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Glimpsing Alterity and Differentiation

Vision and the Heraclitean Logos

It [unconcealedness] belongs to concealment and conceals itself, but in such a manner that, by this self-withdrawal, it leaves to things their tarrying, which appears from out of delimitation.

—Martin Heidegger, “Die Herkunft der Kunst und die Bestimmung des Denkens”

Νυκτιφαῆς περὶ γαῖαν ἀλώμενον ἀλλότριον φῶς

Night-shining, wandering around the earth, an alien light

—Parmenides, *Peri Phuseōs*

Vision, construed throughout much of the history of Western philosophy as the analogue of an intellectual apprehension characterized by full (self-)presence and lucidity, is thought otherwise by Heraclitus of Ephesus. Heraclitus did not, to be sure, just come up with a different understanding of vision and visuality, considered a particular ontic region, but rather his understanding of vision is of a piece with his fundamental insights into what it means to speak and think truthfully and, indeed, to be. To characterize his thought at least roughly at the outset, for Heraclitus, presence and (self-)identity are pervasively eroded by alterity. Jean Bollack and Heinz Wismann, who are among his most perspicacious twentieth-century interpreters, express this point from the (anachronistic) perspective of subjectivity:

[For Heraclitus,] the subject has only a dissociated, abstract, and punctiform existence, since it discovers the Other within itself. . . .

Thus the separation that founds the intelligence of the saying forms the main content of all the fragments.

In reality, the distinction that makes for the *self*, in reproducing the divergence between the saying and its object, enables one to find, by traversing the saying, the divergence that is within the thing, so as to *divide it according to its nature*.¹

In contrast to this unflinching acknowledgment of originary differentiation, the quest for the security of a shared identity that would allow one to integrate oneself seamlessly into relevant communities paradoxically produces alienation, the condition of being uncomprehending (ἀξύνετοι), and thus displaced from genuine community—a displacement that is, to be sure, so subtle as to pass generally almost unnoticed.²

It may seem strange, however, to turn to Heraclitus as a thinker concerned with vision, given that the articulation of his thought is indissociable from the linguistic articulation of his discourse—a *logos* of incomparable refinement that does not situate itself on a meta-level but participates in what it speaks of. The Heraclitean fragments do not offer one, so to speak, a vision of vision, in the sense of a definitive and suitably distant treatment of the subject. This refusal of a “bird’s-eye view” (a loose translation of Merleau-Ponty’s *pensée de survol*) is itself integral to his thematization of vision. What the Heraclitean fragments do offer are entryways into the complexities and paradoxes of vision—which is to say, access to what makes vision provocative for thought, and what prevents it from functioning unproblematically as a model for intellectual adequation.

Given the refinement of the Heraclitean *logos*, it will be necessary to enter into the subtleties of its verbal articulation to avoid the pitfall pointed out by Bollack and Wismann:

One did not go to the words, because one was sure of having understood.³

To pursue the Heraclitean thought of vision will therefore not mean to put forward a theory, to be substantiated and illustrated by interpretations of various fragments, but to trace a way, searchingly and tentatively, through the fragmented landscape of his *logos*. This itinerary will here set out from Fragment B55, which reads:

ὅσων ὄψις ἀκοὴ μάθησις, ταῦτα ἐγὼ προτιμέω.

Those things that are learned by sight [or] by hearing are the ones I esteem above all.⁴

Hippolytus, who transmits the fragment, cites it as supporting his own Christian view of an essential convergence of the seen with the unseen, or of the sensible with the intelligible.⁵ His interpretation not only “reads into” the fragment a doctrine that has no textual basis but also ignores the personal preference emphatically expressed by *ego protimeō* (“I esteem above all”). Charles Kahn’s contemporary reading, in contrast, does justice to the forcible *protimeō*, but Kahn understands the preference voiced as just an endorsement of the commonsensical view that values “ordinary experience” over hearsay or erudite obfuscation.⁶ Both Fragments B56 and B107 call such an interpretation into question, in that they indicate that what is plainly visible (or audible) is not, for all that, apprehended adequately either by highly accomplished individuals or by ordinary people. Fragments B56 and B107 read, respectively:

