

## Zeno of Elea: A Dichotomy

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# Zeno of Elea: A Dichotomy

Joseph Chaney

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## I.

He knew that the arrow hits its target,  
passing through space in continuous flight.  
But there's the problem of the points in time  
when patient thought can hold the arrow still.  
In fractions see how geometric space  
is infinitely divisible, too,  
but that's what no one knows. The knife may slice  
it thinner, but in this world we don't see  
what is real. You can divide in your mind,  
finding points between points, times within time,  
Zeno knew. Diogenes walked off, un-  
impressed; racing against the fast, doomed  
Achilles, he'd need but a small head start.  
But both were moving to where Zeno stood.

## II.

Nothing was trouble-free in Zeno's mind.  
Tyrants present the greatest paradox.  
Their liberty requires slavery—  
one man against the rest, one life, one will,  
cutting off the exchange of ideas.  
His whisper to the tyrant was a bite  
that severed the tyrant's ear. In death, he  
owned the ear. So speech consumes listening.  
Writing devours reading, even as  
the hungry reader eats it up. In time  
we will not understand which swallowed which.  
The people devoured their king, and now  
their sovereignty is like a voice they share,  
a thing between them that nobody owns.

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## **Postscript**

This two-part poem interprets Zeno's paradoxes as dimensions of a paradoxical view of reality. The poem begins by representing Zeno's famous paradoxes, but it goes on to suggest that the broader thinking behind the paradoxes extends to the reasons for Zeno's rebellion against Nearchus the tyrant. According to Valerius Maximus, Zeno (under torture) offered to expose his co-conspirators but insisted on whispering the names in Nearchus's ear. When the tyrant leaned in to listen, Zeno bit his ear and ultimately tore it off before being killed. I find meaning in this savage act.