

The Orpheus complex

Terence Dawson, *Singapore*

Abstract: This paper examines the possible psychological implications of two adaptations of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, both of which were completed in 1997. The first is by a *man*: 'Deconstructing Harry', a film by Woody Allen. The second is by a *woman*: 'Eurydice in the Underworld', a short story written by Kathy Acker in the last year of her life.

The paper argues that there are only four 'necessary events' in the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. It defines the sequence of these events as a 'mythic pattern' that represents the experience of loss, unconscious yearning, depression, and psychological inflation. The film is examined as an expression of an 'Orpheus complex', the short story as an expression of an 'Eurydice complex'. The paper suggests a possible reason for the persistence of interest in the myth throughout the twentieth century. Although it notes that women appear to find it easier to free themselves from identification with the mythic pattern, it also provides reasons for thinking that men may be about to do the same.

Key words: depression, Eurydice complex, inflation, loss, myth, Orpheus complex, yearning.

In a letter written in 1949, Jung describes the Oedipus complex as 'a mythological and a psychological motif simultaneously'. He continues:

But obviously it is no more than a single archetype, the one representing the son's relationship to his parents. So there must be others, since there is still the daughter's relationship to the parents, the parents' relationship to the children, the relationship between man and woman, brother and sister, etc. ... There are any number of typical situations, each represented by a certain innate form that forces the individual to function in a specifically human way.

(Jung 1973/1976, I, p. 525)

Jung's phrasing in this passage suggests that each relationship is represented by only one archetype. It is unlikely that he intended this. Depending on the nature of the bond between the individuals concerned, each of the relationships to which he refers can manifest itself in a great many 'typical' and yet distinct forms. This article examines the possible implications of one archetypal narrative that explores 'the relationship between man and woman'.

The myth of Orpheus and Eurydice is unusual in having had a more or less continuous history for over two and a half thousand years. It has elicited

renderings by moral philosophers, poets, playwrights, painters, composers, choreographers, sculptors, novelists and film-makers. No other classical myth has held so many creative artists in its spell. No other classical myth has excited such varied adaptations. And no other classical myth has given rise to such diverse adaptations in the twentieth century. They include poems by Rilke (1907, 1922) and H.D. (1917), operas by Milhaud (1926) and Harrison Birtwistle (1986, 1994), novels by Caroline Gordon (1944) and Russell Hoban (1987), and films by Jean Cocteau (1950, 1961) and Marcel Camus (1959). There have been numerous other almost equally important adaptations (e.g., Yvan Goll 1918/1924; Adrienne Rich 1968). And yet in spite of the interest this myth continues to arouse at the turn of the twenty-first century, there has been no major attempt to explore its specifically psychological implications.

A myth is not to be confused with any single adaptation of it. The word *mythos* describes a particular kind of *spoken* narrative. No one ever knew who told this narrative first and every time it was told it was inevitably – sometimes very slightly, sometimes significantly – different. Every telling was unique. It has often been said that a myth is a *pre-text*. As soon as it is written down, it ceases to be a myth. It becomes a unique *text*, either as a work of literature, or a painted image on a vase, a sculpture, etc. A text can never reproduce the myth. It is only an *adaptation* of a sequence of events that we call a ‘myth’.

This sequence has fewer elements than might be assumed. For example, there is no evidence to suggest that either the famous ‘condition’ or the motif of the ‘fatal glance’ belonged to any Greek version of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. In all likelihood, they were devised by Virgil (29 BCE). They are not therefore an essential feature of the myth. In similar fashion, Calzabigi, the librettist of Gluck’s *Orfeo ed Euridice* (1762/1774), not only deliberately avoided the celebrated confrontation with Pluto, but also provided a *lieto fine*. Neither the omission nor the ‘happy ending’ prevents one being able to regard the opera as a major adaptation of the myth. A myth is not a fixed narrative. It is a sequence of *necessary* events. The myth of Orpheus and Eurydice has only four *necessary* events:

- a) The ‘death’ (literal or metaphorical) of Eurydice and her descent into an ‘underworld’
- b) The grief of Orpheus
- c) The descent of Orpheus into the ‘underworld’
- d) An endeavour by Orpheus to return to life with Eurydice

This sequence of *necessary* events may be defined as a *mythic pattern* and any text that is centrally concerned with the events of this mythic pattern can be described as an adaptation of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. All other episodes commonly associated with the myth belong not to the ‘myth’, but to specific *adaptations* of it.

In short, the earliest extant account of a myth is no more than one's rendering of a story indebted to earlier versions that are lost to us as well as to contemporary events in the life of the community in which it first appeared. Some adaptations will inevitably be more influential than others, but they cannot be regarded as more 'definitive'.

When considering a myth, one has to take account of all its existent versions.

The history of the myth

The key to a myth's vigour is its adaptability.

(John Friedman 1970)

The story of Orpheus and Eurydice was first formulated about the late sixth or early fifth century BCE. Although usually referred to as a Greek myth, we know very little about either its origins or its original significance. Orpheus was associated with the voyage of the Argonauts, i.e., a quest to recover something of value from a region seen as 'other'. He was also associated with Orphism, a mystery cult, related to that of Dionysos, in which practitioners received instructions on what to do after death (i.e. in the underworld) in order to obtain individual salvation. But in the extant literature of ancient Greece, references to the *mythos* about the determination of Orpheus to recover his 'wife' from the underworld are all brief. None of them provides any details about the story told.

The earliest surviving extended renderings of the story belong to the golden age of Latin literature. The earliest appears in book four of Virgil's *Georgics* (29 BCE). Its frame story about Aristaeus clearly parodies three motifs from the Orphic creation myth (swallowing, ambush, and rapid transformation), and the central story about Orpheus may have been intended to parody two others (the serpent of time, and the relation between love and fury). But we do not know whether *any* of these motifs ever formed part of the Greek *mythos*. About a generation after Virgil, Ovid (c.8) produced his own mock-heroic riposte, which he included in the *Metamorphoses* (bks. 10 & 11). All subsequent adaptations are indebted to these two masterpieces of Augustan literature.

The history of subsequent adaptations reveals a gradual shift in their dominant concern. One can distinguish five unequal phases.

