

**“Shades” of Postmortem Personal Identity:  
ψυχή καὶ εἶδωλον in the Dream Passage (Il. 23.103-104)\***

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I.

In a recent contribution entitled, “Homer’s Challenge to Philosophical Psychology,” Fred Miller proposes an “aporetic approach” to the Homeric poems. That is to say, a close reading of the epics reveals “serious *aporiai*,” at least insofar as philosophical consistency is concerned. Homeric readers, ancient and modern alike, have found irreconcilably-different answers to our perennial questions about humanity and divinity, fate and free will. To his credit, Miller rightly relieves Homer of an undue burden – viz., that of addressing the philosophical problems of later generations. “The analysis of concepts and the resolution of *aporiai*”: these are, as Miller notes, definitively *not* the priorities of an epic bard.<sup>1</sup> Instead, such poets, working freely within the parameters of their oral traditions, understandably use language in ways not strictly-philosophical. Ultimately, Miller wants to argue that the ambiguities of Homer’s poetic language hastened Greece’s philosophical awakening.

In response to Miller, I suggest that – while the Homeric epics certainly employ poetic language – they do so in a way that admits of conceptual analysis. I hope to illustrate this possibility by focusing upon one of Miller’s central *aporiai*: the use of ψυχή, as it pertains to postmortem, personal identity. He nicely frames the problem in this way:

If something of a human being remains after death, what does it take with it – any of the life, thoughts, feelings, and intentions – of the living person? If anything does survive, is it in some way the same as the person who was formerly alive?<sup>2</sup>

Like Miller, I will explore these questions by focusing primarily upon the iconic “dream passage” of *Iliad* 23, where the ψυχή of Patroclus visits Achilles in his sleep (Il.62-107). Unlike Miller, I will not settle for a mere aporetic reading. Instead, I will suggest that a comparative analysis of the Homeric poems allows us to make important conceptual conclusions, however tension-riddled they may be. First, the Homeric ψυχή, I will show, does become the locus of postmortem personal identity. After establishing this position, I will proceed to grant its limitations: something of the Homeric person is forever lost in death. This two-fold position leads not to *aporia* but to antinomy – a delicate balance between personal “identity” and “non-identity,” which the dream passage embodies in a

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<sup>1</sup> Fred Miller, “Homer’s Challenge to Philosophical Psychology,” in *Logos and Muthos: Philosophical Essays in Greek Literature*, ed. Williams Wians (Albany: SUNY Press, 2009), 43.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

vivid way. I will attempt to highlight this juxtaposition with an interpretation of the scene in which ψυχή and εἶδωλον are *not* strictly synonymous, at least not in Achilles' gnomic conclusion (Il. 103-104). Rather, the two terms there connote different "shades" or valences of personal identity, in accord with the unique liminality of the passage.

## II.

This effort begins with a re-reading of the dream passage, which – to my mind – Miller mishandles. He denies that Patroclus' ψυχή is capable of "thought, feeling, and intention," on the grounds that it lacks the "vital organs" (φρένες) necessary for such capacities.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, this position does injustice to the text. The following moments from the scene plainly attribute to Patroclus' ψυχή the postmortem capacity to "think, feel, and intend" apart from the body:

- a.) When "the ψυχή of Patroclus arrives," it is described as "wretched" (δειλός), clearly suggesting some ongoing, affective state of being.<sup>4</sup>
- b.) At line 71, Patroclus begs Achilles, "Bury me as soon as possible, so that I may pass through the gates of Hades."<sup>5</sup> Later, he specifies his ultimate burial wishes: "Do not bury my bones apart from yours, Achilles."<sup>6</sup>
- c.) Finally, Patroclus' ψυχή reminds Achilles how "we grew up together in your household."<sup>7</sup> The first-person perspective of these recollections shows how personal identity and memory perdure together after death.

In short, then, the ψυχή that appears to Achilles has become the bearer of Patroclus' proper name, his "I" – and, along with it, the seat of his affect, desire, and memory. What is more, intertextual analysis confirms that this same ψυχή will continue to bear Patroclus' personal identity long after the funeral rites of *Iliad* 23 are complete. In the Second Nekuia of *Odyssey* 24, for example, Hermes and the slaughtered suitors find the ψυχή of Patroclus in Hades.<sup>8</sup> Apparently, for Patroclus at least, the postmortem ψυχή *does* become (and remain) the locus of personal identity after death (and burial).

