

2. Heraclitus' Poetic Ideas

“You cannot step into the same river twice,” “The way up and the way down are one and the same,” “Nature loves to hide,” “I inquired into myself” and “Character is destiny.” Each of these famous sayings is associated with the philosopher Heraclitus who lived in the ancient city of Ephesus at the outset of the 5th century BC. The operative phrase here is “is associated with” rather than “was held by” since considerable uncertainty surrounds his teachings. Because Heraclitus expressed his views in prose rather than in metrical verse, it is often difficult to tell where quotation ends and paraphrase begins. In addition, one important source, Hippolytus of Rome, quoted Heraclitus in an attempt to convict an opponent on a charge of heresy—not a setting conducive to the dispassionate citation of evidence. To compound the difficulties, Heraclitus’ standard mode of expression was the cryptic aphorism. While this technique might be justified on pedagogical grounds (since the mysterious character of a remark might spark interest), the practical consequence has been a set of widely divergent interpretations.

The focus of the present study is Heraclitus’ legacy for modern poetry. T. S. Eliot, to take the best-known case, selected two Heraclitus fragments (B 2 and B 60) as epigraphs for his “Burnt Norton”, the first of the four quartets.¹ Eliot explained² that he was drawn to the fragments because of their “ambiguity” and “extraordinary poetic suggestiveness.” Similarly, Wallace Stevens (1997, 851) spoke of “the flecked river which kept flowing and never the same way twice” and noted the “inherently poetic quality” of many Heraclitean sayings. But where in the roughly one hundred and twenty Heraclitus fragments, one might wonder, do we find “inherently poetic ideas”? To answer that question, we will need first to review Heraclitus’ main

¹ I follow the text and numbering of the fragments (B) and ancient *testimonia* (A) as given in H. Diels and W. Kranz, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, 6th edition (Berlin: Weidmann, 1951-52).

² In response to a query from Raymond Preston, quoted in Brooker 2014, 261.

teachings and set aside two classic misinterpretations. We will then be in a position to identify the ways in which Heraclitus offered poetic ideas to his audience.

We can begin our review with Aristotle's assertion (in *Metaphysics* I 4) that Heraclitus began his treatise with an inscrutable comment concerning "this *logos*":

But of this *logos*, which holds forever, people forever prove uncomprehending, both before they have heard it and when once they have heard it. (A 1)

In its usual sense, Heraclitus' *logos* was the "word" or "account" he presented to his listeners.

But since he elsewhere calls upon those in his audience to "listen not to me but to the *logos*" (B 50) and characterizes the *logos* as "common" (B 2) as well as "a divine law that holds sway to the extent it wishes" (B 114), it would appear that the *logos* is more than just Heraclitus' personal message.³ Kirk, Raven, and Schofield (1983, 187) define that larger *logos* as:

...the unifying formula or proportionate method of arrangement of things, what might almost be called their structural plan both individual and in sum.⁴

It may have been Heraclitus' discovery of the "structural plan" of the cosmos—which would include connections among the elements, the causes of the well-being of the soul, the true nature of the divine, and how mortal beings relate to immortal ones—that led him to declare that no previous thinker had discovered the real nature of things (cf. B 1, B 28a, B 40, and B 108).⁵

³ Following Marcovich 2001, 113: "From the opposition contained in the phrase *ouk emou alla tou logou* ["not to me but to the *logos*"] it becomes clear that *Logos* has an objective existence, not depending on Heraclitus himself; i.e. that it is a universal Law operating in all things around us."

⁴ Similarly Kahn 1979, 94: "For the *logos* of Heraclitus is not merely his statement: it is the eternal structure of the world as it manifests itself in discourse."

⁵ Heraclitus signals the novelty of his account through the use of an "inceptive *de*" ("But") at the outset. Denniston 1991, 172-3 compares this feature with the use of *de* at the outset of eight of the oracles related by Herodotus, and accepts the explanation of Harrison and von Leutsch that "the seer directs his words against a popular, prevailing idea."