(1) *Orpheus and Allegory: the Middle Ages*. It is not known when the ability of Orpheus to tame the wildest animals with his music was first seen as an allegory of the ability of human beings to master their own inferior passions: possibly as early as the sixth century BCE. Both Virgil and Ovid poked fun at the tradition. Others like Horace (c.19 BCE) took it more seriously (*Ars Poetica*, lines 391–3). During the first five hundred years of the Common Era, interest in Orpheus was largely conditioned by him being envisaged as a promoter of civilization. As a result, early Christian apologists were quick to identify

his attributes with those of Christ (cf. *Isaiah* 11: 6, and the frescoes of Christ playing a lyre in the Roman catacombs).

Inevitably, this came to colour interpretations of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. It was not long before the myth began to be adapted in order to illustrate very different arguments. Boethius (c.524), whose primary concern was with the need to keep one's attention focused on the *fons boni* (= fountain of goodness, identified with God), used the myth to illustrate how one's passions could lead one astray. His brief but enormously influential rendering implies that Orpheus was *wrong* to think of seeking 'his wife' among the dead. His younger contemporary, Fulgentius, asserted almost the opposite. He argues that Orpheus *must* seek Eurydice if he is to civilize himself through art (Friedman 1970). Christian moral philosophers continued to elaborate such interpretations for over a thousand years. The last great allegorical adaptation is Calderón's *auto sacramentale* (1634/1663) in which Orpheus represents Christ who would like to save Eurydice (i.e. fallen human nature), but only if she is willing.

Allegory can explore a great many facets of any given issue, but it cannot individualize. By the fifteenth century, a need was seen to relate the myth to individual experience.

(2) *Orpheus and Pastoral: the Renaissance*. The pastoral, possibly the defining genre of the Renaissance, was revived in order to explore the complexities of relationships. Orpheus became a shepherd so that artists could reflect on the experience of grief and undying love. Today, we may not be able to empathize with the hero of the first Renaissance pastoral, Poliziano's *Favola di Orfeo* (1480/1494). We can, however, with the protagonist of Monteverdi's opera *Orfeo* (1603). Its music takes us more deeply into the hero's predicament than in any previous rendering: its central aria (*Possente spirito*) is every bit as moving as the better known lament (*Che farò senza Euridice*) from Gluck's later adaptation, *Orfeo ed Euridice* (1762/1774).

Even so, the handful of strikingly original seventeenth century adaptations (e.g. Landi 1619; Lope de Vega 1625; Calderón 1634/1663; and Rossi 1647) are exceptions. The respect for 'classical' models that began with the Renaissance soon became a constraint: it ensured that most adaptations adhered so closely to the story told by Virgil that they had little new to say in either literary or psychological terms. Until the end of the eighteenth century, the myth was always about something that happened to an 'other', to Orpheus, a figure from mythology. If a writer 'identified' with Orpheus, it was part of a self-conscious pose. There is no evidence that any artist between the sixth century BCE and the end of the eighteenth century identified with the experience attributed to Orpheus.

(3) *The Artist as Orpheus: Romanticism*. By the early nineteenth century, writers and other artists were beginning to identify with the mythic figure not as the exponent of an art-form, but with Orpheus as the carrier of a particular affective experience. The first major writer to identify with the grief and longing of Orpheus was the German poet and novelist who published under the

pseudonym Novalis. *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (1802) marks a major watershed in adaptations of the myth. It was another half century before the French poet Gérard de Nerval admitted his own identification with Orpheus in two equally autobiographical works, 'El Desdichado' (1853) and 'Aurélia' (1855). Both writers died young. Novalis was planning a continuation of his novel that was to end with the reconciliation of the legends of Orpheus and Psyche; Nerval hanged himself from a lamppost, with *Aurélia* in his pocket.

Identification with a mythic figure such as Orpheus points to psychological inflation, a condition in which a person is so dominated by his or her fascination with an archetypal image that he or she begins to 'act out' a mythic pattern of behaviour, very often with tragic personal consequences. Those who bear witness to their identification with a mythic figure often suffer a high price for doing so, but their works allow *others* to reflect upon, and so gradually integrate, the deeper implications of an archetypal pattern. Even so, most Romantic adaptations from Hugo (1877) to Kokoschka (1915/1919) are disappointing: they are more conspicuous for the evidence of their author's self-indulgent identification with Orpheus than for the interest of either their literary form or their psychological implications.

(4) '*Song is Being*': *Modernism*. There are two defining characteristics of modernist adaptations. The first is much greater freedom of 'form'. No longer content to produce variants of the Augustan myth, artists began to explore the implications of the mythic pattern in new and extraordinarily diverse ways. The second is an emphatic concern with the nature and import of artistic utterance. As one would expect, evidence of 'romantic' identification with Orpheus continues and sometimes even appears to be the dominant feature. But by the second half of the nineteenth century there is evidence to suggest that artists were turning to the myth not just to give expression to a personal crisis, but also to explore intuitions about the nature and function of creative endeavour.

Two major tendencies stand out. The first is an interest in the myth as a metaphor for the artist's need to transform himself. This is evident both in Rilke's startling *Sonnets to Orpheus* (1922) and in Cocteau's play, *Orphée* (1926), better known in its adaptation for film (1950). Two phrases from Rilke's sonnet-sequence – 'song is being' and 'will transformation' – might stand as representative of the great adaptations of this period. The myth had become the vehicle *par excellence* for artists working in very different media to reflect on the nature of their creative individuality.

The second major development is the appearance of the first adaptations to reflect a specifically female psychology. The first woman to give expression to Eurydice's experience from a *woman's* point of view was the American poet H.D. ('Eurydice', 1917). It was not long before other very different writers did the same, notably Caroline Gordon (1944), Muriel Rukeyser (1951 & 1968), Adrienne Rich (1968), and Elizabeth Jennings (1975).

(5) '*I am Orpheus, but who am I?*': *Postmodernism*. Modernist adaptations of the mythic pattern tend to be somewhat 'earnest'. In contrast, post-modern

adaptations delight in irony, parody, and self-conscious referentiality. Just as the two great Augustans parodied the Greek myth, so late-twentieth-century adaptations seize every opportunity to parody all previous versions of the mythic pattern. In spite of their playfulness, however, they have serious and arguably far-reaching implications. They continue to show evidence of the artist's identification with one or other protagonist and to be centrally concerned with artistic identity. But perhaps their defining characteristic is that of Jean Cocteau's last film (1961): a fascination with the way in which the myth 'intrudes' into reality at unexpected moments. Artists are caught between self-conscious awareness of the banality of the mythic *situation* and a compulsion to reproduce the basic elements of the mythic *pattern*. They are at once suspicious of any claims about the inner thoughts of their central protagonists, and yet drawn to the transformative potential inherent in the myth *as process*.

