

Heroic Immortality in the Proem of Parmenides

This paper argues that the proem of Parmenides represents a journey to a heroic immortality at the edge of the world. Others have argued that the *kouros* travels to the sky (*anabasis*: Fränkel 1975: 1-6, Coxon 2009 [1986]: 12-18, Kahn 2009: 210-215), the underworld (*katabasis*: Burkert 1969, Gemelli Marciano 2008, Benzi 2021), the sky and the underworld (*anabasis-katabasis*: Tor 2017: 347-359), or an ambiguous beyond (*apobasis*: Mourelatos 2008 [1970]: 15-16, Cosgrove 2011: 37-39, Folit-Weinberg 2022: 80-84).

First, I show that an *apobasis* is unlikely because the *kouros* reaches the place “where the gates of the paths of Night and Day are” (ἐνθα πύλαι νυκτός τε καὶ ἡματός εἰσι κελεύθων, B1.11). This is a mysterious but specific mythological location described in Homer (*Od.* 10.84-86) and Hesiod (*Th.* 746-757). This fact has been a key piece of evidence for supporters of a *katabasis* reading because Hesiod’s mention of the gates as he begins his description of the underworld (*Th.* 758-806, Burkert 1969: 7-13), but also for supporters of the *anabasis* reading because Parmenides’ gates are “ethereal” (πύλαι ... αἰθέριαι, B1.11-13) and Homer also describes similar gates in the sky (*Il.* 7.745-752 = 8.389-396, Coxon 2009 [1986]: 9-18). However, I argue that it is unlikely that the proem narrates a *katabasis* or *anabasis* because the *kouros* meets the goddess immediately beyond the gates (B1.20-23) without any further details about the location, much less any features of the sky or underworld familiar from archaic poetry.

I then argue that the psychological terminology Parmenides adapts from early epic supports this interpretation. The proem opens by saying that the horses take the *kouros* “as far as the *thumos* can reach” (ὅσον τ’ ἐπὶ θυμὸς ἰκάνοι, B1.1) and it closes with the goddess claiming that she will teach him “the unmoving heart of well-rounded truth” (ἀληθείης εὐκυκλέος ἀτρεμῆς

ἦτορ, B1.29). Another fragment claims that the quality of the “intellect” (νόος) depends on “the mixture of the much-wandering limbs” (κρᾶσιν μελέων πολυπλάγκτων, B16.1-2). I build on Clarke’s (1999) arguments that the Homeric *noos* is a product of psychological entities in the chest including the *thumos* and *ētor* and Tor’s (2017: 222-277) argument that the *kouros* gains a divine mind to encounter the goddess and understand her revelation. Thus, I argue that the *kouros* becomes a semi-divine hero and gains something like the intermediate ontological status of Menelaos in the Elysian Field (*Od.* 4.561-569) or Hesiod’s heroes in the Islands of the Blessed who “have a carefree *thumos*” (ἀκηδέα θυμὸν ἔχοντες, *Op.* 170-173). Both the Elysian Plain (πείρατα γαίης, *Od.* 4.463), and the Islands of the Blessed are at the edge of the world (παρ’ Ὠκεανὸν βαθυδίην, *Op.* 171), which is simultaneously the world’s periphery and its center and the location of the gates of Night and Day where the sun rises and sets (Nakassis 2004). I conclude that this liminal space would be an ideal setting for the goddess to deliver her speech about the nature of Being.

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