According to Plato (in *Cratylus* 402a), Heraclitus employed the simile of a flowing river to support the idea that all things are changing in all respects all the time:

Heraclitus says somewhere that all things give way and nothing remains, and likening existing things to the flow of a river, he says that you cannot step twice into the same river.

Plato's version of Heraclitus' doctrine was accepted by Aristotle, his student Theophrastus, and a long tradition of "doxographers" (or ancient compilers of opinions). It has a fair claim to being the standard interpretation of Heraclitus' philosophy.

Nevertheless, a number of modern scholars (most notably Karl Reinhardt, Geoffrey Kirk, Miroslav Marcovich, M. M. Mackenzie, and Matthew Colvin) contend that the utterances from which Plato extracted the doctrine were intended to make a rather different point—namely that things that differ from each other can also be the same, thereby providing another instance of unity in opposition—unquestionably a central Heraclitean doctrine.⁶ In the particular case of fragment B 12: "Upon those stepping into the same rivers ever-different waters flow," Kirk argues that Heraclitus was seeking to call attention to the presence of the opposite qualities inherent in the river, as well as to the rhythmic regularity with which one opposite passes over into its partner. We can make sense of the existence of multiple versions of the doctrine if we regard B 12 as the Heraclitean original, with the progressive connotation of the present participle "stepping" (*embainousin*) giving rise to the iterative understanding "Upon those who several

⁶ Kirk 1962, 366-84; Mackenzie 1988, 6-7; and Colvin 2007, 759-69. Defenders of the view of Heraclitus as "champion of flux" include Tarán 1999, 9-52; Vlastos 1955, 337-68; Guthrie, 1, 449-52; and Kahn 1979, 147-53.

times step into the same rivers, different waters flow” and concluding with the assertion that no one can step twice (*dis*) into the same river.⁷

There are in fact several good reasons to not attribute the doctrine of flux to Heraclitus. First, in several respects Heraclitus’ cosmos was not constantly changing. He speaks, for example, of a *logos* that “holds forever.” Similarly, one cannot escape the notice “of that which never sets” (B 16); and “one will never discover the limits of soul” (B 45). It should be clear that one can hold either that everything is changing or that the *kosmos* “always was, is, and will be, an ever-living fire” (B 30), but one cannot consistently subscribe to both views. In addition, many of the physical changes Heraclitus claimed to be taking place throughout the cosmos happen in accordance with fixed measures. Thus B 30, B 31a, B 31b, and B 94:

This ordered world, the same for all, no god or man made, but it always was, is, and will be, an ever-living fire, kindled in measures and extinguished in measures.

Fire’s turnings: first, sea, and of sea half is earth and half sea lightning.
Sea is poured forth from earth, and is measured in the same proportion as existed before it became earth.

The sun will not overstep its measures or else the Erinyes, the ministers of justice, will find him out.

Heraclitus also promised that he will “distinguish each thing according to its nature (*kata phusin*)” (B 1), not a task any champion of flux would wish to undertake.

We should also remember that Plato had a vested interest in finding someone—anyone—willing to assert the doctrine of flux, as is clear from the line of argument Socrates presents at *Theaetetus* 181a-183e. In so far as the doctrine of flux undermines itself (since both its truth value and the meanings of the words used to assert the doctrine must be constantly changing),

⁷ As developed by Marcovich 2001, 206.

there must be some entities (as Plato would claim: the Forms or Ideas) that are exempt from all change. Thus, while change was a pervasive feature of Heraclitus' universe, so also were permanence and regularity.