ἐξηπάτηνται οἱ ἄνθρωποι πρὸς τὴν γνῶσιν τῶν φανερῶν
 παραπλήϊως Ὁμήρω, ὅς ἐγένετο τῶν Ἑλλήνων σοφρώτερος
 πάντων. ἐκεῖνόν τε γὰρ παῖδες φθειρας κατακτείνοντες
 ἐξηπάτησαν εἰπόντες· ὅσα εἶδομεν καὶ καταλάβομεν, ταῦτα
 ἀπολείπομεν, ὅσα δὲ οὔτε εἶδομεν οὔτ' ἐλάβομεν, ταῦτα
 φέρομεν.

Humans are deceived in the recognition of what is most plainly visible, like Homer, wisest of all the Greeks. For he was deceived by boys killing lice, who said: That which we see and catch hold of, we leave behind; but that which we neither see nor seize, we carry away.

Κακοὶ μάρτυρες ἀνθρώποισιν ὀφθαλμοὶ καὶ ὄτα βαρβάρους
 ψυχὰς ἔχόντων.

For humans, the eyes and ears of those who have barbarous souls are poor witnesses.⁷

It is interesting that, as Bollack and Wismann point out, Heraclitus, in Fragment B56, adds the determinations of seeing or not seeing to the traditional formulation of the riddle. In its overall form, the fragment articulates a variation of the thought pattern of double proportion, which Hermann Fränkel traces throughout the Heraclitean corpus.⁸ This form alone should caution one against trying to make the fragment yield a straightforward, encrypted assertion, as does Uvo Hölscher, who states that the riddle signifies, “In things the absent is present, the invisible visible.”⁹

Homer, the blind poet, certainly is in his element in the invisible, for his surpassing wisdom and skill lie in his way with words and ideas. When he is confronted with the children’s riddle, however, his very wisdom becomes his downfall. Being blind, he is quite unaware of the demands that the banal

delousing scenario makes on the street urchins' eyesight and eye-hand coordination. Instead, he probably follows out the thought of the invisible on an exalted and a theoretical level—if not on the philosophical level of the transcendent invisible, at least on that of a (quasi-Rilkean) invisible distillate of experience that the poet is in quest of.

Homer's humiliating deception¹⁰ nonetheless does not argue for a return to common experience, or to what one can, paradigmatically, see plainly with one's own eyes. Just as Homer is deceived in *his* very element, which is the invisible, so ordinary people are (in keeping with the pattern of the double proportion) deceived in *their* element, the visible, which they seem to apprehend in incontrovertible self-evidence. Hence, as Hölscher points out regarding Fragment B55 (and contrary to Kahn's reading):

The preference for what can be seen, voiced by Heraclitus in B55, is thus not unqualified; his vision is not naïve and immediate, and has nothing to do with Xenophanes's homely empiricism.¹¹

This conclusion, however, still leaves one puzzled as to how to make sense of the emphatic preference voiced by the *protimēō*. Its force is blunted if visual and auditory perception have nothing more distinctive to offer than does the concern for the invisible that led Homer astray.

In their interpretation of Fragment B55, Bollack and Wismann suggest that it is direct perception that attests to "the particular identity of the perceived object, oriented toward the aspect of its contrary and determined by its own negation." Perceptual preference thus "joins up with the rebellion of things," tearing asunder the reassuring bonds of esteem (*timē*, echoed in *protimēō*).¹² Their emphasis is on the singularizing and differentiating power of perception and, beyond that, on the ability of vision to reveal the incursion of alterity into customary identifications.

Heraclitus himself indicates, in Fragments B7 and B98, that the differentiating or discriminating impetus of perception is so strong that it continues to assert itself, even when vision and hearing fail, and when nothing remains any more to be touched or grasped. Fragments B7 and B98 read, respectively:

εἰ πάντα καπνὸς γένοιτο, ῥῖνες ἄν διαγνοῖεν.

Were all things to become smoke, the nostrils would discriminate them.

αἱ ψυχὰὶ ὁσμῶνται καθ' Ἄιδην.

Souls scent in keeping with the invisible.

