The Task of the Name:
A Reply to Carol Poster

Jason Helms

> In the fields with which we are concerned, knowledge comes only in
> lightning flashes. The text is the long roll of thunder that follows.
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> —Walter Benjamin, *Arcades* N1, 1 (1999)

> *Logos*, in whose lighting they come and go, remains concealed
> from them, and forgotten.
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> —Martin Heidegger, "Aletheia" (1975, 122)

One of the first things learned in the most rudimentary attempt at stargazing
is that the utmost effort must be paid in neglecting to gaze at stars. Instead,
one must gaze near them. Owing to the physiological organization of the
eye, night vision is enhanced toward the periphery of vision rather than the
center. Consequently, one can actually perceive one's own lack of perception
by staring at a star, finding it disappear, and then staring near the star only
to see it reappear. What follows, in this light or darkness or tension of these
two extremes, is not empirical in any sense of the word, which is given to
its own extremes. Rather, I hope through various a/(i)llusions and sidelong
tangents to glance off the surface of my target. As you may guess, superficial
puns—like star(e)—provide one of the most reflective surfaces off of which
to bounce/riff.

Carol Poster's recent article, "The Task of the Bow: Heraclitus' Rhetorical Critique of Epic Language" (2006), provides much fruitful ground for a rhetorical critique of Heraclitus and a Heraclitean critique of rhetoric—many surfaces off of which to glance. However, her analysis is often in a decidedly unharmonious tension with itself. Accordingly, this essay constitutes an attempt to tune by ear. In the course of this response I will outline at which points I diverge from her argument, offering my own listening relation to, and consequently my own reading of, Heraclitus, and propose alternative, but perhaps corrective, views of Heraclitus's relation to the *Logos* and his practiced rhetorics. Let us first start at the end before proceeding through Poster's argument.

POSTER'S CONCLUSIONS

At the end of her article, Poster offers five conclusions that afford us now an ingress for her essay. For the sake of brevity (and, of course, clarity and sincerity) I have shortened them and added a sixth with which she concludes the article:

1. Heraclitus focuses on the problem of correctness of names substantially before Prodicus and Protagoras. . . . Heraclitus thus prefigures two themes discussed more extensively by later writers. First, Heraclitus seems concerned with the art of what *came to be called* "orthoepeia" (the study of correctness of names) for which the sophists Prodicus and Protagoras later became famous. Second, he at least considers the possibility that one can learn something about the nature of things by examining the nonliteral senses of their names, a position that is articulated in its most extreme form by the Heraclitean Cratylus in Plato's dialogue of that name.
2. Heraclitus is an early example of *logos* philosopher, in the Gadamerian sense, in that he believes that investigation of language can provide information that is not exclusively or trivially linguistic. He is an early example of the "linguistic turn" in Greek thought.
3. For Heraclitus, the instability of language is part of a radical instability of the world. Since things change too quickly to be examined, their stable names are all that is available for investigation. While surfaces change, hidden harmonies, which are both concealed and revealed in words, remain. And yet even names themselves, if temporally fixed, are still interpretively unstable.

4. Each positively attributed name or statement should be read two ways simultaneously in a sustained and irresolvable tension, literally and nonliterally, with the opposing figurative statement both contradicting and yet sustaining the literal one.

5. These considerations lead Heraclitus, in his own prose, to a constant tension between rejection of epic vocabulary and ideas as inaccurate and frequent use of them; even when Homer and Hesiod are partially rejected, inquiry into them remains a valid means of investigation. Heraclitus does not simply suggest that epic should be entirely ignored in favor, for example, of direct examination of or experimentation on physical objects, nor purely internal (Cartesian) meditation, but rather interpreted indirectly. . . . Heraclitus himself should be read both literally and allegorically.

6. Since many of the issues rhetoricians discuss with respect to the generations following Heraclitus (especially Gorgias, Protagoras, Prodicus, and Plato) respond directly to Heraclitean formulations, it is important to avoid letting anachronistic concepts of disciplinarity (of "rhetoric" versus "philosophy" or "pre-Socratic" versus "Older Sophist") oversimplify our accounts of ancient Greek rhetorical theory by exclusion of Heraclitus. (15–17)[1]

I will attempt to abbreviate my own responses yet treat all of these premises with the attention they deserve:

1. That Heraclitus was interested in establishing any sense of orthoepia plays down his insistence on the *panta rhei* (everything flows). To suggest any final rightness of words would suggest that everything flows but the *Logos*.