A feature of many of the finest recent adaptations is that they express a need to 'dream' the myth onward. They not only explore the reasons why Orpheus finds himself in his predicament, but also what he must do in order to 'move on' in his life. The mythic pattern is no longer sealed; it is being opened up and extended. At the end of Samuel R. Delany's 'science fiction' adaptation, *The Einstein Intersection* (1967), Lobey (i.e. Orpheus) overcomes Kid Death and thereby makes a first step toward accepting his loss of Friza (i.e. Eurydice). At the end of Russell Hoban's *The Medusa Frequency* (1987) Herman Orff finally overcomes the terror occasioned by the loss of Melanie and thereby recovers control of both his affective and creative life. In *Sliding Doors* (1998), a film by Peter Howitt, the entire action may be seen as a metaphor for what the effective protagonist must do if he is to resolve the dilemma facing him. In adaptations by women, a comparable development is well illustrated in Kathy Acker's short story, *Eurydice in the Underworld* (1997).

Contemporary adaptations inevitably carry the associations of the changing concerns of every phase in the evolution of the mythic pattern. The predominant concern of the two great 'classical' models is identity *per se*. The predominant concern of Medieval and Renaissance adaptations is moral action. In the Romantic period, the predominant concern becomes individual identity. In the Modernist period, the predominant concern is creative identity. And the predominant concern of the most interesting recent adaptations is a determination to move beyond the impasse traditionally seen as implicit in the mythic pattern. The development of these concerns may be compared both with Jung's theory about the withdrawal of projections (see von Franz 1980) and with the related theory of literary consciousness that I tentatively outlined in an earlier article (Dawson 1997).

Myth and analytical psychology

There are good reasons why a psychological approach might be considered particularly appropriate for a study of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. In the first

place, the basic pattern that lies at its heart reflects a psychological condition. Loss, inconsolable grief, surrender to death and determination to recover something precious are all expressions of a state of mind. Moreover, our earliest surviving 'complete' version of the myth is by an Epicurean and Epicureans had little patience with religious explanations of the world. They believed that the gods were 'projections' of human appetites, fears and desires. Virgil's *epyllion* represents an expression of deeply rooted psychological concerns. It invites an analysis of its psychological implications, as do most, perhaps all, later texts indebted to it.

Jung's ideas are particularly well suited to exploring the possible implications of a mythic pattern. In the first place, the distinction he made between the unknowable 'archetype' and an 'archetypal image' is analogous to the distinction between the unknowable 'pre-text' and a 'text' which is only an adaptation of this. According to Jung, we cannot know an archetype; we can only infer its 'existence' from the experience of archetypal images. In the same way, the original version of a myth is only a hypothesis that explains the similarity between otherwise different renderings of a mythic pattern.

Secondly, Jung had a marked suspicion of monolithic theories. He claimed that he always began a clinical encounter by reminding himself not to have *any* preconceptions about the nature of his patient's dilemma. Each dream, he held, must suggest its own individual interpretation; not a 'closed' interpretation, but one that can acknowledge its own tentative, exploratory nature. For an archetypal pattern holds a different meaning for every individual:

Since every individual is a new and unique combination of psychic elements, the investigation ... must begin afresh with each case, for each 'case' is individual and not derivable from any preconceived formula ... We miss the meaning of the individual psyche if we interpret it on the basis of any fixed theory.

(Jung 1924, para. 173)

Jung was consciously interested in the unique and defining detail of any given text, whether a patient's dream or a literary work, as well as in the relevance of these to a specific individual. This is why his method might be particularly useful for analysing different adaptations of the same mythic structure.

This paper takes a brief look at two recent adaptations. Although both are indebted to the same myth, are self-consciously referential, fuse comedy with pathos, and employ the metaphor of 'healing', they also have significantly different implications. The primary aim is to identify the nature of the different psychological dilemmas that lie at their heart and to suggest a possible reason why the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice continues to exercise such a tenacious hold on the imagination of creative artists.

Orpheus in the psychoanalyst's chair

I am Orpheus ... but who am I?

(Vinicius de Moraes 1987)

Allan Stewart Konigsberg (b.1935), better known as Woody Allen, has been one of the best-known, even if not always financially successful, directors of cinematic comedies in the late twentieth century. No one has ever gone over the same ground so often and yet retained his ability to make it seem new. Ever since *What's New, Pussycat?* (1965), he has been exploring the confusion that results from broken relationships. Many of his works use his own biographical experiences as their basis. As early as 1967, he was sued by his ex-wife for 'holding her up to scorn and ridicule' (Spignesi 1994, p. 29). A very similar complaint is loudly reiterated by an indignant female character in the opening moments of *Deconstructing Harry* (1997).

In the film, Harry Block (played by Woody Allen) is a late-middle-aged writer. His third marriage has recently collapsed and, for the first time in his life, he is suffering from writer's block. He is desperately trying to understand why he is still overwhelmed by the same kind of obsessive fixations as he had in adolescence. He drinks, pops pills, longs for every woman he sees, and visits his analyst (his sixth) regularly. His behaviour is characterized by a vivid fantasy life and an increasingly tenuous hold on reality. Although he admits that he has always cheated on his partners, he is utterly unable to understand why they should be either hurt or offended by his actions, whether these consist of infidelity or blatantly caricaturing them in his fictions.

The film has two plots. One tells the story of a car drive to Harry's old school where he is to be honoured for his achievements as a writer. He has no one to accompany him. He finally leaves with a hooker, a friend (who dies of a heart attack), and his son (whom he abducts from the care of a friend of his second wife). The other is about his ongoing fixation with an ex-student, appropriately called Fay, with whom, some time before the opening of the film, he had had a short-lived affair. Since then he hasn't seen very much of her.

