

## Orpheus and Eurydice: a creative agony

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*Abstract:* The archaic story of the Thracian musician Orpheus and his bride Eurydice is heard first as an ancient myth of marriage and death, wedding and separation. The mixture of expectation and dread in its sentiments is sounded still today in the contemporary wedding songs and funeral laments of the Mediterranean and the Balkans. Similar sequences of engagement and withdrawal, ascent and descent, change and metamorphosis are found in the adventures and vicissitudes of other mythic figures. Its premise of the soul's transmigration and its promise of psychic transformation inspired the religious ruminations and philosophic speculation of many centuries.

The shifting keys in the songs of Orpheus and the cries of Eurydice score the shocking emotions of epiphanal moments, the creative 'agon', and a depth psychological passage. With its crescendos and denouements, the Orpheus/Eurydice phenomenon suggests the range of experience as one both engages reality and reaches toward meaning.

*Key words:* creative, death, descent, dismemberment, marriage, music, process, shamanic, transformation.

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The lyre of Orpheus is the entrance to the underworld.

E. T. A. Hoffmann

### The overture: ancient notes

In wild Thrace, frenzied women once dismembered a musician.

Even before 600 BC, many viewed Thrace as a likely place for such an outrage. Poised between Medea's Caucasus and Athena's polis, the shamans' steppes and Apollo's Delphi (between what is now Turkey and Greece, and not so far from the modern-day Balkans) Thrace gave birth to a disturbing and creative god, the disorienting Dionysus. In such a place, both Muses and Maenads might be met and confronted.

A 'generation before Homer', Orpheus was conceived and born in Thrace. An heir to its king, and a devotee of the native god Dionysus, he led the descent to worship Dionysus-Zagreus, daimon of creative ecstasies and mysteries. But as son of the musical muse Calliope, he was gifted with Apollo's own lyre. His

music charmed men, enchanted animals, and stirred the air. Converted to Apollonian worship, he ascended the mountain each morning to play and sing paeans to the shining god who presided at the luminous moment of sunrise (Eliade 1982, pp. 180–5).

And then he found – and then he lost – his only love, Eurydice. Nearly three thousand years ago, Orpheus' songs mingled with his lost bride's cries. Their voices resounded through the ancient world and were echoed in many cultures. Lyrical accounts of their unchosen fate and chosen destiny sounded the hopes and despairs of archaic times, when raw emotion was closer to its natural source, when the most searing of human tendencies were figured as divine (Jaynes 1982).

The dramatic turns of their tragic marriage depict the multiple levels of intense engagement: first in love, and then in loss. Orpheus' transcendent passion and transcending pilgrimage in search of Eurydice evoked the mystery and mana – the 'mysterious overplus' – that inspired classical religious tablets, philosophic tracts, and hermetic texts. With its peak moments, dreadful falls, and tragic consequences, the fate of Orpheus and his wife Eurydice continued to be told through the verses of our poets and sung in the arias of our operas (Dawson 2000).

The myth's leitmotifs reverberate in the notes of history, the chants of spiritual seekers and the intense pitches of artistic endeavour. And they sound still through the peoples of its native regions. In the expressive cultures of the Balkans and the Mediterranean, similar yet fresh responses to love and death may yet be heard in the solo notes of simple daily rites, and the choral keening in the rituals of great moment.

They resound as well in many of us, in those instances when emotion is not muted or silenced: in the disquieting rites of the living and the alarms that the wakeful sleeping hear in their dreams.

### **The theme is sounded**

As a musician, Orpheus traversed the ancient world. While even Odysseus, the sea-faring warrior, was bound to the mast to resist the Sirens' song, Orpheus' compelling voice, his only weapon, protected sailors from shipwreck on the seductive sisters' treacherous shores. When on land, playing like Apollo himself, his music charmed animals and birds, and so touched trees and rocks that they uprooted themselves to follow his melodies. They say, still today in Thrace, that 'mountain oaks stand in the pattern of his dance, as he left them.' (Graves 1960, p. III, n. 113)

Betrothed to Eurydice, he was to settle after his marriage in his native land. But his anticipated wedding, rather than a union, was to be the first violent separation. On their nuptial day, the bardic bridegroom noticed his wife's absence. A snake she stepped on – or the brute rapist Aristaeus – ended their marriage and her life.

A modern poet, Seamus Heaney, translates Ovid's telling of the tale:

Orpheus called for Hymen and Hymen came  
Robed in saffron like a saffron flame  
Leaping across tremendous airy zones  
To reach the land of the Ciconians.  
So Hymen did attend the rites, but no  
Auspicious outcome was to come of that.  
Instead, the torch he carried smoked and spat  
And no matter how he fanned it wouldn't flare.  
His eyes kept watering. And a worse disaster  
Than could have been predicted came to pass  
For as the bride went roaming through the grass  
With all her naiads round her, she fell down.  
A snake had bit her ankle. She was gone.

(Hoffman & Lasdun 1997, p. 222)

By the time the musician, her new husband, found her mute body still and silent on the ground, Eurydice's soul was gone, into the restless rest of the underworld. The joyous notes of the nuptial songs broke into a dirge. 'The wedding abruptly turned to a wake. Orpheus, the bridegroom, all but out of his mind with grief, went into mourning' (Slavitt 1994, p. 195).

While such motifs are seemingly the stuff of acute crisis, mythic imagination, or epic drama, their resonance is expressed in the ordinary and common emotions of current customs. These then allow more immediate access to the reverberating human passions expressed in mythic forms.