A closer reading, though, betrays the diminished quality of such postmortem, personal identity. Yes, the hero "lives on" in the form of his ψυχή; but what a miserable, lamentable existence it is. In the *Odyssey*'s First Nekuia, the ψυχή of Achilles famously articulates the sentiments of a fallen Homeric hero: "Do not make light of death to me, shining Odysseus. I would prefer to be a serf, to slave for another man without lot, whose

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<sup>3</sup> Fred Miller, "Homer's Challenge to Philosophical Psychology," in *Logos and Muthos: Philosophical Essays in Greek Literature*, ed. Williams Wians (Albany: SUNY Press, 2009), 41.

<sup>4</sup> Il. 23.65: ἤλαθε δ' ἐπὶ ψυχῇ Πατροκλῆος δειλοῖο... Here and throughout, all translations are original.

<sup>5</sup> Il. 23.71: θάπτέ με ὅττι τάχιστα Πύλας Ἄϊδαο περήσω.

<sup>6</sup> Il. 23.83: μὴ ἐμὰ σῶν ἀπάνευθε τιθήμεναι ὅστέ' Ἀχιλλεῦ.

<sup>7</sup> Il. 23.84ff: ἀλλ' ὁμοῦ ὡς ἐτράφημεν ἐν ὑμετέροισι δόμοισιν...

<sup>8</sup> Od. 24. 15-16: εὐρον δὲ ψυχὴν Πηληϊάδεω Ἀχιλῆος / καὶ Πατροκλῆος...

livelihood is little, rather than rule over all the dead, wasted away.”<sup>9</sup> This response, with its lofty Achillean flourish, paints a rather bleak picture of personal identity in the Homeric afterlife. In a real sense, “Achilles the warrior” no longer exists, so reduced has he been by death.

Odysseus’ other underworld encounters reinforce this message – most notably his conversation with Anticleia. On the one hand, this poignant scene narrates an exchange so real that mention of ψυχή is sometimes omitted. At 11.153, Odysseus is simply waiting for “his mother to arrive” (ὄφρ’ ἐπὶ μήτηρ / ἦλυθε), not the ψυχή of his mother. On the other hand, this scene – and the First Nekyia, more generally – also highlights the enervated nature of the postmortem ψυχή in Hades. Bewildered by the fleeting quality of his mother’s appearance, Odysseus begins to wonder if he is not experiencing an act of divine substitution familiar to the epic tradition. Recall, for example, how in *Iliad* 5, Apollo sweeps Aeneas away from the moil of Diomedes’ *aristeia*, fashioning in his place a fake double (εἶδωλον) in lieu of the hero himself.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, in *Odyssey* 4, Athena fashions an εἶδωλον, a phantom image of Iphthime, to console Penelope in her sleep.<sup>11</sup> Doubtless familiar with this divine trick, wily Odysseus wonders whether he is being similarly deceived by Persephone. Disoriented and dumbstruck, he asks his mother: “Indeed, has noble Persephone somehow stirred up for me this *eidōlon* – that I, weeping, may lament still more?”<sup>12</sup> Anticleia quickly disabuses her son of such fanciful notions. Persephone is not “beguiling him” *via* some cloned-double (εἶδωλον). Rather, Odysseus is finally seeing the “way it is for mortals”: “when someone dies,” Anticleia explains, the person’s ψυχή flies away and flutters about, like a dream.<sup>13</sup>

Together, these passages from the First and Second Nekyia illuminate, and complicate, the dream passage of *Iliad* 23. They show the meaningful ways in which ψυχή does carry on the name and identity of the fallen Homeric hero(ine). At the same time, they set real limitations to this reading. Odysseus (with his mother, in the First Nekyia) learns the same hard lesson as Achilles (with Patroclus, in the dream passage): viz., the ψυχή survives death, thus preserving personal identity – but in a painfully-ephemeral fashion. I shall now propose that Achilles’ gnomic response (Il.103-104), with its striking juxtaposition of ψυχή and εἶδωλον, suggests precisely this postmortem perspective.

### III.

<sup>9</sup> *Od.* 11.488-91: μὴ δὴ μοι θάνατόν γε παραύδα, φαίδιμ’ Ὀδυσσεῦ./ βουλοίμην κ’ ἐπάρουρος ἐὼν θητευέμεν ἄλλω, / ἀνδρὶ παρ’ ἀκλήρῳ, ᾧ μὴ βίσιος πολὺς εἶη, / ἢ πᾶσιν νεκύεσσι καταφθιμένοισιν ἀνάσσειν.