Smoke, which John Sallis, in his analysis of fragment B98, describes as “the shadow of fire,”¹³ or the dark aspect of its brilliance, is opaque to vision and also stings and incapacitates the eyes; but vision, less sensitive here than the visceral sense of smell, cannot distinguish between the smoke of an altar flame and that of a funeral pyre (to stay with Charles Kahn’s example).¹⁴ Since the *psychai*, being breaths, share the airy nature of smoke,¹⁵ it cannot blunt the keenness of their olfactory “diagnoses.” English translations of Fragment B98 have been at pains to eliminate the ambiguity of “to scent” (which has at least the double meaning of being on the scent of and imparting a scent), and if “to smell” is substituted, then the situation becomes still more tangled. Given that these ambiguities are embedded in Indo-European languages, however, and that they are not foreign to Heraclitus’s customary linguistic artistry, they are best left in place. In keeping with (*kath’, kata*) Hades or *A-idēs*, then, of whom or which there is no sight,¹⁶ the breath-souls sniff out, and perhaps also take on, scents, accomplishing differentiations that bypass the visible. For all that, they do not intimate a transcendent(al) invisible, nor could they do so, since smoke, breath, and scent are formless and ephemeral. Although differentiation remains acute here, the double seduction of vision, toward reifying its own evidences and toward positing transcendent idealizations, does not come into play.

However, the human sense of smell is, as Sallis notes, incapable of making well-informed distinctions and is, of all of the senses, “most subject to the power of concealment.”¹⁷ Smell, moreover, is viscerally bound up with pleasure and disgust, attraction and repulsion, that is, with the blind and inarticulate life of desires and needs. No sooner do its differentiations arise than they stimulate craving or loathing, rather than facilitating understanding. For these reasons, smell, however sensitive, cannot yield the proto-theoretical *mathēsis* for which vision and hearing are renowned. For someone in quest of *mathēsis*, the powers of differentiation proper to the latter two senses are therefore to be preferred. If ordinary people, who do trust their eyes and ears, are nevertheless just as deceived and blinded as was Homer, one reason, if not the key reason, for their predicament is put forward by Fragment B107 (cited above), which states that, as long as humans have barbarous souls, their eyes and ears are poor witnesses.

Though *mathēsis* demands a certain independence of mind, it does not thrive in a solipsistic context. One needs others who are willing, as Descartes puts it, “to meditate along with me,” confirming or disconfirming one’s evidences. This can happen only if their sentient life-breaths or souls (*psychai*) are not given to mere babbling (the root sense of “barbarous”), or to comporting themselves, as Heraclitus observes in Fragment B2, as though their intelligence (*phronēsis*) were a private resource. In this condition, humans are incapable of bearing witness for one another, however much they may have seen,

or whatever doctrines they may espouse. As Fragment B34 characterizes them: “Being present, they are absent.” What genuine witnessing requires, and what empowers eyes and ears, is an attunement to the logos that is held in common and articulates the fundamental patterns according to which all things come to pass (compare Fragments B1 and B2). The true eyewitness, then, will not be one whose sight is preternaturally keen but one who holds fast to the logos, the very logos that Heraclitus strives to articulate.¹⁸ The key issue here is how to understand the counterplay of separation and unification within this logos as it bears upon the understanding of vision. In this context, Fragment B57 is relevant:

διδάσκαλος πλείστων Ἡσίοδος· τοῦτον ἐπίστανται πλεῖστα
εἰδέναι, ὅστις ἡμέρην καὶ εὐφρόνην οὐκ ἐγίνωσκεν· ἔστι γὰρ ἓν.

The teacher of most is Hesiod; him they know to understand the most—he who does not recognize day and night; for there is [the] one.

Day and night, the radiant clarity that enables visual discrimination, and the opaque darkness that frustrates it, are paradigmatic opposites. Parmenides, whose revelatory journey leads him into the Hesiodic House of Night, where opposites are undivided,¹⁹ names fire and night as the two fundamental thought forms that mortals have set up as they journey along the Way of Semblance.