This 'second' plot begins with Harry meeting Fay for dinner. He wants to invite her to accompany him to his old school. She takes the opportunity to tell him that she is about to be married to Larry, his best friend. He is both hurt and thrown into confusion.

The following morning, he sets off for his school. On the way he keeps phoning Fay to try to persuade her to cancel her marriage. His attempts culminate in a scene in which he finds himself in an elevator going down into the depths of the earth. At the bottom is Hell, represented as a night-club owned by Larry, filled with clichéd devils and groups of alluring naked women who symbolize the crassness of Harry's sexual fixations. Harry wants to kidnap Fay back. Larry tells him that he isn't the kidnapping kind.

Whereupon, just in time to prevent Harry being honoured at his school, the police arrive to arrest him for 'kidnapping' his son. He is thrown into jail and told he is in 'deep trouble'. Fresh from their wedding, Larry and Fay arrive and offer to bail him out of jail in exchange for his blessing. He grudgingly gives it.

Back home, he is suddenly aware that the staff of his old school are 'there' (i.e. in his imagination), reminding him that he still hasn't been honoured. They show him all his own 'characters', applauding him.

As is clear from the descent into 'hell', there is of course more to it than this. Both plots alternate with 'scenes' related to earlier moments connected with Harry's life. These scenes, which include descriptions of the marital life of his parents, his relationship with his sister, and various episodes from his three marriages, are *not* literal memories. They represent Harry's *fictional* account of the moment in question.

Each character thus exists on two levels of reality: the first might be called the 'historical'; the second, the 'fictional'. The 'fictional' scenes, which are often wickedly funny, parody various moments in Harry's life. Each of the male 'characters' represents a different aspect of his own personality: one, called Ken, addresses his 'creator' and tells him so. And each of the female characters is modelled on one or other of the women with whom he has been involved. The 'fictional' scenes thus constitute an 'amplification' of the dilemma facing him. If space permitted, every one of them would provide ample material for an extended analysis. Indeed, it is evident that 'Harry' has discussed them all at length with his analyst. He acknowledges that his characters represent significant tendencies in his own character. But by looking so closely at their weaknesses, by turning them into caricatures, by seeing only what is ludicrous about them, he provides himself with the perfect excuse not to 'relate' to them.

The film has Woody Allen's usual abundance of one-liners ('Between air-conditioning and the Pope, I'll take air-conditioning') and some imaginative devices (one of the characters, an embodiment of an aspect of Harry Block's character and played in the film by Robin Williams, is constantly 'out of focus'). It also has some wonderfully funny scenes: Judy Davis (who plays Harry's sister-in-law) and Kirstie Alley (who plays Harry's second wife) give brilliant cameo performances. But as a whole it is irritatingly self-indulgent. The final trick of telling the audience that even the drive to the old school – which appears to exist on the 'historical' level – is in fact another 'fiction' is bad cinema and worse psychology.

Although the film never mentions the names of Orpheus or Eurydice, it is very obviously intended as an adaptation of the myth. Harry's fixation with Fay is modelled on that of Orpheus for Eurydice. We remember Ovid's 'little epic'. It does not tell us anything about what Orpheus felt for Eurydice *before* her death, only that he yearned for her *after* she died. Orpheus is insufficiently committed to what he has; he can only desire what he has lost. Pluto's abduction of Eurydice thus corresponds to Orpheus' inadequate sense of commitment. The same is true in Woody Allen's film. We learn nothing about Harry's feelings for Fay before her engagement. We are only told about what he feels for her after he has 'lost' her. From Harry's point of view, Larry has 'abducted' Fay. In other words, Larry is 'Pluto'. That he is a good-looking playboy corresponds to Harry's desire to nonchalantly seduce every young woman he meets.

And that Larry wants to marry Fay compensates Harry's inability to commit himself to the woman whom he thinks he loves. In Jungian terms, Larry is an aspect of Harry's 'shadow': this is suggested even by the play of their names (Harry/Larry). But he is not a 'dark' shadow so much as a 'bright' (or Luciferian) shadow-figure whose function is to compensate Harry's unconscious fear of commitment.

That Harry is a writer is a variant of the metaphor of Orpheus as artist which dates back to the sixth century BCE (the Sikyonian Treasury at Delphi) and was later developed by Fulgentius in the sixth century and by Ficino in the fifteenth. A writer's 'psychological identification' with Orpheus (= 'possession') stems from the early romantic period. Novalis, Nerval and, in the twentieth century, Kokoschka were all aware of a connection between their fascination with the myth and their own psychological maladjustment. But Woody Allen may be the first artist to submit this dilemma to an analyst.

The problem that worries Harry most is the fate of his writing. As a writer, he has always taken his material from his own life and recast it in a parodic vein. Now in middle-age, he finds that his one ability has dried up. He is suffering from writer's block and is reluctant to admit that there might be any connection between his creative difficulties and his inability to maintain a relationship with any of his partners.

The story of Harry Block offers almost a case history of the type of man who can 'deconstruct' both his relationships and his life, but cannot construct either. He invests all his energy in the 'analysis' of others: he notes their every flaw, can see their every weakness. He can parody them mercilessly, envisage them in any number of amusing situations. He is in love with the prolificity of his own imagination. But he has no psychic energy left to develop even a modicum of self-awareness.

He pursues one young woman after another as if she were Eurydice. In other words, he suffers from a particular kind of anima possession. He is consumed by a sense that he *must* connect with his anima, i.e. an inner *image* of a woman which is also 'the *archetype of life itself*' (Jung 1954, para. 66). When Fay announces that she is going to marry Larry, he cannot understand quite *how* or *when* he lost contact with her. He has not even noticed her absence, just as he never properly noticed her when she was present. He was so captivated by the Fay in his mind that he never understood her own emotional needs. Now, finding that she is no longer available for him when *he* needs her, he yearns to have her back. He becomes desperate. He is willing to go down to Hell to reclaim her. Because his wishful-thinking has a female figure as its object, he mistakes it for love. He cannot understand why he should not be able to model his heroines on his ex-partners. What he considers honesty would be better described as emotional inadequacy.