For many centuries Heraclitus was remembered as “the weeping philosopher.” A disconsolate Heraclitus appears in the foreground of Raphael’s “School of Athens” and in paintings by Hendrick Terbrugghen, Johann Lücke, Giuseppe Petrini, and Gaspari Traversi, among others. Similarly, a weeping Heraclitus appears alongside a cheerful Democritus in paintings by Pietro Baratta, Donato Bramante, Ludovico Carracci, Cornelis Cornelisz, W. Hollar, Jacob Jordaens, Johannes Moreelse, and Peter Paul Rubens.⁸ At one point the Florentine philosopher Marsilio Ficino traced Heraclitus’ misery back to a bad case of misanthropy:

You have seen painted in my academy a sphere of the world; on one side Democritus laughing, and on the other Heraclitus weeping... Why does Heraclitus weep? Because the mass of mankind is a monstrous, mad, and miserable animal. (Ficino 1495, folio 16b)

But Ficino exaggerates. While Heraclitus spoke harshly of those unwilling to take his message seriously, he also affirmed that “All people have a claim to self-knowledge and sound thinking” (B 116), and “A dry soul, a flash of light, is wisest and best” (B 118).⁹ Nevertheless, the weeping Heraclitus became a commonplace of Greek¹⁰, Roman¹¹, and Renaissance¹² literature.

The key piece of ancient evidence supporting this idea was a passage in Diogenes Laertius’ *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers* (IX, 6):

⁸ See Weisbach 1928, 141-58; Blankert 1966-67, 128-35; and Lurie 1979, 279-87.

⁹ With minor variations, the English translations follow those in Robinson 1987.

¹⁰ In Sotion, *On Anger* 2 (according to Stobaeus, *Florilegium* 3.20.53); Lucian, *Sale of the Philosophers* II.13.473; and *The Greek Anthology* III 9.148.

¹¹ Juvenal, *Satire* X, 28-52; Seneca, *de Ira* 2.10.5; and *de Tranquillitate Animi*, 15.1.6.

¹² Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1532, 1534); Montaigne, “On Democritus and Heraclitus” in *Essays of Montaigne*, Vol. 3 (1580); R. Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621); and H. P. Le Camus, *Heraclitus and Democritus* (1652).

Theophrastus says that it was *melancholia* that caused [Heraclitus] to write down some things in half-finished form and other things differently at different times.¹³

“Melancholy, gloominess” is a fair rendering of the Greek *melancholia*, but so also is “impulsiveness”.¹⁴ And it is more likely to have been his impulsiveness—rather than any gloominess—that that caused Heraclitus “to write down some things in half-finished form and other things differently at different times.”

Perhaps the best way of summarizing Heraclitus’ teachings is to focus on eight concepts which appear and reappear in numerous fragments: unity, opposition, strife, justice, fire, “the wise,” excellence, and understanding.

1. UNITY. The cosmos possesses an underlying unity that has escaped the notice of both the many and the wise:

It is wise for those who listen to the *logos* to agree that all things are one. (B 50)
 ...out of all things comes one thing, and out of one thing comes all things (B 10)
 One thing, the only wise thing, is both willing and unwilling to be called by the name of Zeus. (B 32)
 It is law also to obey the counsel of one. (B 33)
 Wisdom is one thing: mastering the intelligence <by which> all things are steered through all. (B 41)¹⁵
 One and the same thing, present [in us] living and dead and the waking and the sleeping and young and old... (B 88)
 ...for those who are awake there is one common universe, whereas in sleep each person turns away into his own private world (B 89)
 ...for all human laws are nourished by one [law], the divine... (B 114)

2. OPPOSITION. The unity of the cosmos is created and sustained through opposition, in at least three different ways:

(a) persons, objects, and events taking place throughout the cosmos display opposite attributes;

¹³ For a discussion of the corresponding view of the happy Democritus, see Lutz 1954, 309-14.

¹⁴ See Liddell and Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (hereafter cited as LSJ) and the discussion in Kirk, Raven, and Schofield (hereafter cited as KRS) 1983, 183.

¹⁵ “By which” assumes an emendation to *hopêi* from the untranslatable *hoteê*, and “intelligence” assumes that *gnômê* refers to a cosmic “mind” or “intelligence” rather than to some “insight,” “judgment,” or “opinion” in the mind of the individual knower.