It may seem surprising, then, that the teacher revered by the multitude does not countenance the pure self-identity and mutual exclusion of these primary opposites. Nonetheless, even the much-maligned multitude shows some awareness that a vision that identifies and fixates upon oppositional constructs may be ill informed, that perhaps the wisdom eye sees differently. Hence, they seek out and are inspired by a teacher who lays claim to another understanding, but in Heraclitus’s judgment, this teacher, Hesiod, does not do justice to the subtle interrelations of the opposites that he seeks to unify. Heraclitus himself can, to be sure, be characterized, as Bollack and Wismann put it, as “making a contribution to a reflection that pursues unity, not separation,” but rather than simply to assimilate opposites, or to unify them at least by filiation, “he makes radical separation itself the condition of identity,” a condition that the logos strives throughout to articulate.²⁰

It is customary but problematic to translate the last clause of the fragment straightforwardly as “for they [day and night] are one.” Kahn accepts this translation, since he takes the unity of day and night to refer to the *nykthēmeron* which, in modern terms, is roughly a period of twenty-four hours.²¹ Dilcher contests such a translation on grammatical grounds, as does Eugen Fink, given the singular verb form ἐστι and the use of ἓν rather than

μία.²² Furthermore, although Bollack and Wismann, as well as Heidegger and Fink, reject the customary reading, they differ among themselves in that the latter two interpreters consider the clause an unconditional assertion, to the effect that there is the One (*es gibt das év*), whereas the former link it to *pleista eidenai* (“to understand the most”). The meaning then becomes that most people judge Hesiod to understand the most, namely, that there is (the) One.

Stepping back from these technicalities of translation to consider the general sense of the fragment, one is led to surmise that, in Heraclitus’s view, the multitude trusts Hesiod’s proclamation of an underlying genealogical unity of day and night, unaware that this postulation, no less than that of sheer opposition, bespeaks both a compromised vision and an artless discourse.

An attentive vision not dulled by babble grasps how singular things are constituted, in their very identity, by oppositional tensions, so that identity becomes indissociable from a play of differences and shows itself to be traversed by alterity. Although in some cases, such as that of the bow and the lyre of Fragment B51, a “backward-turning” or “backstretched” attunement (*palintropos* or *palintonos harmoniē*, following either Hippolytus or Plutarch) leaps to the eye, vision generally must cultivate the probing subtlety that allows it to see a compelling configuration along with its withdrawing undertow. Only presences appear to a “profane vision” (as Merleau-Ponty calls it), but a subtle and discerning vision is attuned to the oppositional play within presencing. Heraclitus pursues further the refinement, as well as the short-fall, of ordinary vision in Fragment B21, and in the enigmatic Fragment B26. Fragment B21 reads:

θάνατός ἐστιν ὀκόσα ἐγερθέντες ὀρέομεν, ὀκόσα δὲ εὐδοντες ὕπνος.

Death are the things that we see waking, those [that we see] sleeping, sleep.

Although it seems self-evident that what appears to waking and attentive sight is the world of living and, if they can be called such, inanimate beings, such as mountains, seas, animals, and plants, someone with an interest in philosophical speculation might conceivably go along with the suggestion that what we “really” see everywhere is death. By the logic of identity and opposition, such a philophile (one imagines him or her as juvenile) would then be led on to conclude that in sleep, in contrast (and most likely in dreams), one must be able to experience genuine life. Heraclitus, however, cuts short any such speculation: what appears in sleep is no more than sleep, so that neither mere somnolence nor the phantoms of dream offer any genuine alternative to the waking vision of death.

This waking vision is more accurately, as well as more comfortingly, a vision of death/life; for “death” is a name for the constitutive alterity of whatever comes to presence, or the despoilment inherent in what appear to be intrinsic realities or truths. In Fragment 36, Heraclitus allows his readers to envisage this alterity or withdrawal concretely, in terms of genesis and perishing. For the breath-souls, it is death to become water (interestingly, the afflictions of the “moist” soul are much commented on in the interpretive literature), whereas water dies in becoming earth. Yet water and earth again engender, respectively, soul and water.

Fragment B26 further elaborates on the chiasmatic linkages of night and light, sleeping and waking, and vision and blindness:

ἄνθρωπος ἐν εὐφρόνῃ φάος ἄπτεται, ἑαυτῷ ἀποθανών,
ἀποσβεσθεὶς ὄψεις· ζῶν δὲ, ἄπτεται τεθνεώτος εὐδῶν,
ἀποσβεσθεὶς ὄψεις, ἐγρηγορώς ἄπτεται εὐδοντος.