In short, he suffers from exactly the same plight as that which Ovid depicts with such wit in the *Metamorphoses*. Just as Orpheus, after returning from the underworld, retires to a mountaintop and sings of various kinds of erotic love,

so Harry Block retires to the flat where he lives alone and consoles himself for the loss of Fay by reminding himself of the stories associated with his fictional characters. The last scene shows them all applauding him. One might describe this as evidence of narcissism, but this would be to mistake the archetypal image with which Harry Block most closely identifies. The admiration of his fictional characters is just one more episode that adapts a motif from the myth of Orpheus. It recalls the spellbound animals lying at the feet of the forlorn Orpheus immediately prior to him being torn apart by the Maenads (cf. all the indignant women who have left him).

We suggest that any narrative in which a man undergoes the loss of a beloved partner, is overcome by grief, surrenders to an imaginal *katabasis* (i.e. 'descent' into his unconscious), and makes a determined effort to recover his partner from a condition analogous to death, can be described as an adaptation of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. All of these are not only present in, but central to *Deconstructing Harry*. The film can thus be regarded as a contemporary adaptation of the myth.

Harry Block may have let go of Fay, but he has not 'learned' anything from his experience. He is not yet ready to re-engage with life. Like Orpheus, he withdraws into a world composed of his own psychic images. This 'Orpheus' will remain in an analyst's chair until he has learned to make a connection between the situation in which he finds himself and his inability to 'connect' with his Eurydice.

The Orpheus complex

The question remains whether *Deconstructing Harry* can be described as the expression of a 'typical situation' in which 'a certain innate form forces the individual to function in a specific way'. In other words, whether the film offers an account of 'a mythological and a psychological motif simultaneously'.

A myth is a sequence of events. As such, it describes a process. A complex, on the other hand, is the combination of emotionally-charged notions and images associated with an archetype and which seems to express itself as if it were an autonomous personality. As such, it describes a dilemma. If the dilemma facing a male protagonist in a narrative written by a man is centrally concerned with a sufficient number of tendencies associated with the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, there is good reason to suggest that it might be defined as an 'Orpheus complex'.

An Orpheus complex describes the dilemma facing a man who not only finds himself in a 'typical situation', but who responds to it in a particular fashion. The characteristics of a man with an Orpheus complex are:

- I. A feeling that his life has lost all sense of purpose. This is expressed variously as helplessness, confusion, and pain, as well as a petulant conviction that he has been treated unfairly either by God, or 'fate', or others.

2. A strong desire to recover a specific woman or anima-figure whom he has (or feels that he has) suddenly 'lost' and whose recovery he thinks will re-invest his life with meaning.
3. An instinctive trust in his own resources to provide a solution to his dilemma. This is expressed in his dreams and waking fantasies as a determination to challenge the figure(s) whom he sees as responsible for his situation (shadow-figures) and so recover 'Eurydice' (his anima). He has a tendency to think of himself as hero (inflation), but because he is unable to make any connection between his unconscious obsessions and his waking life, he fails to translate such determination into reality.
4. As a result, he lives in an increasingly 'imaginal' reality in which he reiterates obsessive thoughts ostensibly about the woman whom he feels he has lost, but which more truly reflect his own dilemma. His self-absorption resembles narcissism, but it carries its history with it. A man suffering from an Orpheus complex is defined by a lingering, even if sometimes unconscious, obsession with a female figure, whether real or imaginal.
5. He has an exaggerated emotional dependence on the creative or pseudo-creative ability by which he is able to reiterate his obsession.

Harry Block exhibits all of these characteristics. *Deconstructing Harry* may be read as the expression of an Orpheus complex. In the same way as a myth can elicit very different adaptations, the same basic complex can manifest itself in many different ways depending on the associations each individual has with its component features. Woody Allen's film thus gives expression to only one possible variant of an Orpheus complex.

The film offers an excellent example of an Orpheus complex *à l'état pur*, but it is *not* representative of what are perhaps the most significant developments in recent adaptations, i.e. the desire to 'dream' the myth onward. For in spite of the 'post-modern' games the film plays with twin plots and the 'modernist' concern with the relation between life and literature, its psychological implications are still rooted in those of the Romantic period. Harry has learned little or nothing from his experience.

This forms a marked contrast with a short story published the same year as *Deconstructing Harry*, in which a woman writer offers a radically new reading of the mythic pattern from the point of view of Eurydice. But first a word about the tradition to which it belongs.

The Eurydice complex

Given its subject matter, it is hardly surprising that most adaptations of the myth of 'Orpheus and Eurydice' were written or produced by men. Until the twentieth century, very few women artists had been drawn to the myth. They include (see Reid 1993) the French poet and writer Christine de Pisan (c.1400), the painters Angelica Kauffmann (1782) and Henrietta Rae (1887), and the choreographers

Isadora Duncan (1902) and Maude Allan (1910). But *every* relation has two sides to it and by the early twentieth century an emphatically female response to the myth was long overdue. If Virgil was the first to give Eurydice a voice, Calzabigi to give her some personality, Browning (1864) to clearly envisage what she felt at being refused a single glance, Rilke (1907) to imagine how she had changed as a result of the time she had spent in Hades, it was left to the American poet H.D. to give expression to Eurydice's experience from a *woman's* point of view. Her poem, 'Eurydice' (1917), opened a new chapter in the story of the myth. Women artists had begun to identify with the experience of Eurydice.

For H.D., the myth tells of a man's double betrayal: first, the betrayal of abandonment that has plunged her into the 'hell' of depression; and, secondly, the betrayal represented by his hypocrisy in offering her renewed joy when he hasn't the strength of purpose to honour his intention. In other words, it tells the story of the damage done to Eurydice from her point of view. H.D., however, was not constrained by the myth. Her Eurydice does *not* long for Orpheus: she has utterly forgotten him. She has resigned herself to her new condition. Indeed, she reproaches her ex-partner for his weakness in being drawn back to think of her. The poem ends with a re-awakened consciousness to an aspect of herself even more precious than that which had been hurt:

At least I have the flowers of myself,
and my thoughts, no god
can take that;
I have the fervour of myself for a presence
and my own spirit for light; ...

(p. 55)

Her poem is a hymn to the discovery of her own autonomy. A woman writer had at last given the myth a radically new focus. Or had she devised a new myth? Caroline Gordon called it the myth of Eurydice and Orpheus (Gordon 1944, p. v).