As they step into the same rivers, ever-different waters flow (B 12)
 We step and do not step into the same rivers; we are and are not. (B 49a)
 The bow's name is life (*bios*), but its work is death. (B 48)
 The way of writing is straight and crooked. (B 59)
 The road up and that road down are one and the same. (B 60)
 Seawater is most pure and most foul—for fish, drinkable and life sustaining, for people undrinkable and lethal. (B 61)
 While changing it rests. (B 84a)
 In a circle's circumference, beginning and end are common. (B 103)
 The most beautiful order is a heap of sweepings, piled up at random. (B 124)

(b) opposites pass over into each other at regular intervals:

Immortal mortals, mortal immortals, living their death, and dying their life (B 62)
 God is day and night, winter and summer, war and peace, satiety and famine, and undergoes change in the way that [fire] whenever it is mixed with spices, gets called by the name that accords with the fragrance of each. (B 67)
 And as one and the same thing there is present living and dead and the waking and the sleeping and young and old. For the latter, having changed round are the former, and the former, having changed round, are back again to the latter. (B 88)
 Cold things become warm, a warm thing becomes cold, a moist thing becomes dry and a parched thing becomes moist. (B 126)

and (c) opposites depend upon each other for their continued existence and operation:

If these [injustices] were not, people would not know the name of justice (B 23)
 They do not understand how, while differing from itself it agrees with itself. There is a backward turning connection, like that of a bow or lyre (B 51)
 Disease makes health pleasant and good, hunger satiety, weariness rest. (B 111)
 Even the barley-drink separates if it is not stirred. (B 125)
 For attunement would not exist unless there were a low note and a high note, nor living things without female and male—which are opposites. (A 22)

3. STRIFE. The cosmos is a battleground on which pairs of forces and elements contend against each other and pass over into each other on a regular basis, thereby sustaining each other's existence.

What opposes is helpful, and the finest attunement comes from differences, and all things come about in accordance with strife. (B 8)
 War is father of all and king of all. And he shows some to be gods and others human beings, and makes some slaves and other free men. (B 53)

4. JUSTICE. Contrary to received opinion, strife or warfare simply is justice—i.e. conflict between the opposites is a natural and appropriate state of affairs:

One must realize that war is common, and justice strife, and that all things come to be through strife, and are so ordained. (B 80)

Justice will catch up with fabricators of falsehoods and those who bear witness to them. (B 28b)

The sun will not overstep his measures, otherwise the Furies, the ministers of justice, will find him out. (B 94)

5. FIRE. Fire plays three fundamental roles in the cosmos:

(a) As a natural substance which transforms itself into different elements in accordance with a fixed ratio:

Fire's turnings: first, sea, and of sea half is earth and half "sea burner." (B 31a)

(b) As a natural substance linked by strife (and justice) with other natural substances:

Fire lives the death of earth and air lives the death of fire, water lives the death of air, and earth that of water. (B 76a)

Fire's death is birth for air, and air's death birth for water. (B 76b)

[It is] death for earth to become water, and death for water to become air, and for air to become fire, and so on in backward sequence. (B 76c)

(c) As an energy-like power into and out of which all things come or go:

All things are in exchange for fire, and fire for all things, just as goods are for gold, and gold for goods. (B 90)¹⁶

and (d) As an intelligence which oversees, orchestrates, or "steers" events as they take place throughout the universe:

How would one escape the notice of that which never sets? (B 16)

This cosmos, the same for all, no god or man made, but it always was, is, and will be, an ever-living fire, kindled in measures and extinguished in measures. (B 30)

And Thunderbolt steers all things. (B 64)

Fire having come suddenly upon all things, will judge and convict them. (B 66)

¹⁶ The physicist Werner Heisenberg 1958, 28-9 observes: "We may remark at this point that modern physics is in some way extremely near to the doctrines of Heraclitus. If we replace the word "fire" by the word "energy" we can almost repeat his statements word for word from our modern point of view."

