

# The Strange Death of Patroklos

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The account of the death of Patroklos occupies a strategic position in the narrative economy of the *Iliad*: before this event, Achilles has withdrawn from combat out of indignation against Agamemnon; afterwards, his anger turns against Hector, whom he holds responsible for his friend's death. Achilles returns to battle and kills Hector in an act of vengeance that, as we have known from the beginning of the poem, will lead to his own demise, which is not actually recounted in the *Iliad*. This episode stands out because it is atypical both in the contents of the narration and in the means of expression used (what are generally termed "formulas"). I will give some examples of these oddities and then propose an interpretation. Here is the text, in the translation by Richmond Lattimore:

So long as the sun was climbing still to the middle heaven, so long the thrown weapons of both took hold, and men dropped under them; but when the sun had gone to the time for unyoking of cattle, then beyond their very destiny the Achaians were stronger and dragged the hero Kebriones from under the weapons and the clamour of the Trojans, and stripped the armour from his shoulders. And Patroklos charged with evil intention in on the Trojans. Three times he charged in with the force of the running war god, screaming a terrible cry, and three times he cut down nine men; but as for the fourth time he swept in, like something greater than human, there, Patroklos, the end of your life was shown forth, since Phoibos came against you there in the strong encounter dangerously, nor did Patroklos see him as he moved through the battle, and shrouded in a deep mist came in against him and stood behind him, and struck his back and his broad shoulders with a flat stroke of the hand so that his eyes spun. Phoibos Apollo now struck away from his head the helmet four-horned and hollow-eyed, and under the feet of the horses it rolled clattering, and the plumes above it were defiled by blood and dust. Before this time it had not been permitted to defile in the dust this great helmet crested in horse-hair; rather it guarded the hear and the gracious brow a godlike man, Achilleus; but now Zeus gave it over to Hektor to wear on his head, Hektor whose own death was close to him. And in his hands was splintered all the huge, great, heavy,

iron-shod, far-shadowing spear, and away from his shoulders dropped to the ground the shield with its shield sling and its tassels. The lord Apollo, son of Zeus, broke the corselet upon him. Disaster caught his wits, and his shining body went nerveless. He stood stupidly, and from close behind his back a Dardanian man hit him between the shoulders with a sharp javelin: Euphorbos, son of Panthos, who surpassed all men of his own age with the throwing spear, and in horsemanship and the speed of his feet. He had already brought down twenty men from their horses since first coming, with his chariot and his learning in warfare. He first hit you with a thrown spear, o rider Patroklos, nor broke you, but ran away again, snatching out the ash spear from your body, and lost himself in the crowd, not enduring to face Patroklos, naked as he was, in close combat.

Now Patroklos, broken by the spear and the god's blow, tried to shun death and shrink back into the swarm of his own companions. But Hektor, when he saw high-hearted Patroklos trying to get away, saw how he was wounded with the sharp javelin, came close against him across the ranks, and with the spear stabbed him in the depth of the belly and drove the bronze clean through. He fell, thunderously, to the horror of all the Achaian people. As a lion overpowers a weariless boar in wild combat as the two fight in their pride on the high places of a mountain over a little spring of water, both wanting to drink there, and the lion beats him down by force as he fights for his breath, so Hektor, Priam's son, with a close spear-stroke stripped the life from the fighting son of Menoitios, who had killed so many, and stood above him, and spoke aloud the winged words of triumph: 'Patroklos, you thought perhaps of devastating our city, of stripping from the Trojan women the day of their liberty and dragging them off in ships to the beloved land of your fathers. Fool! When in front of them the running horses of Hektor strained with their swift feet into the fighting, and I with my own spear am conspicuous among the fighting Trojans, I who beat from them the day of necessity. For you, here the vultures shall eat you. Wretch! Achilleus, great as he was, could do nothing to help you. When he stayed behind, and you went, he must have said much to you: "Patroklos, lord of horses, see that you do not come back to me and the hollow ships, until you have torn in blood the tunic of manslaughtering Hektor about his chest." In some such manner he spoke to you, and persuaded the fool's heart in you.'