<sup>10</sup> *Il.* 5.449-50: αὐτὰρ ὁ εἶδωλον τεῦξ’ ἀργυρότοξος Ἀπόλλων / αὐτῷ τ’ Αἰνεία ἵκελον καὶ τεύχεσι τοῖον. “But silver-bowed Apollo fashioned an *eidōlon* / similar to Aeneas himself and like to his armor.”

<sup>11</sup> *Od.* 4.795-797: ἔνθ’ αὐτ’ ἄλλ’ ἐνόησε θεά, γλαυκῶπις Ἀθήνη / εἶδωλον ποίησε, δέμας δ’ ἦικτο γυναϊκί, / Ἴφθίμη, κόρη μεγάλητορος Ἰκαρίοιο. “But there again the goddess, gray-eyed Athena, took notice. / She made an *eidōlon*, and in stature it looked like the woman / Iphthime, the daughter of great-hearted Icarus.”

<sup>12</sup> *Od.* 11.213-214: ἦ τί μοι εἶδωλον τόδ’ ἀγανὴ Περσεφόνηια / ὄτρυν’, ὄφρ’ ἔτι μᾶλλον ὀδυρόμενος στεναχίζω;

<sup>13</sup> *Od.* 11.217-18, 22: οὐ τί σε Περσεφόνηια Διὸς θυγάτηρ ἀπαφίσκει, / ἀλλ’ αὕτη δίκη ἐστὶ βροτῶν, ὅτε τίς κε θάνησιν / ... ψυχή δ’ ἠὲ ὄνειρος ἀποπταμένη πεπότηται. “Persephone, the daughter of Zeus, does not deceive you at all, / but this is the way of mortals, whenever someone dies / ... The *psychē*, having flown off, flutters here and there like a dream.”

Typically, scholars take the terms ψυχή and εἶδωλον to be strictly synonymous. Michael Clarke, for example, gives us a rather standard exposition: “in Hades the ψυχή is a shade or phantom or image, εἶδωλον, of the man which resembles him in appearance but lacks his substance.”<sup>14</sup> In terms of textual evidence, Odysseus’ visit with Elpenor serves as case in point. Their exchange begins at *Od.* 11.51, when the ψυχή of Elpenor comes to Odysseus;<sup>15</sup> it ends at 11.83, when the εἶδωλον of Elpenor says many things.<sup>16</sup> Yet, such strict synonymy does not always hold, at least not in the dream passage. Miller overlooks this fact, wrongly maintaining that the ψυχή of Patroclus “is described as an image (εἶδωλον) of the living man.”<sup>17</sup> The text never actually makes this attribution. Instead, we find that, in both appearances of Patroclus’ proper name, ψυχή (not εἶδωλον) stands as the subject. The latter term appears only twice in the passage (Il. 72, 104), neither of which allows us to conclude, with Miller, that Patroclus is now an εἶδωλον. Synonymy of meaning certainly holds in the first instance (I. 72), which is formulaic. In that case, εἶδωλα καμόντων stands in clear apposition to ψυχαί;<sup>18</sup> but this does not establish the strict synonymy that Miller envisions. Why? Well, because Patroclus’ ψυχή is situated in contradistinction to the mass collective of ψυχαί / εἶδωλα καμόντων. *They* (the *eidola* of “worn-out men”) are preventing *him* (a lone ψυχή) from mingling with *them* on the other side of the river. In other words, Patroclus’ ψυχή has not yet joined their company and cannot, therefore, be counted among their number.<sup>19</sup>

What is more, the Achillean gnome actually gives us good reason to think that ψυχή and εἶδωλον imply different “shades” of meaning. When Achilles leaps up from his dream and laments, “O shame, there is, indeed, something even in the halls of Hades,” he juxtaposes ψυχή and εἶδωλον.<sup>20</sup> The use of a conjunction (καί) indicates that the two terms are not strictly identical. Nonetheless, the absence of definite articles makes it unlikely that ψυχή and εἶδωλον are to be understood as two unrelated entities. The use of a singular subject and verb (τίς ἐστι) further militates against such a stark bifurcation. The dream passage, then, seems to present us with a rather nuanced position: at times (e.g., I. 72), ψυχή and εἶδωλον are clearly synonymous; at other times (e.g., Il. 103-104), the two terms admit of some distinction. Is there a way to hold these two positions in creative tension, one with the other?

I recommend that we return to the First Nekuia, specifically to Odysseus’ fears about a possible “Anticleia εἶδωλον.” Had Persephone duped him with such a twinned-double, then technically Odysseus would *not* have been interacting with *his* mother. Instead, he would have been talking to a carbon-copy, a phony look-alike. Anticleia’s *per-*

<sup>14</sup> Michael Clarke, *Flesh and Spirit in the Songs of Homer: A Study of Words and Myths* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 148.