Heraclitus does not tell us how the ever-living fire that is the cosmos relates to the *logos* in accordance with which all things happen, but we can conjecture that the *logos* expresses the formula, plan, or ratio in accordance with which fire transforms itself into other substances and is in turn reconstituted from them. Fire also manifests the principle of unity in opposition since it can continue to exist only by consuming (i.e. “living the death of”) earth (e.g. wood) and air.

6. “THE WISE.” A single powerful cosmic intelligence (viz. fire in (d) above) oversees and directs the workings of the cosmos—thereby ensuring that changes take place in accordance with various fixed ratios, measures, or limits:

One thing, the only wise thing, is unwilling and willing to be called by the name of Zeus. (B 32)

And Thunderbolt steers all things. (B 64)

The sun shares...with the chief and primal god the job of setting bounds to the changes and seasons that bring all things. (B 100)

Of all those whose accounts I have listened to, none gets to the point of recognizing that which is wise, set apart from all. (B 108)

Wisdom is one thing: mastering the intelligence <by which> all things are steered through all. (B 41)¹⁷

7. EXCELLENCE. The best life for a human being requires aligning the flash of light that is the soul’s intelligence with the fiery power and intelligence which oversees the operations of the cosmos at large. Living well requires achieving such an understanding and acting on that basis, rather than relying on some monitoring *daimôn* or “guardian angel.”¹⁸ Those who achieve excellence will enjoy a superior form of existence in this life as well as in the life to come:

¹⁷ The notion of a power which “steers” all things appears in a number of early Greek cosmologies: the ‘Indefinite’ of Anaximander which “contains and steers (*kubernan*) all things” (A 15), the “air of Anaximenes which controls (*sungktratei*) us also surrounds all things” (B 2), the Mind of Anaxagoras which “holds every decision (*gnômên*) concerning all things” (B 12), and the air of Diogenes which “steers” (*kubernasthai*) and “controls” (*kratein*) all things (B 5). Seen in this light, Socrates’ statement in Plato’s *Phaedo* (97b-c) that Anaxagoras was the first to view the universe as ordered by a cosmic intelligence did a serious injustice to Heraclitus.

¹⁸ KRS 1983, 203 comments: “Wisdom—and therefore, it might be inferred satisfactory living—consists in understanding the Logos, the analogous structure or common element in things...”

Those who would speak with insight must base themselves firmly on that which is common to all, as a city does upon its law—and much more firmly. For all human laws are nourished by one law, the divine law. For it holds sway to the extent that it wishes, and suffices for all, and is still left over. (B 114)

Soul possesses a *logos* which increases itself. (B 115)

A flash of light is a dry soul, wisest and best, (B 118)

A person's character is his *daimôn*. (B 119)

In its presence they arise and become wakeful guardians of the living and dead. (B 63)

Better deaths gain better destinies. (B 25)

8. UNDERSTANDING. Our faculties of sense perception (or the things “we meet with” when we use them) provide us with only a superficial view of reality:

...they are like people without experience when they experience such words and deeds as I relate. (B 1)

Most people do not understand the sorts of things they meet with.¹⁹ Nor do they recognize them even when they have had experience of them—though they themselves think that they do. (B 17)

Bad witnesses are eyes and ears for those with uncomprehending souls. (B 107)

Uncomprehending when they have heard, they are like the deaf. The saying bears witness to them: ‘although present they are absent’. (B 34)

And since the most esteemed poets have failed to grasp the true nature of the realities (cf. B 40, B 42, B 56, B 57, and B 104), we must not direct our questions to the supposed experts, but follow the example set by Heraclitus: “I inquired of myself” (B 101).²⁰

The approach Heraclitus champions involves the pursuit of a type of knowledge best characterized as “understanding” (*xunesis*) and “intelligent insight” (*noos*). The most pertinent remarks are B 40 and B 51:

The learning of many things (*polumathiê*) does not teach intelligent insight (*noon*), or else it would have taught Hesiod and Pythagoras, and again Xenophanes and Hecataeus.