In many parts of the world, there are wedding-wakes and nuptial-funerals. Still today, 'the analogy between death and marriage is well developed in ritual and folk song throughout the Balkans and particularly so in the long tradition of Greek funeral laments' (Danforth 1982, p. 75). The lamentations of funerals and the songs of rural Greek weddings dwell equally on the distress of separation. Their elaborate ceremonials of passage are so similar in content that they may be distinguished only by their social context.

These two categories of songs resemble each other with regard to their musical form, their narrative structure, and their iconography. So close is this resemblance that many songs can be sung at both death rites and weddings. Of such a song it is said: 'you can sing it as a funeral lament and you can also sing it as a wedding song.'

(Danforth 1982, p. 74)

Such a mix is familiar, too, in the psychological passages of an analytic process. Entry into a new phase of realization, and even into the celebration of a new, longed-for embodiment, comes also as an ending, with a sense of death, a surrender of what was before. Dislocation, separation, mortification mark new union, as if not only does nature demand a death, but also that psyche requires a demise.

A widowed woman in a new relationship dreamt that she was in the bedroom she shared with her lover, before their wedding was to take place. Two widowed cousins showed her that next to the nuptial bed there was a coffin. They urged her not to forget that while becoming a wife, she would still be a widow. This reminded her that while she celebrated her new intimacy, she feared the loss of, and separation from, the individuality she had achieved while being alone.

And indeed, in the myth, Eurydice does not enter Orpheus' bed, but rather is thrust into the halls of Hades. Her transition from girl to wife is a wedding-funeral, her honeymoon an abduction. As a willing bride, she becomes an unwilling bridesmaid to another maiden Persephone, who herself was kidnapped from her mother by Hades, an underworld bridegroom from an unreachable realm.

A woman's wedding, like her funeral, is for parents and relatives a sad occasion at which her departure evokes the expression of grief. The emotional power of this separation and the psychological distance it introduces between mother and daughter are great, whether the daughter is moving only a few hundred yards away, to the other side of her village, or whether she is leaving her village, and Greece as well, for the United States or Australia.

(Danforth 1982, p. 75)

In their archaic story, rather than go forth together on a journey, Eurydice and Orpheus were set on different paths. Each went alone into an exile: Eurydice was called to the realm ruled by death. Orpheus, 'uncalled', was left behind on the living side of mortality's threshold.

In rural parts of contemporary Greece, the dirges of the bereaved decry that in death, the deceased cannot speak. Nonetheless, the dead are imagined to sustain their relationships with their intimates. Expected to give proof of their souls' ongoing existence, their appearance is anticipated in dreams, 'a channel through which the dead are believed to be able to communicate with the living' (Danforth 1982, p. 135).

In accepted custom, one year after a death, the living reach, so to speak, beneath the earth and beyond life by entering their kin's grave and exhuming the body of the deceased. With lamenting and keening, the bones of the beloved are taken from the earth and added to the village ossuary. 'The exhumation ... is an attempted resurrection', for without exhumation, 'the final obligation' of the living, their dead will not retain an individual identity in the after life (Danforth 1982, p. 134).

Against this historical background, Orpheus' unnatural underworld entry may be heard as a mythic approximation of a wrenching, 'close to the bone', harrowing but human custom. It is also recognizable as a psychic experience, when the energy of the living seems to follow the dead; when within the psyche, there is tension between one's desire for inertia and desire for re-engagement.

As a mythic figure, Orpheus attempted more: a self-willed journey as a living man not only into the grave, but also beyond it into the Hades of the

dead. Besotted with grief, Orpheus followed his bride to the forbidding place that was forbidden to him as a still living man. Distraught by Eurydice's absence, he was compelled to seek her presence in the place of dread.

Other mythic figures have been said to cross into the underworld. In neighbouring Sumeria the goddess Innana was released by her lover Dumuzi's devoted descent. The Egyptian god-hero Horus went beneath the world to rouse the murdered Osiris. The Egyptian Anubis and the Greek psychopomp Hermes led and guided souls into and through the underworld. The wanderer Odysseus ventured to its edge and saw his deceased mother.

In the North African tale of Psyche and Eros, the human Psyche struggled to reunite with her mysterious husband, the god Eros, by obeying an angry and jealous Aphrodite's demand that she cross the Styx, river of death, to purloin Persephone's beauty box. When overwhelmed by her task, Eros himself entered the unerotic underworld to rescue and raise her to Olympus.

These attest to the different circumstance in which one senses the withdrawal from one's earthed reality to follow after a familiar energy that seems suddenly to disappear. In his self-appointed crossing, the human man Orpheus was like those few other mortal lovers who dared such a descent: Innana's devoted Dumuzi; the cranky swain of the 16th century Chinese folk opera, *The Peony Pavilion*; the princely lover in *Giselle*. Like them, he willingly pursued his longing into the dark halls of death, and so transgressed the existential boundary all humankind sought to avoid that he might resurrect his beloved.

But, different from these others, Orpheus was an artist. His 'nekyia' has special reference to the creative process. The epic poets Virgil and Dante imaginatively followed his forbidding route. Centuries later Rilke found his words through him.