Other major women writers whose works belong within this tradition include Muriel Rukeyser (1951 & 1968) and Margaret Atwood (1984). Their adaptations of the myth are characterized not by a single cry of *longing*, but by the exploration of a specific kind of *hurt*. They express pain, outrage, and depression, together with the protagonist's fierce determination to recover her self-esteem. In other words, they express a 'typical' psychological situation. And if a woman 'identifies' with a sufficient number of issues which *she* associates with the myth of Eurydice and Orpheus, one can define the dilemma facing her as a 'Eurydice complex'.

A 'Eurydice complex' describes the dilemma facing a woman who not only finds herself in a particular situation, but who responds to this situation in a specific fashion. It is defined by the following characteristic tendencies:

1. A searing hurt experienced after being abandoned by her partner, or after suddenly discovering that her partner has cheated on her. This might also

be experienced imaginally, i.e. in relation to her animus. Typically the hurt results in severe depression.

2. An often unconscious tendency to continue identifying either her partner or her animus with 'Orpheus'; the corollary of this is a readiness to surrender to a depression suggestive of the situation of 'Eurydice'. This willingness to remain in a depression differs from behaviour conditioned by identification with other figures of abandonment (e.g. Ariadne, Dido).
3. A periodic sense of (compensatory?) outrage occasioned not only by her partner's betrayal, but also by what he has done to her. This is often expressed as a fierce determination not to allow herself to be crushed by his behaviour.
4. An instinctive belief in her own resilience, i.e. her ability to get herself out of her 'underworld'. This is usually expressed as a firm resolve to reconnect with and reaffirm her own specific identity.
5. The use of her own creativity (writing, painting, etc.) not only to help her process her experience, but also, as a result, to deepen her understanding of her own identity.

At the centre of both the Orpheus complex and the Eurydice complex is a sense of paralyzing loss. It is interesting to note, however, that while many recent adaptations by men still end with either the literal or metaphorical 'death' of Orpheus (e.g. Birtwistle 1986; Brown 1995), adaptations by women writers suggest that 'Eurydice' is determined not to be crushed by her predicament.

Eurydice on the operating table

What does a woman do who *will be* a poet?

Those from whom you stand to learn the most also destroy you.

(Rachel Blau DuPlessis 1990)

Kathy Acker (1948–1997) died before her fiftieth birthday. She was an American who spent much of her life abroad, including both London and Paris. She has been described as one of the most representative writers of both 'punk culture' and 'postmodernism'. 'It's necessary to go to as many extremes as possible', she wrote. And she did. Her works are often concerned with sex, including all kinds of sexually transmitted disease, and with violence, including the gamut of violence that can be – and *is* – inflicted on the female body, whether by way of self-inflicted abuse by drugs or abuse inflicted by different types of men or 'others'. They give a powerful 'in your face' expression of dilemmas confronting women in the modern world. And they were widely praised, including by writers as different as William Burroughs and Peter Ackroyd.

In spite of the often shocking nature of her work, it is often playful, both in the sense that it delights in overturning conventions as well as in the sense that

she uses 'play' to neutralize the frustration arising from the anxiety of influence, that debilitating sense that the artist is condemned to adaptation, parody, and collage. In this, she reminds one of another avant-garde writer fascinated by the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, Jack Spicer (1960–1961): revealingly, both admired Rimbaud.

In the last year of her life, when she knew she was dying of cancer, she wrote a short story called *Eurydice in the Underworld*. It is almost painfully autobiographical. And yet, like all her work, it is deeply self-conscious: it makes casual reference both to literary stereotypes and to literary history. She was deeply aware that her story belongs within a 'tradition' of adaptations of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice by women writers and, indeed, it makes a disturbingly original contribution to this tradition. For it not only ascribes Orpheus with a significantly different motive from previous renderings, but also invests the underworld with significantly different implications.

The story/play begins with YOU (Eurydice) sitting on a bed soon after an operation for breast cancer. She feels violently sick and OR (Orpheus) cannot understand how he can help her. Two days later, her doctor tells her that her condition is not good. Back home, she tries to ward off her panic the only way she knows how ('If we keep on fucking, I'm not gonna die'). Then comes a description of the conversation during the preceding operation. The ensuing 'Diary written by Eurydice when she's dead' is a dream-sequence which makes reference to an early Orphic text, to key events in the life of the Russian poet Tsvetaeva, and to *Jane Eyre*. Its theme is the tension between the demands of reality (represented by a bank loan) and the urgent need to 'perceive by feeling'. Next a letter by Orpheus (found after *his* death), tells 'E' that she's not the girl he wants. She replies that she was never able to bear the split created by having to conform to his exclusive reality and feeling lonely in hers, which he couldn't understand. Following his return to the realm of the living, Orpheus announces that he hated 'being down there'. The last line is: 'I've returned back here. I'm glad that I met U because now I know I can love again.'

Eurydice in the Underworld juggles with genres (drama, poetry, diary) and with plot (the section entitled 'Eurydice's Monologue' consists of a song by *Orpheus*). It plays both with orders of reality and with the chronological sequence of events. It rejects a conventional narrative line which insists that events follow one another in chronological sequence. And it presents exactly the same problem as Henry Sayre identified in relation to one of Acker's previous novels. One is never sure of the status of the persona (the 'I') in the text:

Who is this 'I'? What does she want? If these are fantasies, what kind of psyche do they depict? If they are realities, what kind of world?

(Sayre 1989, p. 81)

As in *Deconstructing Harry*, the ambiguity of both the narrative and the identity of the persona at any given moment makes it difficult to distinguish clearly between 'fantasy' and 'reality'. The densest writing appears in the 'Diary written by Eurydice when she's dead', which consists of a succession of dream-like scenes or reflections, each of which deserves extensive analysis. For

each of its interrelated scenes – as in Woody Allen’s film – may be read as an amplification of the situation confronting the main protagonist in the ‘main plot’.

Eurydice in the Underworld invites at least three complementary readings. First, there is the story about the horrors of terminal cancer with which Kathy Acker was wrestling at the time of writing. The surreal and the kitsch are combined in the description of the pain that Eurydice feels on learning not only that her body is being ravaged by cancer but also that Orpheus does not truly love her. Pluto is the cancer that threatens to snatch her from Orpheus and Hell is both the death that awaits her and the pain of knowing that Orpheus does not want her. In death (which is also a ‘dream’ occasioned by intuitions of imminent death), she remembers how she was torn between longing to be both *part of* and *apart from* the consumerist society that alienated her, and her desire both to surrender to the world of Orpheus and to retain her own identity. The operating table is a loaded metaphor. Instead of rising from it healed, the failure of the operation means that she has to face the horror of death, which is eternal aloneness.