¹⁹ This would appear to be Heraclitus' response to the poet Archilochus (fr. 70): “Of such a sort, Glaucus, is the mind of mortal man, whatever Zeus may bring him for the day, for he thinks such things as he meets with.”

²⁰ Guthrie 1962, 419 offers this gloss on B 101: “I turned my thoughts within and sought to discover my real self,” “I asked questions of myself,” and “I treated the answers like Delphic responses hinting, in a riddling way, at the single truth behind them...”

They do not understand (*ou xuniasin*) how, while differing from itself it agrees with itself. There is a backward-turning²¹ connection like that of a bow or lyre.

The key term in Heraclitus' indictment of the popular sages is the adjectival element *polu*—"much or many": in their compilations of information (about the gods, the care of the soul, or natural phenomena), the sages have focused on a multitude of details and failed to detect the hidden unifying principle—i.e. they have failed to grasp the *logos* that expresses the true nature of the divine, the soul, and the cosmos as a whole. Grasping the nature of the "backward turning connection" in the case of the bow and lyre, on one plausible interpretation²², requires appreciating how the successful operation of the bow and lyre involves two opposing movements—as the string (in both the bow and lyre) is first pulled back in one direction before it springs forward in the other. In a way that closely parallels the up and down road that is one and the same, the string and the frame move back and forth in an opposing yet cooperative manner.

The same two-stage procedure of analysis and synthesis will be required in order to discover the true nature of all things. We must come to appreciate how each element or property contributes to the work of its opposite, advancing from an understanding of the nature of individual phenomena to a comprehensive "mastery" (cf. his use of the verb *epistasthai* in B 41) of how the principle of the hidden unity of the opposites applies to the cosmos as a whole. In developing this view of the requirements for knowledge Heraclitus moved away from the popular view of wisdom as embodied in the teachings of the popular poets and sages, as well as away from the traditional identification of knowledge with "what is met with" in sense

²¹ Accepting the *palintropos* ("backward turning") in Hippolytus rather than the *palintonos* ("backward stretching") in Plutarch and Porphyry. The textual question is much disputed, with weighty considerations available on both sides. Also disputed is the precise nature of *harmonie* ("connection" or "fitting together") evident in the bow and the lyre. A strong but not decisive case for *palintonos* is set out in Marcovich 2001, 125-9.

²² Following the account given in Vlastos 1955.

experience, and toward a view of knowledge as understanding, a form of awareness that originates in sense experience²³ but is fully realized only in reflection.

It is clear from this summary that Heraclitus developed a philosophy of considerable depth and complexity. Like his Milesian predecessors, he sought to identify a single basic substance out of which existing things emerge and to which they must ultimately return. Because there is an intelligent power which oversees the workings of the cosmos, events take place throughout the universe in an orderly manner, most notably as things feed upon and pass over into their opposites in regular intervals. This process can with equal accuracy be characterized as “the turnings of fire” in so far as the power that controls all natural processes possesses various fire-like properties. The proper response for mankind in the face of these truths is to acknowledge the existence of that Zeus-like power and align itself with that power, for the sake of living well in this life and in the one to come.

The poetic character of many of Heraclitus’ sayings was already a subject for comment in antiquity. The 4th- and 3rd-century philosopher Timon referred to him as “cuckoo-voiced” (*kokkustês*) and “riddler” (*ainiktês*, A 1.6). The author of the 10th-century *Suda* (A 1a) stated that Heraclitus “wrote many things in a poetic manner” (*egrapse polla poêtikôs*, A 1a). As we shall see, the many of the surviving fragments feature the use of poetic figures or devices: intentional ambiguity, chiasmus, alliteration, assonance, onomatopoeia, verbal puns, simile, metaphor, antithesis, asyndeton, hieratic language, and a repeated tripartite grouping of words and sentences.²⁴

²³ Scholarly opinion is divided on the nature of the role Heraclitus assigned to sense experience. The issue is well discussed in Graham 2011, 176-84. See also Lesher 1994, 1-34 and 2011, 458-84.