Orpheus lost his beloved, but kept his voice. His melodies inspired composers' arias (Dawson 2000) even as his songs of celebration changed to minor key, soulful and sorrowful. Just as they forged his way in the world, they gained him illicit entry into the underworld, as his lover's croon slid into an elegy so haunting that it silenced even Cerberus, guard beast of the dark, one-way crossing. Even the infernal deities who kept the dead starved for life and parched for vital waters seemed moved by Orpheus' mournful melody. But were they? It seemed, too, that sympathy, so unseemly in this unmoving land, moved them. Eurydice was allowed to follow the lead of his music. Orpheus was granted permission to claim his wife? Or was he?

As the tale came to be told, a famous condition was imposed: Orpheus was not to look at Eurydice following him.

### A grave place

But when Orpheus ascended into Apollo's solar brilliance, he looked back while his wife, steps behind, belonged still to Hades. Unlike the dead, he quit

the underworld and then turned around, only to see his bride flutter like the smoke of the sputtering bridal torch; only to watch while her tangible form returned to the intangible shades.

Orpheus lost his wife a second time. At his famed 'fatal gaze', Eurydice was swallowed by death's jaws, sating the appetite of a hell starved of life, and leaving Orpheus in a life starved of vitality.

Wife's double death stuns Orpheus like  
 Man scared by three-necked dog Cerberus:  
 Loses fear only after he loses nature,  
 Turning stone

(Boer 1989, p. 208)

Orpheus' gaze was the fatal glance.

From the perspective of the living, Eurydice's visage as a shade might have been too ghostly for a lover to keep Eros in his eyes. Once in the light of the living, Orpheus might see the face of death on his resurrected bride, now a loathly damsel (Zabriskie, P. T. 1979).

But at such a threshold, it must have been more than a lover's ambivalence or change of heart, thoughtlessness or second thoughts that left Eurydice behind.

Only the dead would know the rules of death. With the other-worldly knowledge of those who had no exit, and whose fate was sealed, they would know that a living man could not obey their order, that Orpheus could not understand, and so would not remember their condition once out from their gloom. Eyes wide shut to the world would foresee that a vital artist could not restrict his vision to obey those with no far-reaching sight.

The forever dead for whom it would be futile to look back also knew that one of their own would not return to a future that had a past. In Eurydice's darker view, an earthly marriage to Orpheus might be as great a disintegration of maidenhood as her downward detour from the nuptial chamber.

A common fear was shown in the dream of a young woman on the eve of her marriage. She was with a beloved godmother who had become an unkempt hag in an unhappy marriage. They both watched in horror as the bride's teeth fell from her mouth. While consciously joyous, this woman's unconscious carried being a bride as becoming a crone. Hidden in the anticipation of marriage was the sense of death – not only as a maiden, but also as one who, through committing unto death, was bringing it into view.

From her lower angle on the other side, did Eurydice see the shock in her beloved's look? Through his sight, did she see the difference between her dead self and the mortals who had yet to die. Seeing herself as dead in his eyes, did she will herself more deeply into death.

In the nadir of alienation from life, she might long for the distance of encompassing darkness. After being amidst the dead, how could she live among those who had not died. In rendering herself invisible to the living, she would be more visible to the spirits.

These questions touch on crucial motifs in both the artistic and psychic life. They emerge from the essence of the myth, its reference to creativity, its relation to psyche, and its function as mystery.

By bringing form from the formless, sound from silence, the visible from the invisible, and reality from the void, the making of art and the articulations of psyche are felt participations in the work of creation. For the ancients, humans called down the gods by giving them voice and sight. The divine could be heard and seen when creative craftsmen and artists assigned them shape and sound, and so brought them into light or hearing. By so doing, their work was both creative and transgressive, revealing and bringing the eternal into space and time, the empty or potential into reality.

Vision and sound – to see and hear as subject and be seen and heard as object – was not perceived as always benevolent. As is clear in Ovid's collection of the myths and classical stories of metamorphoses (Slavitt 1994), to receive a god's gaze, to be noticed or heard by divinities, created dangerous attractions with dread consequences: loss of human form and definition; change into unsought and unrecognizable shapes, dismemberment and disappearance. Conversely, to see the gods and goddesses, to hear divine or demonic voices, often brought punishment: blindness, madness, shipwreck and fragmentation. Most potently, the gods could make humans disappear by changing the very mode of their existence, sending them to Hades, the void or empty place, the *a vides* or invisible (Bonney 1991, vol. 1, p. 199).

The artist could also change the course of things by hiding, concealing, switching forms and shifting shapes, making invisible. Odysseus duped the Trojans by hiding the Greek forces in a horse carved of wood. Daedalus tricked nature by concealing Pasiphae within the form of a cow; she mated with a bull and gave birth to the Minotaur. The monstrous mating of human and animal; the careless contacts the gods made with humans; the unnatural meeting of the living and the dead, all had the same annihilating and dread effect.

Greek thought included developed ideas on the consequences of artistry, perceiving creative work as an intersection of gods and humans. Especially as Orpheus played a god's lyre, he would make manifest the ancients' fantasies of the price of extraordinary or 'divine' talent. The sudden, shocking, and poignant meetings and partings between living Orpheus and dead Eurydice may then be seen as mythic renditions of both artistic and analytic endeavour, illustrative renderings of the all too familiar dilemmas intrinsic to both creative process and psychic passage.

As long as the work is vital, as long as there are sentiments to be explored, the noting of what exists behind and out of sight, beyond and out of hearing is crucial. The artist is forever attending to the intangible and inaudible to render and make perceptible. How then could Orpheus, as an artist, follow the underworld's constrictions?