And now, dying, you answered him, o rider Patroklos: 'Now is your time for big words, Hektor. Yours is the victory given by Kronos' son, Zeus, and Apollo, who have subdued me easily, since they themselves stripped the arms from my shoulders. Even though twenty such as you had come in against me, they would all have been broken beneath my spear, and have perished. No, deadly destiny, with the son of Leto, has killed me, and of men it was Euphorbos; you are only my third slayer. And put away in your heart this other thing that I tell you. You yourself are not one who shall live long, but now already death and powerful destiny are standing beside you, to go down under the hands of Aiakos' great son, Achilleus.'<sup>1</sup>

The scene is doubly exceptional: the battle is fought in the evening and, at the beginning, the Greeks are stronger "beyond their very destiny" (780). Nothing else in the *Iliad* takes place this

way: elsewhere this formula is always part of a statement that a given outcome "might have happened 'beyond destiny' if a certain god had not restored order." No other battle takes place in the evening, which is the time for meals, sleep, and talk. Moreover, everywhere else the evening is marked by the position of the sun; here it is indicated by a unique expression in the poem, the adjective *bouluton*, "the time for unyoking of cattle." The second element of this adjective, deriving from the verb *luo* (to loosen, undo), contains a double semantic allusion: first, this verb is commonly used for the death of a warrior, whose limbs are "loosened" or "undone"; second, in every other instance, what is done with cattle in the evening is to kill them for consumption; the verb "loosen" is generally applied to horses. These two twists on formulaic style – the use of a common expression in an unusual sense, and the lack of other instances, meaning the expression is not formulaic – herald an exceptional event.

Luck favors the Trojans, and Patroklos will be killed. The event is announced before the battle and, moreover, it has been known for some time, through allusions by the poet or by Zeus. Therefore, what captivates us is not the event but rather the way in which it unfurls. The first to strike Patroklos is Apollo, a fact that by itself is a unique occurrence in the *Iliad*. The gods assist their favorites by counseling them or averting perils, but not by actually killing their protégés' enemies.<sup>2</sup> To do so, the gods generally intervene in the guise of human beings. In this case, Apollo himself strikes without a mask. He faces Patroklos, a fact that is reiterated in the repeated use of the prefix *anti*; but the blow dealt at close range by this divine hand, oddly enough, strikes Patroklos' back. First of all, how can a frontal blow strike behind? And secondly, everywhere else, men struck in the back are fleeing; this is not the case with Patroklos.

Apollo's blow has staggering effects: Patroklos is disarmed alive, at the beginning of the battle, whereas all the other defeated warriors are stripped after death so that their weapons may be flaunted by the victors as proof of victory. The scene, which lists the same weapons as those mentioned in the typical scenes of preparation for battle, using formulas that do not depart from the other scenes in which the fallen are stripped of their arms, is how-

ever unique in one aspect: it reverses the order in which Patroklos was seen to take up his equipment at the beginning of the same book. The arms fall from top to bottom, whereas Patroklos had armed himself from the legs up (130-144). This scene of disarmament is truly unique, and the inverted sequence signals the utterly atypical character of Patroklos' death. Naked (*gumnon*) and "broken" (815, 816), Patroklos is cast into a sort of living death before he actually dies.

The second to strike Patroklos is Euphorbos. His blow, although struck with a bronze weapon, continues Apollo's attack, as emphasized by the repetition of the same formulas: Patroklos is struck in the back, from behind, at close range. Euphorbos acts as the arm of the god. It should be noted that the details furnished about this young warrior identify him as an apprentice who is more qualified for contests with other youth than for real combat, and he quickly leaves the scene. It has often been observed that Euphorbos resembles Paris in these aspects. Paris, we must recall, will kill Achilles from behind, with Apollo's help; sometimes Apollo is portrayed as solely responsible for Achilles' death, which the *Iliad* does not describe but does allude to at the beginning of the poem. Thus the death of Patroklos, Achilles' *alter ego*, who is wearing the latter's weapons, cannot but recall this other death, which is mentioned more and more insistently as the end of the poem approaches. The fate of the helmet – a metaphor for the death of Patroklos, since it is described with expressions usually reserved for a mortally wounded warrior (in particular, the "plumes ... defiled by blood and dust," 795-96) – is paired with a reminder of its rightful owner, as if to keep us from forgetting that Patroklos' destiny is linked to that of Achilles. Behind this strange death looms another death, awaited and feared, that of the hero of the *Iliad*. If Achilles' death is not actually narrated, perhaps it is because the death of Patroklos is its equivalent, an inverted substitute, and it is not necessary to present the final struggle when the pattern to which it conforms has already been shown, in reverse, as if in a photographic negative.