²⁴ This is not a complete listing. Mouraviev 2006 offers an extensive account of Heraclitus’ use of poetic techniques, although it is doubtful that Heraclitus employed quite as many poetic devices as Mouraviev claims.

Among the first to comment on the ambiguity of a Heraclitean utterance was Aristotle (in *Meta. I 4*):

Punctuating Heraclitus' writing is a problem because it is unclear whether [a word] goes with [the words] that go before or after it. An example of this is found at the outset of his treatise, where he says: "Of this account, which holds..., people...prove uncomprehending."

To make sense of Heraclitus' sentence one must determine whether the word *aiei* ("always") goes with *tou de logou toude eontes* ("this account which holds") or with *axunetoi gignontai anthrôpoi* ("people prove uncomprehending"). Aristotle faults Heraclitus for failing to make clear which of the two readings he had in mind, but as Charles Kahn (1979, 89-95) has persuasively argued, Heraclitus almost certainly intended for the *aiei* to be understood in connection with both clauses, i.e. for the statement to be read as "of this account which holds always, human beings always prove to be uncomprehending." This would be a typical Heraclitean "polar expression", just like the seawater which is both the most polluted for men and the purest for fish (B 61), and that which is most there to be understood (the *logos*) is that which is most misunderstood (B 72). In creating the ambiguity Heraclitus would have been alerting the members of his audience to the possibility that in ordinary speech as in other aspects of their daily lives there are ambiguities needing to be resolved.

Intentional ambiguity, or as Kahn termed the phenomenon, "semantic density," is also evident in B 50: "It is wise for those listening not to me but to the *logos* to agree that *hen panta einai*." One obviously correct translation of *hen panta einai* here is "all things are one." Nevertheless, a case can be made for the alternative "one is all things." As B 10 explains, understanding the nature of the cosmos requires realizing how "out of all things comes one thing, and out of one thing comes all things."

Heraclitus also made extensive use of the poetic figure known as chiasmus, the crosswise arrangement of contrasting pairs:

Out of all things (comes) one and out of one (comes) all things. (B 25)

Fire's death is air's birth and air's death is water's birth. (B 76b)

For these changed around are those and those changed back again are these. (B 88)

...as goods are for gold and gold for goods... (B 90)

Cold things warm up, a warm thing becomes cold...(B 126)

One especially artful aphorism features a double chiasmus:

Immortal mortals, mortal immortals, living their death and dying their lives. (B 62)

Here again Heraclitus' words convey two different messages. First, it is impossible to have a proper understanding what it means to be a mortal without also understanding what it means to be an immortal, and vice versa (cf. "no high notes without low notes," "no male without female," "no understanding of 'justice' without these [unjust things]," etc.). This reading seems especially likely in so far as the Greek word for "immortal" (*athanatos*) had its opposite (*thanatos*) embedded within it.

Second, it is impossible to achieve a proper understanding of either mortality or immortality unless one sees human and divine existence as alternating stages within a single ongoing process. The chiastic structure of the remark provides the key to understanding the reality: the words alternate in their position relative to each other just as life and death alternate

with each other. Heraclitus elsewhere (B 76a) speaks of the elements (air, fire, earth, water) as “living each other’s death” and “dying each other’s lives.” Thus, mortals and immortals—i.e. human beings and gods—imply each other’s existence as well as pass over into each other, a reading also supported by B 27: “what happens after death men neither expect nor hope for,” B 25: “fates that are greater win better fates,” and B 63: “In its presence they arise and become wakeful guardians of the living and corpses.”

Fragment B 12 (“On those stepping into the same rivers ever different waters flow” illustrates the use of assonance, alliteration, and onomatopoeia. The –s—, –oi—, and –in— sounds in the first clause *potamoisin toisin autoisin embainousin* (“on those stepping into the same rivers”) imitate the sound of the flowing river, in contrast to the crisp alliteration of *hetera kai hetera hudata* (“ever different waters”).