But also, as a soul, Eurydice could not be fully embodied. Her full essence vaporizes as she emerges to earth. Certainly, in creative work, the intensity of

internal conception are never realized enough to make them fully perceptible in the world. Rather, just as they become manifest form, there comes a searing sense of loss that the ideal perfection is never completely embodied. Once the image from the mind's eye is drawn, once the piece is composed and played, the artist is aware of what the translation has left behind.

There are similar crossings in psychic life. As long as an individual lives with a sense of on-going process, there are always potentials to be actualized, conceptions to be realized in the future. Limited by one's body, personality, and character one may move with and toward soul, yet know one is unable to express the soul itself. Paradoxically, each venture into incarnated reality brings a felt and suffered sense of separate confinement, apart from the soul's boundlessness.

### **Agitation and release**

For his part in Eurydice's disappearance, the inconsolable Orpheus' songs were no longer of sorrow but of despair. Like Persephone he returned to the upper world, but not for six-month sojourns. Instead, until his own death snuffed out his life just as Eurydice's demise extinguished his passions, he remained alone. Alienated from the living, in his longing for Eurydice, he shared her isolation.

Like Aphrodite's acolyte, the sculptor Pygmalion, Orpheus rejected all women. But as a devotee of Apollo, and as a musician, he produced no gorgeous statuary, no Galataea to be brought to life from stone.

Like Narcissus, Orpheus suffered no women to touch him. But while Narcissus was transfixed by his own reflection, and rejected both male and female, Orpheus did not gaze at himself, nor was Eurydice an Echo. One legend tells that while Orpheus stayed apart from the risks of love with women, he received young men. But in his coldness, he returned neither affection nor embrace. His heart frozen, Orpheus retreated into the icy solitudes of Thrace to sing, to play, and to wait out his time.

Yet even the gloomy strains of his laments continued to haunt and charm nature and culture.

Only one group, the Maenads, refused to be enraptured. Rather, they were enraged by the purity of Orpheus' sound, a reminder of his dismissal of their lust. If his body would not sate theirs, these thirsting women would not be soothed with his song. One unharmonious day, after a nocturnal orgy honouring Dionysus, the scorned women blew brassy horns, drowning out his songs. Unappeased, the harpies screeched a shrill, staccato cry as they wreaked their revenge. With horrifying cacophony, they tore him to pieces, madly scattering his limbs and bones.

Why were they so punitive? Was it in the name of Dionysus, whose demands for ecstatic incarnation Orpheus rejected as he chose art and asceticism? Was it because he never looked back to Dionysus once he ascended the mountain



for sunrise purification and praise in his worship of Apollo. He utterly deserted the *daimon* of *orgia*, Dionysus-Zagreus, who, while hailed by the Maenads, did not escape their tearing arms. While the former disciple turned away from his devotion, he would not escape the cult's dismemberment.

Was the source of their fury Orpheus' refusal to glance their way, rendering them invisible to him? Certainly they revenged Orpheus' withholding from women since the wedding day death of his wife.

Perhaps the Maenads' rage was on behalf of Eurydice, the bride who died the day she became Orpheus' wife. Were they disgusted that his anxious need to see her made her forever invisible?

Or were they angered that his morbidity did not allow Eurydice her full rest? Still in rural Greece, the bones of one who has been dead for a year are transferred to a collective storehouse. The person's individual reality is then imagined to blend into the impersonal stream of life and death. The mourners no longer visit the graves each day to keen their laments. No longer do the living await the dead in their dreams. While holding the deceased dearly in memory, the living return into life and the individual soul of the deceased one rests in peace.

But having been among the dead, Orpheus had never fully returned. His lingering in on-going grief kept both lovers suspended between life and death.

His awful end was not Orpheus' first knowledge of dismemberment. He had visited Egypt, land of dismembered Osiris. He had also met other dismembering women. On board the *Argo* while Jason searched for the Golden Fleece, the musician's soaring notes had calmed the winds and soothed the storms of the sea. It was thanks to his musical magic that the ship reached Colchis, the Black Sea kingdom of Medea.

Like the Maenads, Medea dismembered those she left behind; those she betrayed and those who betrayed her; those to whom she gave birth. To the Greeks she was a murderess. But in her own culture as a shamaness and healer, Medea also re-membered those who had been broken, presiding over the mystery of rebirth by rejoining their limbs in her magic cauldron.

In mournful counterpoint to the Maenads, the Muses retrieved and re-gathered Orpheus' pieces. Once these inspiring aunts, sisters of his mother, had taught him to play Apollo's lyre. Now, they wept over their nephew's parts. But like the Egyptian Isis who rejoined her husband's limbs and severed head, they could not bring him back to life nor into harmony. As Isis' tears swelled the tides of the Nile, the Muses' tears of lament dampened Orpheus' drying flesh, moistened his desiccated bones, and swelled the hissing rivers that carried away his thirsting, severed head.

Still today, women in Thrace 'pour water on the ground whenever a funeral procession passes their houses... in order to quench the thirst of the souls of the dead and for the dead to drink' (Danforth 1982, p. 107).

Orpheus' head was retrieved on the island of Lesbos. Meanwhile, in the marriage hall of Persephone and Hades, Orpheus' soul moved to the

long-awaited union with Eurydice that had been denied them in life. Now no longer in the contaminating contact between the living and dead,

Orpheus-ghost underground recognizes places  
 Seen before: searches Fields of the Blessed & finds  
 Eurydice: eager embraces; they walk there now stepping together: or he follows her;  
 or she  
 Follows him with Orpheus looking back at her safely.

