. And as the bow establishes itself in the usage that is the negation of itself, so '*bios*' confirms itself as a word entailing self-contradiction.

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