2. While it is true that Heraclitus represents the "linguistic turn" in Greek thought, he goes further than Poster, who finds any inquiry into the *logos* to bear on a reality "that is not exclusively or trivially linguistic." Because finding him to be a linguistic turn is already somewhat anachronistic, I read him instead as a poststructuralist— or, if you fear the inherent anachronism, perhaps a pre-structuralist. There is no triviality of language when it is exclusive: *il n'y a pas de hors-Logos.*[2]

3. Poster's third point, concerning interpretive instability, is absolutely on target. However, it creates tension with her first point. If Heraclitus reveled in the instability of things, words, and their

relationship(s), why is it that we would think he insisted on a "correct" meaning? Whereas the conventions of academic writing might find this inconsistency fallacious, I feel Heraclitus might find a delicious tension in Poster's argument.

4. Although Heraclitus should indeed always already be interpreted in a *dissoi logoi* fashion, Poster herself does not maintain this interpretive instability. I propose that he must be read in more than two ways simultaneously or even intermittently. Throughout her article she often pins down that which Heraclitus left ambiguous, as is demonstrable by her next point.

5. Attempting a simultaneously allegorical and literal reading seems to avoid the traps that Heraclitus has set for us, but it falls again into a desire to separate things into distinct categories. In the distinction allegorical/literal not only is one privileged but the intervening space is ostracized. By attempting to *fix* (neuter) the categories, we replace possibilities with impotence.

6. Though the conclusion that reading Heraclitus as a philosopher and rhetorician is truly anachronistic, I will at length explain why anachronism is not to be feared and why we must allow not only ourselves but Heraclitus a certain degree of anachronism whereby he will show the philosophy/rhetoric distinction to be as false in our own day as it was nonexistent in his.

These abbreviated points do not outline my argument so much as lay a groundwork for an interpretive strategy with which readers of the rest of this essay can engage.

POSTER'S ARGUMENT

Allow me then the same back turning (*palintropos*) that Heraclitus's *bios* exemplifies.[3] Poster begins by emphasizing Heraclitus's exigency for rhetoricians, hitching her wagon (I believe appropriately) to Schiappa's (1). She then proposes that by making explicit Heraclitus's critique of epic, she will investigate "Heraclitus' theories of style, meaning, and persuasion and [explore] the consequences of his theories concerning interpretation of language for his practices of production of discourse" (2). Although her conclusions concerning Heraclitus's theories of interpretation are for the most part right, she practices a kind of dissoi logoi along the way.

Laying the groundwork for her eventual discussion of epic, Poster claims: "The early Ionic use of prose was itself a polemical device used to distance an innovative and anti-epical manner of thinking from earlier ideas and genres" (3), citing Glenn Most as her defender. Yet, whereas Most does indeed speak of the quarrel between these philosophers and their predecessors, he prefers to emphasize the philosophers' dependence on the poets: "It is worth emphasizing that neither here nor elsewhere do the early Greek philosophers ever criticize the archaic Greek poets as being deficient in aesthetic beauty or rhetorical persuasiveness, but only in terms of the falsity of their content" (1999, 337). Specifically concerning Heraclitus, he writes of "the evident care that Heraclitus took to formulate his insights in a language that borrowed from traditional forms of poetry" and that "the single prose book for which he was famous was marked by a variety of poetical techniques" (1999, 335, 357). Though Heraclitus certainly evokes Homer, their conversation is not necessarily an argument. Notably, Most accuses writers of anachronism when we attempt to project our current divisions (specifically those of poetic and philosophical) on the writers of the past: "To ignore this dependence [that of the philosophers on the poets], to disparage it as unphilosophical, or even just to excuse it as a regrettable form of a primitive thought from which the really interesting core, the logical arguments, can be extracted and rescued, is inadvertently to acknowledge allegiance to a very recent and quite provincial notion of what philosophy is and is not, and to retroject that notion unhistorically into a discursive situation of the distant past whose participants would certainly have found such ideas very strange indeed" (1999, 336).