(Boer 1989, p. 230)

### The mythic crescendo

It is tempting to hear mythic narratives as renditions of personal lives. With echoes of Orpheus' lyre and Eurydice's weeping in our psychic ears and creative compositions, it is tempting to listen to their resonances as human biographies. We superimpose the disharmonies of Orpheus' fate onto Mozart's dissociations and diseases, Chopin's consumptions, distraught Schumann, mad Schubert, overdosed Hendrix, the felled John Lennon, and Jung's 'psychotic interval'.

Eurydice is then conflated with Hamlet's Ophelia, Othello's Desdemona, Rodin's Camille Claudel, dapper Fitzgerald's wild Zelda. She is courageous Frieda Kalho, despite her crucified body and constant pain, with Diego Rivera; mad Viv committed by T. S. Eliot or Emily Hale discarded by him. She is one of Picasso's passing fancies or of Warhol's crazy ladies. She is Ted Hughes's Sylvia Plath, trapped in a bell jar; she is Arthur Miller's Marilyn Monroe after her fall. She is Christiana Morgan, Henry Murray's distraught lover whose youthful visions were plumbed by Jung (Jung 1997). But from a depth perspective, mythic figures and themes are not to be equated with personal chronology or individual biography.

Archetypal motifs cannot be collapsed into personal accounts or human personalities, just as symphonic sound is not a whistled melody. Rather, myth is the narrative unfolding of an epiphanal moment, a crucial tension, a common challenge or a chronic complex. Ernst Cassirer writes:

Mythical thinking comes to rest in the immediate experience ... Focusing of force on a single point is the prerequisite for all mythical thinking. When, on the one hand, the entire self is given up to a single impression, is possessed by it, and on the other hand, there is the utmost tension between the subject and its object, the outer world; when external reality is not merely viewed and contemplated, but overcomes a man in sheer immediacy, with emotions of fear or hope, terror or wish fulfilment: then the spark jumps somehow across, the tension finds release, as the subjective excitement becomes objectified, and confronts the mind as a god or a daemon.

(Cassirer 1946, p. 33)

Cassirer also notes that the isolated occurrence of an impression, its separation from the totality of ordinary, commonplace experience, produces 'not only a tremendous intensification, but also the highest degree of condensation, and as

though... the objective form of the god were created so that it veritably bursts forth from the experience' (*ibid.*, p. 34).

Myth also attempts to gain purchase on the autonomous process that may evolve from an intense instant, be it the rising crescendo of uplifting ecstasy or the disturbing tympani of crushing trauma. Then salutary deities or salubrious demons are imagined.

If a momentary god is, in his origin, the creation of a moment, if he owes his existence to some entirely concrete and individual, never-recurring situation, he yet achieves a certain substantiality which lifts him far above this accidental condition of his origin ... he becomes an independent being, which henceforth lives on by a law of its own, and has gained form and continuity.

(*ibid.*, p. 35)

Only when individuals identify their entire being with the intensity of an instant, the breakthrough of a mood, or the clashes of a specific conflict does a myth suggest an entire biography. Then the figures of myth assume inappropriate right of place and lord it over a psyche.

Secondly, if myth also carries the impersonal perspective of the unconscious psychic life, it cannot be viewed as a personal narrative or script. From the ego attachment to the here and now, Orpheus' pursuit of Eurydice and his renunciatory fidelity to her memory is morbid. From the Dionysian demand for the instinctual and dramatic, his retreating apartness is schizoid. In mortal time and from earthly space, Eurydice would then be another pained and painful, Eve-like female victim of a snake in the grass – her underworld existence a consequence of a tragic fall. She becomes another casualty of a creative but careless mate: an obscured wife, a pained and painful shade in the shadow of a husband who, like an ever-rolling stone, plays on, his later laments as popular as his youthful songs.

For Jung, Orpheus symbolizes 'the faculty of man to charm his unconscious powers'. He saw the myth as teaching, 'that for a certain length of time almost miraculous effects can be produced by the strength of the imagination, by the exercise of the right kind of art, by the beauty and measure and proportion of music, music ... the art of feeling'. But, Jung continued, 'by doing the right things in the right way and having the right imagination, he lost his soul'. Then 'one must return to the life of the earth, or to the cauldron to be made over' (Jung 1997, p. 1293). Eurydice disappeared because she 'was not such a fool as to go back with him ... where he was playing the flute all day long, with bears and lions sitting around' (Jung 1997, p. 1295).

But the psyche as a whole first composes myths, and then listens to its own wisdom through them. Psyche shapes mythic images and then perceives them through different levels of sight and according to different lights. From ego's gaze, with its wishes for worldly fulfilment, Eurydice's disappearances are ghastly turns. From the conscious view, Orpheus' winding path into and out of the underworld is a trail of tears, with a grievous outcome. But in both

collective and individual experience, new possibility often appears first as horrifying, monstrous, transgressive. What is assumed a trap, what appears as an end, may be entry to new realization.

In Jean Cocteau's film masterpiece *Orphée* (1950), as if in a dream, Orpheus passes through a mirror to enter the underworld. To grasp the myth's fuller intent, be true to its mystery, and honour its completeness, we too must go beyond our ego's framing of reality to reflect on it as if from beyond the looking glass. We arrive there, not only through imagination, but also our intimations of the psyche's progressive thrust.

