

# Poetic Reflections on a Propofol Induction

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Propofol is a medication that anesthesiologists use routinely, and most would agree that because of its profile of beneficial effects, its introduction in the U.S. in 1989 was a major advance for anesthetic practice. It is also a dangerous drug, with a narrow therapeutic index in some patients, and there has been an ongoing debate between non-anesthesia practitioners who want to use it for sedation, and anesthesiologists who maintain that such use may well be inappropriate and even dangerous for patients, depending on who administers it and how. To clarify the situation and in the interest of patient safety, the ASA House of Delegates adopted in 2004 and amended in 2009 a “Statement on the Safe Use of Propofol.” The danger that had long been apparent to anesthesiologists was underscored to the general public by Michael Jackson’s death from a propofol overdose administered by a non-anesthesia trained physician in an unmonitored setting.

With all this as background, there appeared in the *New Yorker* magazine on June 30, 2008, an amazing poem entitled “Propofol” by Karl Kirchwey. It is a poet’s description, based upon conversations with his anesthesiologist before his routine colonoscopy, of his descent from literary repartee into the oblivion of general anesthesia. With the author’s permission, the *CSA Bulletin* is reprinting this poem below, with annotations by me, intended for those who might benefit from and be enriched by an understanding of some of Mr. Kirchwey’s mythological and literary references.

## Propofol

By *Karl Kirchwey*

Moly, mandragora,<sup>2</sup> milk of oblivion:<sup>3</sup>

I said to Doctor Day,<sup>4</sup> “You bring on night.”<sup>5</sup>

“But then,” he said, “I bring day<sup>6</sup> back again,”

and smiled; except his smile was thin and slight.

I said to him, “Sleep and Death<sup>7</sup> were brothers,

you know. They carry off great Troy’s Sarpedon<sup>8</sup>

in Euphronios’<sup>9</sup> famous calyx-krater”—

babbling.<sup>10</sup> He said, “I am a singleton.”<sup>11</sup>

## Poetic Reflections on a Propofol Induction (cont'd)

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I said to him, "The Romans would have called you  
Somnus, the Greeks Hypnos or Morpheus"  
(but Doctor Day looked blank), anything to  
forestall the wasp<sup>12</sup> (Classics not his thing, I guess)

alighting on the back of my right hand.  
He said to me, "Tell me why you are here."  
I said, "To lose a page,<sup>13</sup> I understand,  
out of the Book of Life."<sup>14</sup> A traveller

approached the citadel<sup>15</sup> even while I was speaking,  
seven seconds from my brain:<sup>16</sup> then it was snuff.<sup>17</sup>  
Pornokrates,<sup>18</sup> naked in her black stocking,  
led one more pig on a leash to the trough.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.asahq.org/publicationsAndServices/standards/37.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> *Greek Myths and Christian Mystery* by Hugo Rahner. New York: Harper and Row; 1963. [http://books.google.com/books?id=N8XAF-JE6PAC&pg=PA179&lpg=PA179&dq=moly,+mandragora&source=web&ots=Ik\\_pjHxBK&sig=2tRhZruSpicT7n7yTBRTjs579Cw&hl=en&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&resnum=4&ct=result](http://books.google.com/books?id=N8XAF-JE6PAC&pg=PA179&lpg=PA179&dq=moly,+mandragora&source=web&ots=Ik_pjHxBK&sig=2tRhZruSpicT7n7yTBRTjs579Cw&hl=en&sa=X&oi=book_result&resnum=4&ct=result)  
"V. **Moly** And **Mandragora** In Pagan And Christian Symbolism: Introduction  
*The Greek frequenter of the mystery cults was driven by a longing to rise from out of the darkness into the light. The Christian found this longing assuaged in the 'brightness of the children of God.' But this assent is a weary one for in it we are transformed. In the course of it there takes place a purifying process which I will deal with under the name the 'healing of the soul,' and the symbols which cryptically designate this process are the 'soul-healing' flowers moly and mandragora. Antiquity lisped of these flowers in its myths and Christianity saw in them an intimation of Christian truth. For in the contrast between the blackness of the root of these plants and the brightness of their blossoms, the ancients saw a symbol of the spiritual division in man—and it is a division that must needs be healed.*"

<sup>3</sup> Cf. "Milk of Amnesia." An anesthesiologist friend of the author's family told him that propofol is called "Milk of Amnesia," punning on Phillips' Milk of Magnesia, owing to its white color and its use to produce amnesia (personal communication). Beyond amnesia to oblivion is the author's notion of where propofol would take him.

