

P Block (Plumbum), Halcyon

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Plumbum is the Latin name for lead (hence 'plumber'). It belongs to the P-block section of the table of chemical elements – the poor metals, which include tin and pewter. Lead is malleable, silken and lethal. Heavy with associations of death and toxicity, it is also protective against harmful electro-magnetic rays. It's a substance previously used extensively in paint technology - as in the manufacture of 'white' and 'red lead', once used on the steel hulls of ships to protect against corrosion.

The halcyon is a legendary bird which is said to make its nest on the surface of the sea. According to the Shorter Oxford, the halcyon is a kingfisher. '1. Bird anciently fabled to breed about the time of the winter solstice in a nest floating on the sea, and to charm the wind and the waves so that the sea was then especially calm'. Hence '2. Calm, quietude – halcyon days.'

Nietzsche writes of an encounter between Zarathustra and Dionysus in which the god replies to questions from Zarathustra with a 'halcyon smile'. According to Gilles Deleuze, we don't know what this image meant for Nietzsche. In my own mind there is the image of a bird skimming the waves, fast and smooth, settling the deep, rolling currents...playing.

Maybe the god's halcyon smile is the opposite of the Gorgon's stare, turning the viewer to stone.

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