Of course, the machinery that brings Achilles to his death involves Hektor: Achilles cannot leave his friend unavenged, but he will not survive Hektor, as we are told several times. Hektor is

the third to intervene in the scenario of Patroklos' death. His blow is also struck at close range, but from the front. Thus Hektor, along with Euphorbos, completes the action initiated by Apollo, who approached from the front. The wounded Patroklos' remarks go even further. By pointing out to Hektor that the Trojan is there only to strip the arms from the victim, Patroklos suggests that human actions are but a complement to those of the god, the true author of his death: Hektor and Euphorbos are only the instruments of the god. Hektor strikes Patroklos "in the depth of the belly" (821), an expression that is formulaic, but also specialized: it is used in two other instances, once in connection with a god (Ares), as if by chance, and the other in Paris' regret (if only I had struck him deep in the belly), as if by chance. The formulas are not interchangeable. They make sense. And the sense, here, is that it is Apollo who kills Patroklos, as he will kill Achilles through the quite unwarrior-like hand of Paris. One more significant detail is that when Patroklos falls, struck by Hektor, he does so "thunderously" (822). The expression could not be more formulaic. But it is immediately followed by a detail that alludes to a possible etymology of the name Achilles: phonetically, "to cause grief," *ekach*, "to the people," *laon*, evokes his name. The death of Patroklos, in effect, prefigures that of Achilles.

The interplay of what is formulaic and what is not is thus fundamental to this scene, making it at once familiar and atypical. The oft-repeated formulas diverge from their usual meaning by their juxtaposition with novel usages. Sometimes, on the other hand, they are resemanticized, as in the phrase *telos thanatoio*, literally "the end of death" (855). This phrase appears only near the end of the passage, when Patroklos finally dies. But this death has been narrated in slow motion, like no other death in the *Iliad*. The passage is studded with numerous phrases (for examples, "the soul fluttering free of his limbs went down into Death's house" [856]; "he fell/ thunderously" [821-822] ) that are sufficient to communicate the warrior's death. Thus, unlike the other occurrences of the same expression, which are ordinary, this instance takes on its fullest sense as the end of a process. At the same time, it alludes to the length of the narrative, conscious of the rhythm of its own unfurling.

To my view, the fascination of this passage, a scenario played in reverse and in slow motion, lies in the way it holds up a mirror to the text as a whole and reflects its workings. By virtue of its strangeness, this combat probes not only the nature of other, but also the true causes and means of death. For death itself is the true subject of this slow agony. It should be noted that, unlike other warriors, whose deaths are developed extensively, Patroklos gives no thought to the fate of his corpse, which is a typical preoccupation of those who die in the *Iliad*. This particular scenario is concerned not with psychology or death on an individual level, but rather with Death. By manipulating the formulaic style, the poet succeeds in endowing his narration with this general value and in demonstrating its supple capacity for polysemy, something like “frozen words” that are poised to melt.

*Translated from the French by Jennifer Curtiss Gage*

## Notes

1. *The Iliad of Homer*, trans. with an introduction by Richmond Lattimore (Chicago and London, 1951), pp. 351-353 (Book 16, lines 777-854).
2. On one occasion, we do see Ares strip the weapons from a warrior whom he has just killed, but the act is not depicted in this work; in any case, one might say killing is the job of the god of war, whose name is often quite simply a synonym for “combat”; the occasion is not noteworthy.