Secondly, there is the ambivalence implicit in the final lines. Orpheus is pitiful in his self-centredness; Eurydice, in hers. *Her* reality is hell to him; *his* reality is hell to her. That the final lines are given to Orpheus is of course deeply ironic, even bitter: her Orpheus isn’t even a true Orpheus: he wants to love again. Eurydice dies from cancer; Orpheus is metaphorically dead to her (both because to the dead, the living are ‘dead’ and because he is *not* Orpheus, who is defined by eternal love for Eurydice).

But the story is also affirmative. For the song given to ORPHEUS, with its echoes of Rilke and T. S. Eliot, can also be read as a projection of a *woman’s* thoughts. ‘Actually’, Orpheus says, ‘I’m a woman’. In other words, Orpheus, who is the speaker of the last sentence (‘I’m glad that I met U because now I know I can love again’) is *also* Eurydice. In other words, the text reflects the fact that in adaptations of the myth by women Orpheus is always an animus-figure and the animus represents an aspect of female psychology. According to Jung, the animus can also chain a woman to her own constraining thoughts. Thus by freeing Orpheus so that he can love again, Eurydice also releases herself from a form of animus possession that is the counterpart of the anima possession from which Orpheus suffers in male adaptations of the myth. In other words, she frees herself from the mythic pattern that had threatened to engulf her.

And thirdly, there is an archetypal myth about the need to confront the dilemma that faces a creative woman. Eurydice’s imminent death allows her to understand that what separates her from life is inherent to her vocation as a poet: the combination of feeling that she is excluded from the ‘world’ of Orpheus and feeling lonely in her own ‘world’ have literally ravaged her. And yet she clings to a belief in the value of her own reality, of a poetic instinct richer than the merely physical reality of the body. Poetry, she insists, is ‘a physical phenomenon’. It is the struggle against that with which she must

struggle (the temptation to make a ‘U-turn’ even in her desire) and the acceptance of that which she must accept if she is to become the individual she is. In other words, it reapplies to Eurydice what Maurice Blanchot (to whom Acker refers) affirms about Orpheus (1955). Her art is born from her determination to face the ‘unknown’.

Kathy Acker offers a very ‘personal’ adaptation of the tradition begun by H.D. In her work, Eurydice’s consciousness of the damage done to her by her partner’s ‘Orpheus complex’ plays a considerably smaller part than it does in poems by H.D., Muriel Rukeyser, and Margaret Atwood. Its main concern is with coming to terms with the sense of her life as a writer even as terminal cancer stares her in the face. It is the knowledge that the death in question was not a metaphor, but literal, that marks her adaptation of the myth of Eurydice and Orpheus as distinct.

Even so, perhaps the only truth of literature is that *the audience learns more than Oedipus*. The reader is always able to learn more than the protagonist. Because ‘Eurydice in the Underworld’ is a text, for the reader even ‘death from breast cancer’ functions as a metaphor for the ultimate challenge facing any creative woman writer: to discover the forms by which to express what she and only she can say. In this sense, Eurydice’s acceptance of death – the ultimate ‘unknown’ – symbolizes the value with which Acker invested not only her identity as a woman, but also her own creative life.

Conclusion: Orpheus and Eurydice today

Myths exercise the fascination they do because they express ‘typical situations’ in which people continue to find themselves. Ever since the Romantic period, the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice has provided a vehicle for the exploration of the shattering experience of ‘losing’ one’s partner. The late twentieth century has seen a marked increase in the number of break-ups and divorces. Might this explain why the basic sequence of events associated with this myth has attracted so many adaptations in the last fifty years?

Every age produces adaptations pertinent to its own concerns. It is too early to say whether either of our texts will survive as classic examples of their own genre. What is certain is that they provide strikingly individual adaptations of ‘a mythological and a psychological motif simultaneously’. They each contribute important metaphors to the ongoing evolution of this mythic pattern or should we say *two* mythic patterns? And each of the ‘texts’ we have looked at also represents an individual *variant* of two specific, highly charged and frequently encountered dilemmas. I have defined these as the ‘Orpheus complex’ and the ‘Eurydice complex’ respectively.

Neither a myth nor a complex is ever fixed. Both are involved in a slow but gradual evolution whose stages depend on the ability of individuals to integrate their respective concerns. The two ‘texts’ chosen as examples in this article do not have an equivalent significance. *Deconstructing Harry* might be described

as a 'classic' example of an Orpheus complex. At the end, Harry Block is caught in an impasse that he *cannot* resolve. In contrast, although Eurydice, in Kathy Acker's short story, remains in the underworld, she *refuses* identification with her 'classical' original. The implications of the mythic pattern have been largely integrated. Our two examples thus belong to *different* stages in their respective integration.

Possibly the most arresting implication of our analyses is that not only both of the *mythic patterns*, but also both of the *complexes* associated with them, appear to be in process of reformulation, i.e. about to enter a new phase.

It is half a century since Caroline Gordon (1944) and Muriel Rukeyser (1951) described 'Eurydice' in the process of coming to terms with the hurt inflicted on her by her partner's betrayal. In both their adaptations, Eurydice confronts her pain. She is ceasing to identify with Eurydice. She is resilient. She is ready to face the future. She wants to resume her own specific identity. At the end of Kathy Acker's short story, which develops this tradition, Eurydice has no wish that her partner should play the role of Orpheus. By liberating him so that *he* can love again, she frees herself from identification with Eurydice. And this, in turn, not only frees her from the tendency to live out the consequences of the mythic pattern with which she has equated her experience, but also from the depression into which it has led her.

As soon as women who experience a depression occasioned by abandonment reject any tendency to identify their ex-partner with 'Orpheus', they will no longer have any reason to identify with Eurydice. Acker may have died, but her readers absorb the implication of her work. Women need never allow themselves to become even the temporary victims of a tendency to identify a partner or ex-partner with Orpheus. If and when this realization becomes more widely integrated, women writers will cease to have any reason to associate the experience of losing a partner with that of Eurydice. The myth will no longer have any resonance for them.