There appears to be a less desirable form of anachronism, seeing the ancients only in terms of our categories. However, I applaud Poster for locating the "linguistic turn" in Heraclitus and would go one step further, finding him almost Derridean. How then can we attempt to understand these ancient philosophers? Perhaps the shift would be from seeing to listening. Rather than looking for what lies behind these philosophical fragments ("the really interesting core, logical arguments") in order to extract meaning, we might listen and create meaning in our own time. Most ends by implying such a conclusion: "The degree to which [Heidegger and Nietzsche] were inspired and guided by these thinkers, above all by Heraclitus, can hardly be exaggerated. Investigating this issue would no doubt contribute significantly towards a better understanding of the nature and limits of modern philosophy" (1999, 360). Studying the ancients can create an understanding of the present. Heidegger and

Nietzsche bring with them claims of bad philology and elitism, but Most seems to portray them as needed remedies to those of us who would too readily impose our times onto the past. Anachronism then becomes a necessity: never to impose our time on theirs but to listen to the connections between our disparate eras—connections that surely work in both directions.

Returning to Poster, let us look at the interpretive strategies with which she asks us to confront Heraclitus. She sets the stage by invoking "what Kahn has termed his linguistic density, which he defines as 'the phenomenon by which a multiplicity of ideas are expressed in a single word or phrase' (Kahn 1979, 89). In the close analysis of Heraclitean fragments below, I will argue that the intent behind both density and obscurity is to make Heraclitus' audience, if intent on understanding his *meaning*, engage in a complex and iterative hermeneutic process of both literal and allegorical reading" (4; emphasis added). While I agree that Heraclitus's "linguistic density" does indeed call for the interpretive strategies she suggests—that is, a hearing that involves more than one ear—I feel that Poster fails to utilize these very strategies in her own close reading. Her very use of the singular *meaning* in the above quote evidences a tendency to disallow interpretive ambiguity.

Poster next turns toward a series of close readings of the fragments, proposing certain criteria for choosing fragments:

> If one is concerned with the problem of Heraclitean interpretation, both in the sense of how contemporary scholars can interpret Heraclitus and Heraclitus' own theories of interpretation, it is important to begin with material that is:
>
> 1. Very well attested as to authenticity and accuracy;
> 2. Syntactically and semantically unambiguous;
> 3. Consistently embedded in relatively straightforward contexts; and
> 4. Able to provide information about Heraclitus' own methods of composition and interpretation. (4–5)

Criteria 1 and 4 are at least tenable, but criteria 2 and 3 seem decidedly anti-Heraclitean. If Heraclitus's style is deliberately obscure—as Poster herself says (2)—then why attempt to find an unambiguous fragment for our starting point? A fragment truly devoid of ambiguity would instead be the least appropriate to illustrate either his style or his thought. As

Poster has already set up our claims on the grounds of unambiguity, we might ask whether she will read Heraclitus as she says he would have himself read.

Poster's first close reading focuses on b48, a reasonably straightforward, well-attested fragment:

> *Tō oun toxō onoma bios, ergon de thanatos*
> For the bow (*toxon*), its name is life (*bíos*) but its task is death

She formulates four points about the fragment:

1. It attacks epic for misusing language (using the wrong term for "bow").
2. It leads readers to question the relationship of names to things, and particularly whether names can be correct in a nonarbitrary manner.
3. While it criticizes epic for errors in language and ideas, at the same time, its very use of epic as a starting point suggests that epic can still be valuable.
4. Finally, although it somewhat overtly suggests epic read literally is erroneous, it covertly shows that behind these errors are truths that can be discovered by allegorical reading, albeit truths that were not necessarily apparent to the epic authors. (5–6)

Her first point relies on a fairly large leap: "The use of *'bíos'* for bow is also primarily epical, i.e., occurring overwhelmingly in epic or in poetic works borrowing epic diction. Thus any criticism of the term can be read as criticism of epic language" (7–8). Although it is true that *bíos* is a predominately epic word, Heraclitus's choice of it can be explained far more simply than as a critique of epic poetry: it's funny. Because *bíos* works as a pun on life (*bíos*), it can be opposed to death and used to support his general thesis of the *hen panta* (all is one). Most (where this argument can be found in a much abbreviated form) writes, "Looked at silently, the letters of the word *bios* can yield both meanings, but the moment they are pronounced (and at least in this period, most reading was likely not to have been silent) the reader cannot help but accentuate either the one vowel or the other—and thereby inevitably reducing a complex truth to a one-sided, and hence partially erroneous, oversimplification" (1999, 358). The fragment then becomes a statement of ambiguity with Heisenbergian

overtones—the statement can mean either, indeed means both, until a reader (such as Poster) intervenes. There is no need to infer any critique of Homer at all. For Heraclitus, merely showing opposition is not to say that a word is "wrong," as Poster claims.

