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To See a Wolf: Material Evidence for a Literary Idiom?

This paper suggests that two literary references to "seeing a wolf" in Plato and Theocritus elucidate a curious inscription of "*Lykos kalos*" on a late archaic red-figure cup by Onesimos (c. 500-480 BCE). While the Plato passage is customarily read as the earliest instance of the superstition that to be seen by a wolf or, alternately, to see a wolf would render a person mute, I argue that the inscription on Onesimos' cup may hint at the existence of an earlier, archaic version.

In Plato's *Republic* (336b), Socrates, rattled by the anger of Thrasymachus whose behavior is like that of a wild beast, claims he is glad that he looked at his aggressor first. Socrates explains that if Thrasymachus had looked at him first, Socrates would have lost his ability to speak (336d). Commentators explain this odd passage as the earliest reference to the superstitious notion that to be seen by a wolf could deprive a person of the powers of speech (e.g. Adam 1963, 24).

Similar explanatory notes accompany Theocritus 14 (e.g. Gow 1950[II], 252; Dover 1994, 192), where the young man Aeschinas discovers that the woman he loves is in love with another man. As he tells it, they were at a drinking-party when someone asked her the name of the man she loved and she grew silent, unable to answer. Responding to her silence, she was jokingly asked if she had "seen a wolf" (22). Theocritus then weaves this proverbial statement into a pun on the name of her beloved who turns out to be a certain Lykos, described as tall, delicate, and considered handsome by many (24-25).

A consideration of Onesimos' cup helps put these literary passages into a clearer cultural context (Louvre G 105). The interior of the cup shows horsemen and horses walking near a stable, represented by a single column (Beazley 1963, 324/60; Boardman 1975, 133-34/228). It preserves the potter's signature of Euphronios alongside Onesimos' painter's signature, and the rest of the cup features two names: *Lykos* and *Erothemis*. Both names are probably meant to be read with the one other word on the cup, *kalos*, marking out both men as "handsome" (Immerwahr 1990, 85/507). Although the types of inscription here are standard for a symposiastic vessel, Onesimos' placement of the name *Lykos* is extraordinary.

Rather than occupy the same field as the word *kalos* -- the amorphous background of the cup -- as tradition dictates and the viewer expects, the name *Lykos* stands out in painted black on the white capital of the column, firmly situated on a spatially defined material object within the cup's image. To interpret the phrase "*Lykos kalos*," the reader must reconcile two disparate dimensions: "*Lykos*" is painted on a representation of a three-dimensional object within the image on the cup, while its semantic complement "*kalos*" exists in the spatially undefined background of the real three-dimensional object, the cup itself.

The reconciliation of the spatial difference occurs during the act of drinking. Because *Lykos* is the word highest up on the cup's interior, closest to the rim, it would have been

the first word revealed as the drinker consumed the cup's contents, presumably wine. Upon seeing the name, the symposiast would read out aloud, "Lykos," and in this initial utterance of the name we have the essential elements of the Platonic passage; because the cup's user has "seen *Lykos* first," he, like Socrates, has escaped the threat of becoming mute, his salvation realized the moment he voices the word. As another drink drains the cup's contents further, the emergence of "*kalos*" completes the phrase and it, too, is read out aloud. As in Theocritus 14, after a moment of suspense, Lykos is declared handsome to the assembled participants in the drinking party.

Knowledge of the proverbial danger of the wolf's gaze enhances our reading of the words inscribed on this cup's surface, whose disparate positions lead the reader to utter the speech act that then saves him from losing speech. Onesimos' visual games in turn add depth to our understanding of the superstition preserved by later authors. As the audience of both the cup's text and the literary texts, we are encouraged to "cry wolf" lest we, too, are made silent.