From the other side, neither Eurydice's original death and descent, nor her underworld return, is loss of footing on poignant paths. Rather they are necessary passages and essential initiations in the psyche's teleology, so that experience may be reflected on and reframed from a dimension beyond the conscious personality. Her lover's dismemberment takes him bit by bit, piece by piece, to a soulful reunion and final resting-place by her side in the shades.

### The note echoes

From an older and more primal perspective, Orpheus exemplified a primordial personage, placed in the time of 'origins'. As an 'ancestor of Homer', both non and pre-Homeric in story, sensibility, and values, Orpheus and Eurydice were archaic mythico-religious figures, carriers of new realizations from well before the sixth century BC (Eliade 1982, pp. 180-1).

Like Thrace itself, Orpheus bridged and straddled different worlds and diverse sensibilities. For the Greeks, he could seem savage, akin to both dismembered Dionysus and dismembering Medea. For the Thracians, he was Apollonic in his artistry and thus Greek in spirit.

Orpheus followed Eurydice beyond the grave and then returned to lament what he had seen. With his songs and strings, he moved beyond culture and custom. He came to incarnate the process whereby artistic vision of depth experience may take creative form. By the fifth century BC, his entry into and return from the subworld of death suggested the shamanistic flirtation with transgressive altered states. The rites of shamanic crossings became rituals of spiritual initiations for renewal and rebirth. Human imagination conceived of the soul's transmigration; transmigration then suggested transformation. The un-straight ways taken by Orpheus and Eurydice became the inspiration for several initiatory passages of transcendence in the ancient mysteries, and later for alternating modes of psychic progression. Psychologically, they showed that deeply felt suffering may transcend the limits of outer events. The one way journey of the natural law, of life as affliction and pain, becomes the two way crossing wherein one may return to oneself with a sense of greater strength and meaning.

Jung writes that 'psyche is made up of processes whose energy springs from the equilibration of all kinds of opposites' (Jung 1947, para. 407). As a man

and artist, Orpheus is a guide in the two ancient ecstatic modes of the 'founders of mystery', Dionysus and Apollo and so participates in two forms of non-rational and sacred initiations. He first submitted to the lowering of consciousness intrinsic to the *orgia* of Dionysus (Eliade 1982, p. 183). Then he ascended toward the heightening of consciousness, essential to the Apollonian mysteries of *katharsis*. When he went too far and too high, the Dionysian pursued and pinned him to the ground.

Orpheus embodies the continuous tension between the different poles constant in the making of art and the making of psyche. When Apollonian, he is attracted to the spatial structures, mathematical measures, and emotional syntheses of music. And he is drawn to the apartness and renunciation inherent in both committed creative process and psychological separateness. When Dionysian, he is torn apart by the demand for entanglement, for playing one's part in the goat-god's fertile drama of existence and performance.

Centuries later the alchemists would colour these forces as the reflective white of the *albedo* and the passionate redness of the *rubedo*. And in our own time, in dreams, there are frequently journeys first to glowing and golden hilltops, followed by twisting turns through tunnels. Often, one is moving toward a meeting with a woman. Often, the path takes the dreamer back to the surface of the daily world. Or on dream trips to concerts and operas that suddenly takes a chthonic turn, leading toward nightclubs, jazz caves, and strange jungles where tropical drums beat the rhythms of the dark.

Orpheus' tears are akin to the *liquefatio* that begins the opus, just as tears for what has been lost so often begin the flow toward a different reality. Eurydice's second descent is the final *mortificatio*, the detachment of one's soulfulness from the world that cannot in any case be kept in one's grasp.

Orpheus climbs above, and is brought back to, earth. But when the Orphic path is entwined with Eurydice's downward way, a third vector, the spiralling course of the Eleusinian mysteries, is joined. It forces the tense pulls between the Apollonian and Dionysian to conform with the other-worldly realm where Eurydice claims the stage.

At Eleusis, Demeter's daughter Persephone died in maidenhood as a parting from her mother, forced into an underworld marriage with her kidnapper, Hades. When Eurydice is seized, bitten by a snake, or overcome by a rapist, she is already a bride, at the very beginning of wifehood.

From the nature orientation of tribal kinship, the departure of the daughter may be a stinging event, an occasion for tears. But in the *contra natura* landscape of the mysteries, the snake-bite is an initiatory image, signifying penetration by realizations that allow transformation. The snake from Hades pursues the back and forth, two-fold serpentine pattern of initiations' rites of passage.

In the underworld, Eurydice is sometimes imagined to be handmaiden to Persephone, sometimes perceived as having pride of place, equal or superior to its queen. Each maiden is called the 'widely judging one', each is a goddess in the underworld (Wili 1944, p. 68). Eurydice forges and maps the path that

draws Orpheus away from the ways of the world. Wider and more embracing in her judgements, Eurydice carries an underworld, unconscious, ego-far and soul-near destiny. She thus offers a crucial destination for her lover, a station on the way of the crosses that takes him far below the Dionysian, farther still from the Apollian.