Man in the night grasps a light, having died for himself, his sight extinguished. Living, then, he touches the dead one while asleep, his eyes extinguished; waking, he touches the sleeper.²³

Notwithstanding the clear, antithetical articulation of the fragment, interlinked as it is by the triple *haptetai* (with the accusative and genitive constructions expressing, respectively, grasping and touching), the text remains elusive. Heidegger acknowledges (quite uncharacteristically) that he is baffled by the guiding sense of the fragment, as well as by the specific meanings of *haptesthai* (“to touch, grasp, or kindle”) and *heautōi* (“for himself”) that it draws upon. He also finds himself puzzled as to the basic point of Clement’s citation of it.²⁴ With his customary fine-tuned auscultation of language, he proposes to read it together with Fragment B10, to let the *haptetai* echo the *syllapsēs* or graspings-together of the latter text. He thus brings the interpretation to turn on how, in the midst of the multifarious all (*panta*)²⁵ of presencing, and without negating it, the One that unifies reveals itself.²⁶ In this perceptive reading, nonetheless, the fragment’s preoccupation with the extinguishing of vision is not attended to.

Engulfed by night, a human being must, as though struck blind, gropingly orient herself by touch, letting touch take the place of vision, which depends on light. Although there is no independent evidence that Heraclitus either did or did not hold a version of the “fiery eye” theory of vision (first formulated in antiquity), according to which the eye itself emits fiery rays rather than merely responding to light,²⁷ such a theory could help clarify the sense in which sight can be said to be quenched or extinguished at night, as well as the resonance of “kindles” in the first *haptetai*. Nonetheless, the stress

of the fragment is not on the visual fire (crucial though the element of fire, in both its ordinary and subtle aspects, remains for Heraclitus) but rather on the supplanting of vision by touch (which involves a loss of visual distance and which closely echoes the supplanting of vision by smell in Fragment B98).

Although, whether one lies sleepless, dreams, or sleeps deeply, one's life continues unbroken in the embrace of night, one touches then—with one's eyes blinded to the daylight panorama and one's ties to the lifeworld loosened or cut—upon what it may mean to be dead. Furthermore, through the altered understanding and the illusory experience of dreams, one's naïve confidence in the trustworthiness of waking experience is eroded, so that one comes to realize that, for all of its seeming lucidity, it touches upon the sightless condition of sleep. Waking in nocturnal darkness, one may have an intimation not only of the dreamlike character of waking experience but also of the ways in which sleep (now no longer sharply distinguished from waking life) draws near to death. In the natural, cyclical kindling and extinguishing of sight, one is thus exposed, in the immediacy of touch rather than from a theoretical distance, to the absencing withdrawal that permeates, and thereby perhaps unifies, presencing. Sight allows for such exposure through the supplement of touch, which it calls for due to its unavoidable blindings. Since these uncanny intimations unsettle one's customary but illusory idea of the self as an entity that exists in its own right, that excludes what is foreign to it, and that perdures for an allotted time, they have the power to restore one to a more genuine self-understanding.

The fault of ordinary vision is not that it may fall short of transcendent invisibles, but rather, to render it sensitive to the play of shadows, latencies, and reciprocities that always already inform it, what needs to be called into question is its fixation on unambiguous figures delineated against a neutralized ground, along with its tendency to reify its own evidences. Such sensitivity is fostered by a (literal or metaphoric) passage through "night" (euphemistically referred to by Heraclitus as "The Kindly One"), which brings one into intimate contact with disfiguration, ambiguities, and loss. The extinguishings and metamorphoses of vision therefore restore it, ultimately, to its own obscurities and *lacunae*, which tend to be forgotten, as long as one remains spellbound by the brightness, vivid clarity, and sense of incontrovertible presence that it can offer. Being exposed, as they are, to nocturnal blinding (a powerful experience before the availability of electric lighting), humans can, paradoxically, become more clear-sighted concerning vision and its play of appearances. In this way, a human being encompassed by night can be said to touch upon or hold fast to a light (*phaos haptetai*).