In contrast, at the end of *Deconstructing Harry* the protagonist is still in an impasse. After returning from 'hell', he clings to the past. He is afraid of the future. He has no resilience. He is still 'Orpheus'. He is still mistaking his charm for 'emotional intelligence' and the intensity of his desire for 'love'. He is still in thrall to a mythic pattern that is also a psychological complex. He is not yet free to become the specific individual he is.

We have already noted, however, that *Deconstructing Harry* is not typical of the latest developments in the evolution of this mythic pattern. There are signs that writers are beginning to explore not only why Orpheus finds it so difficult to let go of Eurydice, but what he must do if he is to overcome this tendency and move on in his life. Possibly the most persuasive example of this development is provided by Peter Howitt's film *Sliding Doors* (1998). At the end, Gerry (who can be identified with Orpheus) has to face the fact that he has lost Helen (i.e. Eurydice), and this frees him to get together with Lydia who is carrying his child.

Just as women writers began to do long before them, male writers are at last preparing the way for Orpheus to resolve the ‘complex’ that has imprisoned him for two and a half thousand years. If and when this tendency is taken further, it will of course signal the start of a radically new phase not only in the evolution of the mythic pattern, but also in the integration of an Orpheus complex.

TRANSLATIONS OF ABSTRACT

L’auteur s’interroge dans cet article sur la dynamique psychologique qui apparaît dans deux adaptations différentes du mythe d’Orphée et d’Euridyce, toutes les deux sorties en 1997. La première est l’oeuvre d’un *homme*: ‘Deconstructing Harry’ (*Harry dans tous ses états*) de Woody Allen. La deuxième est celle d’une *femme*: ‘Euridyce in the underworld’ (non traduit en français), qui est une histoire courte écrite par Kathy Acker pendant la dernière année de sa vie.

Dans cet article l’auteur pense qu’il est possible de considérer qu’il n’y a que quatre ‘événements incontournables’ dans la structure du mythe d’Orphée et d’Euridyce. Il définit le ‘modèle mythique’ constitué par ces événements et l’ordre dans lequel ils apparaissent et représentent l’expérience de la perte, d’un appel ardent inconscient, de la dépression et de l’inflation psychologique. Il avance que le film est une expression du ‘complexe d’Orphée’ et l’histoire courte celle du ‘complexe d’Euridyce’, et aussi qu’il existe possiblement une raison pour cet intérêt redondant pour ce mythe tout au long du vingtième siècle. Bien que cette étude montre que les femmes semblent trouver plus facile de se libérer d’une identification avec le modèle mythique, elle permet aussi de penser que les hommes sont peut-être sur le point d’en faire autant.

Diese Arbeit untersucht die möglichen psychologischen Implikationen zweier Adaptationen des Mythos von Orpheus und Eurydike, die beide 1997 fertiggestellt wurden. Die erste stammt von einem Mann: “Deconstructing Harry”, ein Film von Woody Allen. Die zweite ist von einer Frau: “Eurydike in der Unterwelt”, eine Kurzgeschichte, die von Kathy Acker in ihrem letzten Lebensjahr verfaßt wurde. In der Arbeit wird argumentiert, daß es lediglich vier “notwendige Ereignisse” im Mythos von Orpheus und Eurydike gibt. In der Arbeit wird die Folge dieser Ereignisse als “mythisches Muster” definiert, das die Erfahrung von Verlust, unbewußtem Sehnen, Depression und psychischer Inflation darstellt. Der Film wird als Ausdruck eines “Orpheus-Komplexes” untersucht, die Kurzgeschichte als Ausdruck eines “Eurydike-Komplexes”. Die Arbeit schlägt einen möglichen Grund für das im 20. Jahrhundert anhaltende Interesse an diesem Mythos vor. Obgleich bemerkt wird, daß Frauen es einfacher zu finden scheinen sich von der Identifizierung mit dem mythischen Muster zu lösen, werden auch Gründe angegeben für die Annahme, daß Männer dabei sein könnten, dasselbe zu tun.

Questo lavoro esamina le possibili implicazioni psicologiche di due adattamenti del mito di Orfeo e Euridice, entrambe apparse nel 1997. Il primo è di un uomo: “Harry a

pezzi”, un film di Woody Allen. Il secondo è di una donna: “Euridice agli Inferi”, una breve storia scritta da Kathy Acker nell’ultimo anno di vita. Nel lavoro si sostiene che nel mito di Orfeo ed Euridice esistono solo quattro “eventi necessari”. Definisce la sequenza di tali eventi come un modello mitico che rappresenta l’esperienza della perdita, della bramosia inconscia, della depressione e dell’inflazione psicologica. Il film viene esaminato come espressione del complesso di Orfeo e la storia come espressione del complesso di Euridice. Il lavoro suggerisce un possibile motivo per la persistenza di interesse nel mito attraverso tutto il XX secolo. Sebbene rilevi che alle donne sembra essere più facile liberarsi dall’identificazione con il modello mitico, fornisce inoltre ragioni per pensare che forse anche gli uomini stanno per fare la stessa cosa.

Este trabajo examina las posibles implicaciones psicológicas de dos adaptaciones de los mitos de Orfeo y Euridice, ambos se completaron en 1997. El primero es obra de un hombre ‘Deconstruyendo a Harry’, una película de Woody Allen. El segundo es obra de una mujer: ‘Euridice en el Inframundo’, un cuento corto escrito por Kathy Acker en el último año de su vida.

El trabajo argumenta que hay solo cuatro ‘eventos necesarios’ en el mito de Orfeo Euridice. Estos definen la secuencia de estos eventos como el ‘patrón mítico’ que representa la experiencia de pérdida, deseo inconsciente, depresión et inflación psíquica. El film es examinado como una expresión de un ‘Complejo de Orfeo’ el cuento corto como la expresión de un ‘Complejo de Euridice’. En el trabajo se sugiere una posible razón para la persistencia del interés en este mito a través del siglo veinte. Aún cuando se indica que las mujeres parecen liberarse mas fácilmente de la identificación con el patrón mítico, también provee razones para pensar que en los hombres puede ocurrir lo mismo.

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