<sup>15</sup> *Od.* 11.51: πρώτη δὲ ψυχή Ἑλπήνορος ἦλθεν ἑταίρου.

<sup>16</sup> *Od.* 11.83: εἶδωλον δ’ ἐτέρωθεν ἑταίρου πόλλ’ ἀγόρευεν.

<sup>17</sup> Miller, 40.

<sup>18</sup> *Il.* 23.72: τῆλέ με εἰργουσι ψυχαί εἶδωλα καμόντων

<sup>19</sup> I realize that many commentators understand Patroclus to belong to this cohort of εἶδωλα καμόντων. While I appreciate their line of reasoning, I maintain that the context and syntax of the passage invite the distinction I am suggesting.

<sup>20</sup> *Il.* 23.103-104: ὦ πόποι ἦ ῥά τίς ἐστι καὶ εἰν Αἴδαο δόμοισι / ψυχή καὶ εἶδωλον, ἀτὰρ φρένες οὐκ ἔνι πάμπαν.

*sonal* identity would not reside in such an εἶδωλον. Fortunately, we can see this hypothetical play out at the end of the First Nekyia. At 11.601, Odysseus “notices mighty Hercules.”<sup>21</sup> Yet the first word of the next line indicates that this encounter is somehow deceptive. As a posthumously-deified mortal, “Hercules himself” (αὐτός) has taken his place among the “immortal gods.”<sup>22</sup> His personal identity does not actually reside in Hades.

I propose that the use of εἶδωλον intentionally evokes this deception in a way that ψυχή would not. The former term, unlike the latter, connotes a fictive quality, conjuring not a “presence” but a rather an “absence” of meaningful personal identity. This semantic valence makes sense, given the well-known epic tradition of fashioned “εἶδωλον duplicates.” Something of the “shadowiness” of εἶδωλον, *qua* divinely-constructed copy, inherently clings to εἶδωλον, *qua* Homeric shade. In contrast, ψυχή – with its primary significations relating to breath and life – lacks these illusory connotations.<sup>23</sup> Such a semantic difference naturally makes ψυχή a more reliable bearer of postmortem personal identity. Moreover, it explains why we always see ψυχή, and never εἶδωλον, attached to proper names in Hades – except in the anomalous case of Hercules. *Metri causā* remains a necessary, but insufficient, explanation for this poetic pattern; *sensus causā* should also factor in our understanding.

Perhaps this semantic distinction can, at last, cast some light on Achilles’ otherwise-enigmatic conclusion to the dream passage. In his gnomic statement (Il.103-104), Achilles brings ψυχή and εἶδωλον into close relationship – but one of distinction, not synonymy. I suggest that he does so in order to encompass the binary poles of Homeric afterlife.<sup>24</sup> In a way, “Patroclus” lives on after death; in another way, “Patroclus” has disappeared forever. On my reading, ψυχή, the Homeric shade that regularly carries post-mortem personal identity, connotes the former truth; and εἶδωλον, the dark shade that often deceives, connotes the latter truth. Such a distinction, if truly embedded in the text, would capture the complexity of Achilles’ experience. After a night’s worth of vivid interactions, he cannot deny that he has connected with his fallen comrade. And yet, as Achilles awakes from sleep, he must also admit that “Patroclus” has evanesced, eluding his own mortal grasp.

#### IV.

If, by chance, this semantic distinction between ψυχή and εἶδωλον seems forced or foreign, it at least honors the rare “liminality” of this scene. Deceased, but not yet buried, Patroclus stands on the threshold between life and death. In this regard, he remains a

<sup>21</sup> *Od.* 11.601: τὸν δὲ μετ’ εἰσενόησα βίην Ἡρακλεΐην

<sup>22</sup> *Od.* 11. 602: εἶδωλον· αὐτὸς δὲ μετ’ ἀθανάτοισι θεοῖσι

<sup>23</sup> On this score, the noun’s etymological root – from ψύχειν, “to blow or breath” air – proves quite instructive. See, e.g., Richard Onians, *The Origins of European Thought* (Cambridge: CUP, 1951), 93ff. Cp. Jan N. Bremmer, *The Early Greek Concept of the Soul* (Princeton: PUP, 1983), 21.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Shirley Sullivan, who similarly claims that “the two terms (sc. *psyche* and *eidolon*), in Achilles’ words, sum up the essence of man’s existence in Hades.” Shirley Sullivan, “A Multi-Faceted Term: Psyche in Homer, the Homeric Hymns and Hesiod,” *Studi Italiani di Filologia Classica* 6 (1988): 165.