But as a figure in the mystery of transformation, he must look back. Whereas the souls destined for reincarnation are to drink of the springs of Lethe, of forgetfulness, the Orphic personality does not wish another cycle of reincarnation, but wishes rather to 'leap up from the cycle' as a soul. The thirst of the Orphic dead is not for the waters of forgetfulness but for the water of the lake of Memory. Eliade quotes the Orphic verses inscribed on ancient tombs 'I am the child of Earth and starry Heaven: that you know; but I am parched with thirst, and I am dying. Give me quickly of the cool water that flows from the lake of Memory' (Eliade 1982, pp. 190-1).

Orpheus and Eurydice twice anticipate unions and twice suffer separations. The first separation is earthly; the second is in the underworld abode of the spirits.

In their second parting, this bride and bridegroom are akin to the alchemical royal couple in the eleventh Rosarium image of Fermentation (Zabriskie, B. 1995). Having already been separated and rejoined in the first phase of the alchemical opus toward transformation, in this picture the couple is winged, and the Queen is perceived as causing the king to remove himself from her and their intercourse. The next picture shows the sowing of seeds, as if in this second more realized phase, separation is necessary for planting and harvesting of the seeds of their essence and their relationship. Of this pair, Jung writes:

Although the two figures are always tempting the ego to identify itself with them, a real understanding even on the personal level is possible only if the identification is refused. Non-identification demands considerable moral effort. Moreover it is only legitimate when not used as a pretext for avoiding the necessary degree of personal understanding.

(Jung 1946, para. 469)

As a victim of Maenadic attack, Orpheus was reclaimed by his original *daimon*, Dionysus in his form as Dionysus-Zagreus, *daimon* of fertility. In an act of sympathetic magic, he was 'torn limb from limb to perish in the character of the god whose death he died' (Wili 1944, p. 69).

Campbell writes of the shamanic dream process whereby

the novice is torn apart and cut to pieces by the spirit of one of his ancestors and his bones cleaned of all blood and flesh. Only his skeleton is preserved and is then clothed in new flesh and blood and thus transformed into a creature that lords over time and space.

(Campbell 1964, p. 309)

## Jung comments:

Through dismemberment ... the divine spark got into everything, the divine soul entered the earth ... It is also the mystery teaching that if the light is put out completely by apparently inimical forces, there is everywhere a spark of light which is the condition that guarantees a later resurrection. So we should never consider a thing as permanently lost. If it is apparently extinguished, it has simply transformed into a sort of dormant condition, an incubating condition, which means the inauguration of new change.

(Jung 1997)

## The on going song

When an old understanding is about to become detached from a body of beliefs or an embodied life, there are often dreams of severed limbs and heads, dismembered bodies. In particular, the severed head may carry the import of the lost hope, the lost value, the missing mate.

While the Maenads rent Orpheus' body, they could not silence his song nor could death still his voice. After the frenzied crescendo, Orpheus' severed head rolled onto the waters of the Hebrus and continued to sing. Carried by the swells of the river, his plaintive call for Eurydice echoed along its banks.

In the myth, the bridegroom's decapitated head is given 'pious place' in Lesbos. It became the Orphic oracle, inspiring musicians and poets, guiding philosophers, devotees and initiates, and calling all who had the ears to hear, the eyes to see, the mind to know, and the spiritual stamina to submit and proceed.

To the ancients, the head contained the immortal elements otherwise carried by the breath-soul believed to disappear beneath the earth like smoke (Onians 1973, p. 93). As the seat of germinal ideas, seminal thoughts, and fertilizing inspirations, the head was imagined to contain the soul and seed of new life (ibid., p. 113). Jung writes of the severed head as the '*caput mortuum*' – a symbol of the dismembered, mortified 'capital' thing or 'principle', that had informed and ruled one's life. Beheading is significant symbolically as the separation of the 'understanding' from the 'great suffering and grief' which nature inflicts on the soul. It is an emancipation of the '*cogitatio*' situated in the head, a freeing of the soul from the 'trammels of nature' (Jung 1955/1956, para. 730). Its purpose is to bring about a *unio mentalis*, a joining of soul and spirit in the overcoming of the body (ibid., para. 730). In the psychic context, it suggests a transcendence of the old reality through an understanding entirely beyond the old perception. In mystery terms, it is passage into a new life.

When a woman, an artist, reached a moment when the old adaptation was no longer relevant, she told the following dream in which the loss of the bridal partner and rams' severed heads were analogies.

From my window I see a bride running down the street, coming from a church toward my apartment. An angry group follows her. She is hysterical, repeating, 'he wouldn't marry us, he wouldn't marry us'. All are furious as the priest at the church had refused to perform the wedding ceremony. They come to my place for a reception. A horrible ritual begins. Rams' heads are served on platters. The men saw at the body of a lamb. Balloons are busted, pouring water all over the rugs. I scream that their anger is useless. Not only was the bride not allowed to marry in church, but I realize there was no bridegroom, no one to marry.

Unable to stay together in life, unable to come together when one had died while the other lived, Eurydice and Orpheus are finally joined when both have gone beyond a suffered death. Similar to the alchemical conceit of the *coniunctio*, their nuptial conjunction of soul and spirit follows the tearing apart of body.

To mortal eyes, the marriage of Orpheus and Eurydice is fruitless. But to the third eye of initiation and mystery, it follows and combines a triple way to bear three essential fruits: the fullness of the Dionysian moment of ecstatic embodiment; the emptying of the self in artistic selflessness; the death of separation from the only natural and already known. Then there may be experience of the timeless, alternative, elastic embrace of transcendence as the familiar self has contact with an otherness.