Much of Poster's argument depends on Heraclitus's supposed orthoepeia. Although his goal of setting out words and things according to their nature (b1) could certainly be heard in this regard, I do not believe that Heraclitus claims that words have intrinsic relationships with things. His focus on contradictions and tensions seems to point in the opposite direction. Most denies any reading that will resolve Heraclitus's inconsistencies: "Aristotle complained that, without punctuation, the articulation and hence the precise meaning of Heraclitus' utterances was ambiguous (*Rhetoric* III.5 1407b14–18). But this was no doubt precisely Heraclitus' intention. For ambiguity is the constitutive feature of the world he describes, and between his own ambiguous *Logos* (discourse) and the ambiguous cosmic *Logos* (structure) to which it refers there is a relation of homology, already established in the collection's opening aphorism (the very sentence Aristotle was complaining about)" (1999, 358). If we read Heraclitus as Poster says we should, then there is never any need to resolve these ambiguities.[4] However, her close readings engage in exactly this attempt at resolution. In a discussion of whether or not Heraclitus was interested in orthoepeia, Poster writes, "If interpretation of Heraclitus were restricted entirely to making our own contemporary connections among *ipsissima verba* isolated from historical context, this problem would need to stand as irresolvable. There is, however, a quite plausible solution, which can be found in classical testimonia" (12). I would emend the first sentence quite lightly, substituting the indicative for the subjunctive: "this problem *does* need to stand as irresolvable." The very Heraclitean method of interpretation she later espouses—with which I agree—begs us not to resolve this ambiguity, regardless of how plausible the solution may be.

This interpretative closure limits such ambiguities in Heraclitus, which is why Poster hears a critique of Homer in b56: "Homer, who was wiser than all the Greeks, was deceived. For he was deceived by the words spoken to him by some boys killing lice: 'What we saw and caught we leave behind, while what we do not see and catch we take with us.'" Yet, in that very fragment, Heraclitus calls Homer "wiser than all the Greeks." Poster evidently hears only sarcasm, but if we are to allow for a simultaneously literal and allegorical reading, then we must hear it *also* as a true compliment to Homer and perhaps an insult to all Greeks as well. In relation to this very fragment, Kahn shows that there is an elaborate pun at work between "lice"

(*phtheir*) and "to destroy" (*phtheirō*). The children are literally destroying the destroyers. He then writes of this pun, "Of course no one could possibly guess this meaning on a first reading of [b56]. But then the device of proleptic statement, or more generally of resonance, implies that many dimensions of meaning will not be immediately accessible on our first contact with the text" (1979, 112).[5] Heraclitus engenders a reading at once iterative and adaptive. To rest on any one reading would be to sin against the *logos* itself.

In an endnote Poster points out the ambiguity of Heraclitus's first fragment (an ambiguity that, as has already been shown, Aristotle could not tolerate): "The fragment begins: '*Tou de logou toud eontos aei axunetoi.*' It is impossible to determine whether *aiei* (forever) goes with *eontos* (holding, literally 'being') or *axunetos* (uncomprehending), i.e., whether the account holds forever, people remain forever uncomprehending, or both. Neither case would materially affect this part of my argument" (n. 22). Though neither case would affect the argument, accepting *both* cases would. My reading of Heraclitus (in accordance with Kahn, Barnes [1979], Heidegger, Most, etc.) indicates that every reading must be held simultaneously—and sporadically—and that one must always remain open to even more readings. Although I find fault in Poster's suggestion that Heraclitus is critiquing Homer in b48, I welcome it into the universe of Heraclitean interpretations. It is perhaps a bit of metacritique: finding tension by practicing certainty while proclaiming ambiguity. Assuming a metacritical (and purposefully hypocritical) play with Heraclitus calls for more scholarship on Heraclitus's rhetorical instability. Perhaps in the future a place will be made for these types of critiques standing hand in hand with Poster's.

Rhetorics, Communication and Information Design
Clemson University

NOTES

1. Each of Poster's conclusions is taken verbatim from the article with minor elisions. The sixth point immediately follows the other five in her article but remains unnumbered and acts as the closing paragraph of the article. Quotes from Poster 2006 are cited by page number parenthetically in the text.

2. This means "There is nothing outside the Logos."

3. I have neglected to add the accent mark to maintain the ambiguity of the word which exists in b48 but not b51. N.B. that the original also lacked accent marks, diacritical marks not being added until centuries later.

4. Poster writes, "Heraclitus himself should be read both literally and allegorically" (16).

5. Of course my reading will always be a prolepsis of sorts (both anticipatory and anachronistic).

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