HERACLEITUS REVISITED

Callimachus' epigram on his dead friend

Eipé tis 'Hráskleite teóv mórov, éz dé me dákrov
ηγαγεν, ἐμνήσθην δ' ὀςάκις ἀμφότεροι
ηλιον ἐν λέσχη κατεδύσαμεν ἀλλὰ σὺ μὲν που
ξεῖν 'Ἀλικαρνησσοῦ τετράπαλαι σποδίη:
αἴ δὲ τεαὶ ζώουσιν ἁμόδευς, ἕσον ὁ πάντων
ἀρπακτῆς Ἀθόης οὐκ ἐπὶ χείρα βαλεῖ.

is well known in English from the beautiful nineteenth-century adaptation of Cory:

They told me, Heraclitus, they told me you were dead;
They brought me bitter news to hear and bitter tears to shed.
I wept as I remembered how often you and I
Had tired the sun with talking and sent him down the sky.
And now that thou are lying, my dear old Carian guest,
A handful of grey ashes, long, long ago at rest,
Still are thy pleasant voices, thy nightingales, awake;
For Death, he taketh all away, but them he cannot take.

This, however, loses the brevity of the original, which I have tried, not altogether
with success, to retain in the following version:

Someone spoke of your death; I had to weep
To think, my Heracleitus, how we two
So often used to talk the sun to sleep.
Somewhere some dust is all that's left of you
These long long years, Halicarnassian guest,
Yet still your songs are living as of old:
Your nightingales, which Hades' hands, that wrest
All mortal things from us, can never hold.

Cory's rendering requires that although Heraclitus had died τετράπαλαι,
Callimachus had only just heard the news. This seems improbable; I would
think it more likely that Callimachus, perhaps having had too much to drink,
dissolved into tears on hearing his dead friend mentioned. Neither Cory nor I
has reproduced the sigh with which the pentameter subsides in τετράπαλαι
σποδιή. This is reminiscent of Catullus' famous line from a poem on a similar
subject, which has the same sighing close:

Atque in perpetuum, frater, ave atque vale.

Could Catullus, an admirer of the Alexandrian poets, have been influenced
here by Callimachus' line?

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