

# Elegy to Narcissus

Peter Antich

## Articulation

This poem is a musing on the thought of Heraclitus. The central opposition I reflect from Heraclitus' fragments is sleep and wakefulness. This opposition is encountered throughout the fragments as the opposition between life and death, vision and darkness, and wisdom and ignorance.

For Heraclitus, philosophy is wakefulness. Thus, this poem is also a musing on philosophy. Wisdom attends to logos, which holds always, governs everything, and is common to all who attend to it. However, "most people live as if they had their own private understanding."<sup>1</sup> Again, "For the waking there is one common world, but when asleep each person turns away to a private one."<sup>2</sup>

A moment's reflection will verify the value of Heraclitus' claim. At some level, language allows for commonality. You, as the reader, and I, as the writer, share in these words. Language allows us to identify things, to identify commonalities in the universal flux. But, for Heraclitus, logos is also divine. Properly speaking, the logos is neither objective nor subjective, it is simply common. Outside of the logos there is no knowledge, no wisdom, no permanence; there is only forgetfulness and ignorance.

However, Heraclitus says, "Though at variance with itself, it agrees with itself."<sup>3</sup> This is among the most puzzling of Heraclitus' ideas. How do sleep and wakefulness agree? In the fragments, as in life, sleep falls into wakefulness,

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<sup>1</sup> Curd, Patricia, ed., *A Presocratics Reader*, trans. Richard D. McKirahan (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1996): 30, 22B2.

<sup>2</sup> 22B89.

<sup>3</sup> 22B51.



wakefulness into sleep. Where does one cross over into the other? What really holds the two apart? Where is the line between philosophy and pure, simple mindlessness? The poem can only ask these questions.

The poem entrusts this task of thinking to the myth of Narcissus.

### **Elegy to Narcissus<sup>4</sup>**

I awoke when the broad-fingered oak, falling, touched upon me.  
When it hit, the note it sounded was the dawn,  
And through all our roots roared the birthing chord.

The low cloud, called from the expanse, echoed three  
“Jetzt komme feuer”<sup>5</sup>

And from our branches the dew was gone.

Twixt the trunks, with iron-flame, the sun-chariot we called our lord.

In the stillness  
    Low was the secret borne  
How the darkness  
    Soon had us forsworn  
And in the silence  
    Mellow the mists retreat  
So we may hear the cadence  
    Echo the mourning dove suite

Not without reason is it from the east that wakefulness is kindled.  
Unhappy Euros<sup>6</sup> accompanies the sun, and when he overturns the vessel  
The dryads offer sacrifices, for the forest must have sunlight.

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<sup>4</sup> In Greek mythology, a notoriously handsome hunter, who died upon seeing his own reflection. The name Narcissus seems to be related to the Greek word for numbness. Survived by the nymph Echo, who was rather taken with him. By some accounts, from the blood of Narcissus grew the flower of that name.

<sup>5</sup> “Now comes fire.”

<sup>6</sup> The East Wind; often bringer of rain.

In the heat it is easy to give in to sleep, and be Narche's<sup>7</sup> kindred,  
 But there is need for us in the woods to awaken him whom amidst the leaves is nestled,  
 Because if he lingers long, on toes of silence, long-eared Ampelos<sup>8</sup> will stop up his sight.

Awake, I kindled the sleeper; I told him to awaken.  
 Asleep, he touched the dead, and beckoned them to sleep.  
 For beside the restful in the woods, stretch the relics of the dead.

Thunderbolt from the skies echoes: “θάνατός ἐστιν ὀκόσα ἐγεθθέντες ὀρέομεν”  
 “ὀκόσα δὲ εὐδοντες ὕπνος”<sup>9</sup> and beckons sweet Kraneia<sup>10</sup> weep,  
 Whence flow hallowed streams, which one must follow.

In the river  
     Hastened the law revealed  
 How the hour  
     Forgot had us concealed  
 From the deep sap bark  
     Hallowed a shrine to you I spoke  
 Who out from the biting darkness  
     Reminded had yet awoke

Sleep, on wings of silence, alighted on my eyes.  
 When I reached the clearing spoken by those wings  
 Where such branches rest, rotten and turgid, as whose eyes gleam opaque.

And, on tongues of silence slow, they whispered to me of  
 All they say is best in life, which to recognize is sleep, and I

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<sup>7</sup> Sleep.

<sup>8</sup> The vine; friend to Dionysus and mocker of the Moon.

<sup>9</sup> Perhaps, “What we see when awake is death, what we see asleep is sleep.”

<sup>10</sup> The Dryad of the Dogwood.



Close my ears that I might hear, and from them run in shadows,  
     And with me run the ghosts  
         For it had been not long since  
         Dawn that they by lean  
         Boreas<sup>11</sup> were spirited away  
 And I came up far north to hard Pindus<sup>12</sup> yaw  
 At the dripping mouth of old Achelous<sup>13</sup>  
     Whose waters they say began  
         At the tears I saw of  
         Sleepless Niobe<sup>14</sup> my  
         Reflection in silver pools  
 And I showed the day's silken water wash upon me  
     And I surrender to sweet sleep  
         And whenever they ask me  
         "Was aber jener thuet"  
         To the silent ear she echoes  
             "Weis niemand"<sup>15</sup>

Yet, when we sink our roots into the supple soil of such words,  
     Then blooms forth this gallant flower  
         Whose petals mark out dreams;  
             Whose tendrils venture toward the Sun. ❖

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<sup>11</sup> The North Wind; snatcher of Oreithyia.

<sup>12</sup> A mountain in Northern Greece.

<sup>13</sup> A Greek river.

<sup>14</sup> A Greek divinity who, robbed of her children, was turned to stone and continues to weep unceasingly. By some accounts the source of the Achelous, though this would make little sense geographically.

<sup>15</sup> Together, "But what that one will do nobody knows."