To understand more fully why the nocturnal blinding of sight is not merely restorative but (metaphorically and paradoxically) illuminating, the Heraclitean reflections on vision themselves need to be further illuminated by their context, which is the self-articulation of the logos.

Fragment B64, in its terse simplicity, inaugurates the Heidegger–Fink Heraclitus seminar. Heidegger there brings it into relation with Fragments B41 and B50, with a view to emphasizing the unifying character of governance, and to point, “in our situation of need today,”²⁸ to a mode of governance that is released from power and calculation. The fragment will here be read differently and will facilitate the reintegration of Heraclitean vision into the logos. This fragment reads:

τάδε πάντα οἰακίζει κεραυνός.

All the things that are there, the thunderbolt steers.

Keraunos, the thunderbolt, emblem of Zeus and of his cosmic governance, also is thunder and lightning, or the fiery lightning flash. Its sudden brilliance throws all things into compelling but transient phenomenal configurations. The verb *oiakizein*, “to steer,” derives from *oiax*, the tiller or handle of the rudder of a ship, which is an ancient emblem, in maritime cultures, of purposive leadership. A ship steered by thunder and lightning, however, is embarked on a perilous course and is likely to encounter the abyss that subtends human purposes. What is steered by the lightning flash here is not the proverbial ship of state but “all the things that are there,” or the whole of presencing, considered (to speak anachronistically) in its historicity. The governance of the lightning flash is not that of cosmic law but of an enigmatic granting (well expressed by the German *es gibt*) and withdrawal of entire constellations of presencing. To resort to a Heideggerian term, one can speak here of the epochal character of presencing or manifestation. If the logos articulates the imprevisible, differential, and perhaps epochal character of presencing, it is vision, rather than intellection, that first of all offers an intimation of it. Vision can reveal the lightning flash as an emblem of the happening of manifestation, because it is already sensitized (as hearing, in the end, is not, since it does not seek to delimit and define entities) to the play of differences and the incursions of alterity on the microcosmic level of the constitution and undoing of singular beings, or to what it means for them to come to presence spatially and temporally. Vision is, then, the one sensory power adequate to a cosmos that is “fire everliving,” epochally kindled and extinguished (like vision itself) “according to measure” (compare Fragment B30, as well as B31, which concerns the “tropics” or turning points of fire). However, the sight of those whose souls are “barbarous,” or unreceptive to the logos, will remain riveted to the phenomenal surface of whatever the lightning stroke has illumined and thrown into relief. They will perceive seemingly assured spatiotemporal configurations of self-identical things rather than being initiated into the spatIALIZING and temporalizing play of manifestation. For this reason, they will be unreliable witnesses for those who seek genuine insight.

The reading of selected Heraclitean fragments here performed cannot, of course, claim to hold up a mirror to Heraclitus's own meaning. Its hermeneutical displacement is obvious, as is the fact that it is informed by certain decisions concerning textual scholarship and the choice of interpretive literature. Moreover, the need for what might be called an "imaginative supplement" is particularly acute in scholarly work that addresses pre-Socratic philosophy. The effort of this reading has been to explore a facet of Heraclitus's challenging thought, which the prevailing interpretive preoccupation with other facets, such as fire, logos, or the soul, has tended to obscure and marginalize. The challenge can be appreciated when one contrasts Heraclitus's understanding of vision to Plato's. To explore this facet has meant to follow out the thread of a certain questioning of vision that is woven into Heraclitus's philosophically more fundamental questioning of the nature of manifestation—a questioning that also (though Heraclitus himself does not develop this interconnection) has a bearing on the understanding of ethical relationship as informed by alterity. Given that Heraclitean vision has been found to be, in a privileged way, attuned to originary differentiation, the hermeneutical situation just discussed is, in fact, appropriate, for it allows interpretation to acknowledge at the very outset that the text it addresses is not an original presence closed in upon itself and refractory to differentiation. Given their effort to articulate the alterity inherent in presencing—an alterity to which vision attests—the Heraclitean fragments are open to a dialogical engagement with contemporary thought.