Having investigated the role of ψυχή in the living man,*1 we turn now to a consideration of ψυχή at death. The implications of the spider simile led us to suspect that death may be, for Heraclitus, something that occurs as the result of damage to ψυχή, primarily, and not to the body or to any or its other faculties; ψυχή is that by virtue of which a living creature is alive; therefore death must be explained in terms of ψυχή. The Homeric man saw death as the departure of ψυχή from the body; breathed out through the mouth or through a wound, it takes up a shadowy existence in Hades, while it is the corpse that continues to be spoken of as the man’s αὐτός, as preserving whatever was characteristic of him as an individual in the eyes of those who mourn for him.2 I believe Heraclitus criticizes and rejects this aspect, too, of Homeric teaching; and his new view of the death of men leads to a reassessment of how men ought to live.

Fr. 36: ψυχὴν θάνατος ὀδορ γενέσθαι...
Fr. 77: ψυχή... τόρφν ἡ θάνατον υγρὴς γενέσθαι.

The first thing we notice about these fragments is the peculiar nature of the expression θάνατος ψυχῆς. First of all, it is clearly a word-play, a juxtaposition of opposites: “It is death to the life-faculty…” Secondly, we notice that this is a very un-Homeric way of talking about death. For the Homeric man, death is something that comes to an individual, or to his body. At the moment of death, the ψυχή is released, or departs, but death is never described as coming to the ψυχή, or as being a death of or for the ψυχή. Death is generally described as a dark cloud which covers the eyes of the man as he becomes a corpse (Ε 82, etc.). After ψυχή departs, the corpse, not ψυχή, is described as being in a state of death. Thus, at X 361, the poet describes the death of Hector:

* For modern works referred to in this article, please see Bibliography on pp. 169-70.
1 Nussbaum, “ΨΥΧΗ in Heraclitus, I,” this volume, pp. 1-16.
2 Iliad A 3, Π 453 ff., Theognis 567, etc.
One might say that to say τέθναθι to a corpse is to say “you have lost your ψυχή”; it is not to say “your ψυχή is dead,” or even “death has come to your ψυχή.” Corpses are frequently described as being in a state of death (H 89, 409, K 343, 387, O 664, Π 5, 26, 565, Ρ 369, Σ 540, Χ 448). But the ψυχή in Hades are always described, not as dead shades, but as the shades of the people or corpses which are in a state of death (κ 530, λ 37, 84, 141, 205, 541, 564, 567). The single exception — λ 147, δν τινα μεν ες νεκυων καταπεθνεωτων, where νεκυς means “shade” and is apparently equivalent to ψυχή — can easily be explained as a later variant of the more common formula involving ψυχή ... νεκύων καταπεθνεωτών. The nearest we find to a deliberate juxtaposition of θάνατος and ψυχή in Homer is at Λ 488, where the ψυχή of Achilles asks Odysseus not to try to comfort him since he would rather be a servant on earth than ruler of all the shades. For him, θάνατος means ceasing to exist as a whole man, and taking up existence as a mere ψυχή. But the ψυχή, speaking, does not describe itself as being in a state of death.3

In fact, the first time we find an expression similar to the θάνατος ψυχάις of Heraclitus is in the Antigone of Sophocles: ἦ δ’ἐμη ψυχή τέθνεται (559-60). However, this passage itself is so problematic that it is not useful for purposes of analogy.

We may say, then, that Heraclitus’ expression is foreign to traditional ways of talking about death; if θάνατος ψυχάις had any meaning for Homeric man, it would have to mean the moment of the separation of ψυχή from the body, and certainly not the termination of ψυχή’s existence or importance. In fact, as we have seen, ψυχή generally seems to become important, and is spoken of, only upon its separation from the corpse.

A further consideration of fragment 36, however, shows us that this cannot be the meaning Heraclitus has in mind. For we see that ψυχή here has replaced fire in the λόγος of cosmic change, as it is elsewhere discussed. And it is impossible to elicit from the cosmic fragments any

3 Vergil understands and reproduces this Homeric restriction, writing simulacraque luce carentum (Georg. IV. 472), but defunctaque corpora vita (Georg. IV 475 = Aen. VI. 306).