## Poetic Reflections on a Propofol Induction (cont'd)

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- 4 “Day” is in actual fact the name of the anesthesiologist in question on the day of his procedure, and his name was used with permission (personal communication). As happens not infrequently with creative writing, other meanings not known even to the author may spring to mind. For one, “day” is the perfect opposite of “night,” Doctor Day bringing on the night of general anesthesia. For another, an anesthesiologist (particularly one prone to tangential thinking) might divine an occult reference to “Doctors’ Day,” which commemorated the first clinical use of ether by Dr. Crawford Long on March 30, 1842.
- 5 Anesthetic “sleep” akin to darkness or night.
- 6 Emergence and awareness, “lightening” of anesthesia.
- 7 Greek gods of sleep (Hypnos was the Greek god of sleep and dreams) and death (Hypnos brother was Thanatos, god of death) were twin brothers, and anesthesia might be considered a third brother. Nyx, their mother, was goddess of night. Morpheus, the god of dreams, was the son of Hypnos, god of sleep. Somnus was the Roman equivalent of Hypnos.
- 8 Internet “Classic Encyclopedia, based upon the 11th edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica (pub. 1911),” <http://www.1911encyclopedia.org/Sarpedon> “SARPEDON, in Greek legend, son of Zeus and Laodameia, Lycian prince and hero of the Trojan war. He fought on the side of the Trojans, and after greatly distinguishing himself by his bravery, was slain by Patroclus. A terrible struggle took place for the possession of his body, until Apollo rescued it from the Greeks, and by the command of Zeus washed and cleansed it, anointed it with ambrosia, and handed it over to Sleep and Death, by whom it was conveyed for burial to Lycia, where a sanctuary (Sarpedoneum) was erected in honour of the fallen hero. Virgil (*Aen.* i. lxx) knows nothing of the removal of the body to Lycia. In later tradition, Sarpedon was the son of Zeus and Europa and the brother of Minos. Having been expelled from Crete by the latter, he and his comrades sailed for Asia, where he finally became king of Lycia. Euripides (*Rhesus*, 29) confuses the two Sarpedons. See Homer, *Iliad*, V. 479, xii. 292, xvi. 419-683; Apollodorus iii. I, 2; Appian, *Bell. civ.* iv. 78; Herodotus i. 173., with Rawlinson’s notes.”
- 9 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Euphronios> “Euphronios (circa 535-after 470 B.C.) was an ancient Greek vase painter and potter, active in Athens in the late 6th and early 5th centuries B.C. As part of the so-called ‘Pioneer Group,’ Euphronios was one of the most important artists of the red-figure technique. His works place him at the transition from Late Archaic to Early Classical art ... The Sarpedon krater or Euphronios krater, created around 515 B.C., is normally considered to be the apex of Euphronios’ work. As on the well-known vase from his early phase, Euphronios sets Sarpedon at the centre of the composition. Following an order by Zeus, Thanatos and Hypnos carry Sarpedon’s dead body from the battlefield. In the centre background is Hermes, here depicted in his role of accompanying the dead on their last voyage. The ensemble is flanked by two Trojan warriors staring straight ahead, apparently oblivious of the action that takes place

between them. The figures are not only labelled with their names, but also with explanatory texts. The use of thin slip allowed Euphronios to deliberately use different shades of colour, rendering the scene especially lively. But the krater marks the peak of the artist's abilities not only in pictorial terms; the vase also represents a new achievement in the development of the red-figure style. The shape of the chalice krater had already been developed during the black-figure phase by the potter and painter Exekias, but Euxitheos' vase displays further innovations created specifically for the red-figure technique. By painting the handles, foot and lower body of the vase black, the space available for red-figure depictions is strictly limited. As is usual for Euphronios, the pictorial scene is framed by twisting curlicues. The painting itself is a classic example of the painter's work: strong, dynamic, detailed, anatomically accurate and with a strong hint of pathos. Both artists appear to have been aware of the quality of their work, as both painter and potter signed it. The krater is the only work by Euphronios to have survived in its entirety. On display at the Metropolitan Museum, New York since 1972, it was officially returned to Italian ownership in February 2006, but remained on display as a loan to the Metropolitan Museum until its repatriation to Italy in January 2008.