unique ψυχή, *sui generis* within the Homeric tradition.<sup>25</sup> The dream passage reflects this uncertainty, depicting Patroclus as a vagrant “wanderer” (ἀλάλημαι, 1.74), detained in his postmortem journey to the underworld. The lack of proper burial prevents Patroclus from passing beyond the clear boundary markers of Hades: the gates of Hades (πύλας Αἴδαο, 1.71) and the river (ὑπὲρ ποταμοῖο, 1.73).<sup>26</sup> Caught between two realms, Patroclus’ ψυχή exhibits qualities (appearances, desires, speech acts) that are proper both to living heroes and to Homeric shades. Without question, this liminality imbues the text with a certain level of ambiguity. At times, the ψυχή itself seems confused about what or where it is – as, e.g., when it asks to embrace Achilles’ arm one last time.<sup>27</sup>

While not wishing to eliminate this ambiguity, proper to the text, I have attempted to reach some definite conclusions, however modest. In response to Miller’s aporetic approach, I have re-read the dream passage with closer textual and intertextual analysis. Whereas he sees in the Homeric poems irresolvable contradictions, spurring future philosophical inquiry, I discern, within the poetic tradition itself, conceptual distinctions of thematic and semantic import. On the one hand, then, if we take the dream passage at face value, together with the evidence of the First and Second Nekyia, we must attribute to the postmortem ψυχή some kind of real personal identity. The heroes and heroines of the Homeric age *do* continue to exist after death, in ψυχή-form. Admittedly, if we overstate this position, we run the risk of wrongly importing into the Homeric world later eschatologies (Platonic, Christian) or metaphysics (Aristotelian hylomorphism, e.g.). Miller and Clarke wisely warn against such misreadings. Along with them, and in light of the stark Achillean and Anticleian perspectives, I wish to acknowledge the devastating blow delivered by death. This two-fold perspective leads, then, to a difficult, but *conceptually-intelligible*, antinomy: *via* the ψυχή, personal identity continues after death; but *vis-à-vis* one’s earthly life, this postmortem identity is so paltry that “real human existence” ends with death. To my mind, this “both-and” interpretation boasts an important virtue: it can accommodate the passages where personal identity clings to a fallen corpse and those where it passes over into Hades.<sup>28</sup>

Finally, and perhaps somewhat controversially, I have introduced a semantic distinction between ψυχή and εἶδωλον that would nicely embrace these polarities. While recognizing the strict synonymy of these two terms in many Homeric *loci*, I dispute their synonymous meaning in Achilles’ gnomic conclusion to the dream passage. Instead, I posit that ψυχή carries a positive and εἶδωλον a negative “personal identity valence.” Such a distinction seems to honor both the syntax of the gnomic saying and the unique liminal context of Patroclus’ appearance. On my reading, then, the striking juxtaposition

<sup>25</sup> For a thorough analysis of Patroclus’ singularity in this regard, see Sullivan, 165-167. She rightly points out that Elpenor – another “unburied shade,” like Patroclus – is allowed to enter Hades. This “inconsistency in Homer” deserves further study and reflection. See *Od.* 11.51-83.

<sup>26</sup> Presumably, the River Styx. See Nicholas Richardson, *The Iliad: A Commentary, Volume VI: Books 21-24* (Cambridge: CUP, 1993), 173. Also, on the relationship between this “liminal state” and funeral rites, see Maria Mirto, *Death in the Greek World* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012), 62ff.

<sup>27</sup> *Il.* 23.75-76: καί μοι δὸς τὴν χεῖρ’ ὀλοφύρομαι, οὐ γὰρ ἔτ’ αὐτίς / νίσσομαι ἐξ Αἴδαο, ἐπὶν με πύρρος λελάχητε. “And give your hand to me: I lament, for I will not return again from Hades, once you grant me the funeral-fire.”

<sup>28</sup> Examples of both cases abound. For instances of the former case, see, e.g., *Il.* 22.386-87, 24.422-23; for instances of the latter case, see 22.482-83, 24.592-94.

of the two terms provides an apt summary not only of the dream passage itself but of the Homeric afterlife in general: when the light of the sun has been left behind, personal identity perdures forever (ψυχή) and yet vanishes like smoke (εἴδωλον).

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