Among the many verbal puns are B 114 and B 48:

Those who would speak with insight (*xun noôî*) must base themselves firmly on that which is common (*xunôî*) to all, as a city does upon its law... (B 114)

The adjective “common” (*xunôî*) echoes the phrase ‘with insight’ (*xun noôî*) again displaying the way in which words echo the world, or the *logos* echoes the *kosmos*. Similarly, B 48:

The bow’s name is life but its job is death.

plays on the double meaning of *bios* (which can mean, depending on the placement of the accent, either “life” or “bow”). In a number of fragments Heraclitus employs forms of the verb *xuniemi* whose meaning ranges over “come together in friendship,” “come together in battle,” “go along

together with someone”—i.e. “understand”, and “go along together with someone”, i.e. “be obedient.”

B 41 and B 64 employ the metaphor of “steering” or “piloting” (*oiakidzei, ekubernêse*) to characterize the way in which an intelligent power oversees and guides the operations of the cosmos. B 30, B 41, B 65, B 66, B 90, and B 100 employ fire (in its various manifestations) as a simile for the power that oversees the changes taking place throughout the cosmos, while B 55 speaks of the interaction between fire and other natural elements in the metaphors of “want” and “satiety.” B 34, B 75, and B 89 employ contrasts between waking and sleeping and being deaf and hearing as similes for the contrast between those who understand the cosmic *logos* and those who do not. The *kukeôn* or “barley drink” of B 125 serves as a simile for the cosmos that achieves and preserves its identity only by changing (cf. B 84a “while changing it rests”).

B 60 “A road up and a road down are one and the same,” B 48 “The bow’s name is life but its work is death”, and B 18 “If one does not expect the unexpected, he will not discover it, for it is hard to discover and intractable” all employ antithesis or the contrast of opposing ideas. The listing of divine attributes in B 67: “God is day night, winter summer, etc.” is an asyndeton (a series of items listed without conjunctions). And several fragments feature “hieratic” or religious language (e.g. this *kosmos* “was, is, and will be” and “ever-living” in B 30 and “father of all and king of all”—a traditional epithet of Zeus—in B 53. Similarly, B 64: “Thunderbolt steers all things.”

Many sayings display a tripartite structure:

to antixoun sumpheron: That which opposes is helpful. (B 8)

amathiê kruptein ameionon: It is better to hide ignorance. (B 95)

nekues kopriôn ekblêtoeroi: Corpses are more to be thrown out than dung. (B 96)

êthos anthrôpôi daimôn: A person's character is his guardian spirit. (B 119)

phusis kruptesthai philei: Nature loves to hide. (B 123)

Heraclitus' favorite poetic idea was arguably that of unity in opposition. Fragments B 1, B 23, B 32, B 34, B 48, and B 93 all comment on how understanding the meaning of an individual word requires grasping the meaning of its polar opposite, just as there is unity in opposition at work throughout the cosmos. Similarly, fragments B 1, B 50, and B 51 speak of a *logos* that holds always but is always misunderstood, the one that is also many, and of the thing that agrees with itself only by differing from itself. The chiasmic structure of B 10, B 62, B 76b, B 88, B 90, and B 126 also directs our attention to a series of opposing states of affairs: one thing and all things, mortals and immortals; the living and the dead; waking and the sleeping; fire for all things and all things for fire; cold and warm; and moist and dry. The tripartite structure of many utterances also shows how a single phenomenon can comprise two opposing constituent elements (e.g. "Wherefore one must follow (*dei hepesthai*) the common, but while the *logos* is common (*eontes xunou*), the many live (*zôosin*) as if they had a private understanding" (B 2).

Having now surveyed Heraclitus' main teachings and his use of poetic devices we can resume our original inquiry: what is Heraclitus' legacy for modern poetry?