The back of the Sarpedon krater shows a simple arming scene, executed more hastily as the massive krater's clay dried and rendered it less workable. This explicitly contemporary scene, depicting a group of anonymous youths arming themselves for war, is emblematic of the new realism in content as well as form which Euphronios brought to the red-figure technique. These scenes from everyday life, and the artistic conceit of pairing them with a mythological scene on the same piece, distinguish many of the pieces painted by Euphronios and those who followed him."

- <sup>10</sup> The author begins to babble and "free associate" from the effects of propofol.
- <sup>11</sup> The doctor is no twin, not like sleep or death, unique in himself, just like CSA's own Dr. Singleton, as he rightly pointed out when he read this poem.
- <sup>12</sup> Propofol burns on injection, like a wasp.
- <sup>13</sup> "To lose a page" is wonderful symbolism for what propofol does epistemologically.
- <sup>14</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book\\_of\\_Life](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book_of_Life) The Book of Life (Hebrew: transliterated *Sefer HaChaim*) is the allegorical book in which God records the names and lives of the righteous. According to the Talmud it is open[ed] on Rosh Hashanah; its analog for the wicked, the Book of the Dead, is open[ed] on this date as well. For this reason extra mention is made for the Book of Life during Amidah recitations during the Days of Awe, the ten days between Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish new year, and Yom Kippur, the day of atonement (the two High Holidays).  
During the Days of Awe, Jews have an opportunity to repent for their sins and ask forgiveness of God for sins against Him, and to ask forgiveness from individual people whom they have wronged. On Yom Kippur, the books are sealed, and what will happen to a person for good or bad during the coming year is then a matter which further repentance cannot alter.

## Poetic Reflections on a Propofol Induction (cont'd)

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- <sup>15</sup> Meaning an external force, propofol, breached my fortified castle of my awake being. The author reflects that “when travellers approach citadels (think of Oedipus coming to Thebes!) in ancient Greek mythology, it’s often with disastrous consequences (personal communication).”
- <sup>16</sup> Seven seconds from IV propofol injection to reach the brain is a reasonable estimate.
- <sup>17</sup> Snuffed out the light, the consciousness, the life even.
- <sup>18</sup> <http://www.artandpopularculture.com/Pornokrates> “*Pornokrates*,” also known as *Pornocratie*, is an 1879 painting by Félicien Rops. It depicts a blindfolded woman being led by a pig on a leash. For some the pig with the golden tail represents the image of luxury and lucre steering the woman, whose only excuse is her blindness; for others, it is the image of man, bestial and stupid, kept in check by the woman. This image of the pig, as well as those of the puppet and the pierrot are shared by many of Rops’ contemporaries.

*Pornokrates* heralds the advent to the art world of the contemporary woman which Rops glorified. She is characterised by her arrogance, her composure and her ruthlessness.

In a letter to his friend Henri Liesse, he described the painting: “My *Pornocratie* is complete. This drawing delights me. I would like to show you this beautiful naked girl, clad only in black shoes and gloves in silk, leather and velvet, her hair styled. Wearing a blindfold she walks on a marble stage, guided by a pig with a ‘golden tail’ across a blue sky. Three loves—ancient loves—vanish in tears (...) I did this in four days in a room of blue satin, in an overheated apartment, full of different smells, where the opopanax [a.k.a. sweet myrrh] and cyclamen gave me a slight fever conducive towards production or even towards reproduction.”—Letter from Rops to Henri Liesse, 1879.

Kirchwey writes, “I had seen the Felicien Rops painting at a show in Lausanne earlier in the spring of the year when I had the colonoscopy (personal communication).” He intended a different take on *Pornokrates*: “I think of Circe, turning Odysseus’ men into pigs. To put it plainly, as the maiden-no-more said: Men Are Beasts. ‘*Pornokrates*’ would translate from the Greek as ‘Government by Harlots,’ I believe. So the naked lady is actually walking a pig on a leash, I think, rather than being led by same (personal communication).”

The pig as the image of luxury and wealth leading the blindfolded woman versus the woman walking the pig, the image of man, bestial and stupid — you decide. It’s a chicken and egg thing, and—babbling now—the Easter Egg here is that propofol spelled backwards is lofo-porp (last on, first off, belly button lint). OK, I’ll keep my day job ...

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