Orpheus' final re-union with Eurydice as death bride did not follow the motif of death and resurrection in this world, to a resurgence of ego after a plunge into internal alienation. Rather its final coda was a crossing from nature to soul and spirit. In his reach toward Eurydice in Hades, in his suit for her return, Orpheus dares the line between life and death, death and life. He enters Eurydice's deadness to return her to life but then, through her death, enters first the alienation of an unnatural existence and then the spiritual or dynamic reality beyond nature.

Jung writes:

The ego is Here and Now, but the 'outside of the ego' is an alien. There, both earlier and later, before and after. So it is not surprising that the primitive mind senses the psyche outside the ego as an alien country, inhabited by the spirits of the dead. On a rather higher level it takes on the character of a shadowy semi reality, and on the level of the ancient cultures the shadow of that land beyond have turned into ideas...

(Jung 1946, para. 411)

The deathly marriage and marriage with death manifest the cultural and personal complexity of separation and connection, of sacrifice and commitment. Eurydice's loss through Orpheus' 'mistake' is his defeat. More compelling, the very notion that his error is a cause for her final death implicitly suggests that humans may have an influence over death. With this fantasy, there is kinship with the religious notion of the eternal and immortal soul, and with the sense that the psychic has a more than material dimension.



The Orphic passage may be both psychological and physical. Many years ago, on a Tuesday before Christmas, a middle-aged male patient, who had lived his life as a celibate in a religious brotherhood, dreamt:

I hear an explosion in the attic of my house. I rush to the telephone to call for help. As I pick up the receiver, I look into a mirror. On the other side of the glass, a woman sits surrounded by a circle of men. She beckons to me. Dreamily, I hang up the receiver without calling. I step into the mirror to join her. She says: 'By June, you will be dead.'

As in the Cocteau film, the other side of the mirror beckoned him to the other world of Eurydice and the great mother figure in her many aspects: Juno, Nut, Hecate, Kali. Four days later, this man died of a cerebral hemorrhage during his annual family visit for Christmas, his head in his mother's lap.

### The coda

In archaic cult, Orpheus' person and process signified the impersonal *agon* of boundary transgressions and transformative transitions. Like Dionysus, Asclepius, Heracles, the other transcendent figures of late pagan cults and mystery rites, Orpheus became an intermediary hovering between the divine and human worlds (Fowden 1986, p. 29). He is a figure in Platonic philosophy. His relation to animals provides the sympathy for the vegetarianism of the Pythagorean, while his music offers a basis for its mathematics. Like Hermes, poems, books, and a hermetic 'bible' were ascribed to him (Eliade 1982, p.184). The conception of a human willing to traverse the liminality of the grave, to dare the descent into death to redeem another, was presented several centuries before the Christian era (*ibid.*, pp. 180–203).

Renee Brand notes the profound historical and psychological significance for mankind in the development:

In a slow transition which had already started within matriarchal society and within matriarchal mystery cults, the spiritual principle conquers the limitations and boundaries of tellurism, the earth-religion. This spark of the spiritual in pagan antiquity is the idea of redemption which we find later as the core of Christianity. The confining, stifling limitation of an earth-religion consists in the perpetual motion of transformation of matter into matter. This vicious circle of matter procreated and dissolving back into matter becomes identified with damnation, Tartarus, hell. Mankind is chained to the *ius naturale*, and it is this chain that needs to be broken. Redemption is achieved in establishing a viewpoint beyond the mere nature-happening, through a new religious, spiritual principle.

(Brand 1952, p. 30)

Eliade reminds us that from the mystery view, humans are not born but made. Orpheus and Eurydice as psychic realities allow a per-son-hood – a sustained state of sounding through – between glorious music and piteous moans. In their operatic story, marriage led not to the union of the bridal chamber but

to the separation of death. As a consenting bride, Eurydice was changed to a raped shade. The underworld, horrible realm of separation became the meeting place. Orpheus' finest achievement was his greatest defeat. His life, lived for love of a woman, was loveless. His sublimated existence ended in a triumph for ecstasy. His horrible death at the hands of scorned women released him into his ever-lasting reunion with his beloved.

If myth is the psyche's description of itself and its epiphanal moments, the myth of Eurydice and Orpheus, whose soothing music tamed wild beasts amidst his own tension and turmoil, is a powerful expression of the paradoxical nature of psyche. Orpheus-Eurydice are the charged, excited, intensified points in the constant process of making psyche. They configure an individual's suffered responses to the different, demanding dimensions of experience and creation.

Jung suggests that 'great energy springs from a correspondingly great tension of opposites' (Jung 1942, para. 154) and that 'the greater the tension, the greater the potential.' (Jung 1941, para. 18) The motifs of love and loss, marriage and death, success that is failure, descent and ascent, ascetic sacrifice and orgiastic demise, dismemberment and reunion resound in countless creations and innumerable lives.

In its drama and emotion, the myth offers access to the underworld realities of our experience:

The intense emotion that is always associated with the vitality an archetypal idea conveys (is) ... a premonitory experience of wholeness to which a subsequently differentiated understanding can add nothing essential, at least as regards the totality of the experience. A better developed understanding can, however, constantly renew the vitality of the original experience ... The experience itself is the important thing, not its intellectual representation or clarification, which proves meaningful and helpful only when the road to original experience is blocked.

(Jung 1955/1956, paras. 776-7)

From the transformative perspective, the myth is a shaping of a powerful internal process. It may begin with a moment, a relational encounter, an inner mandate; it leads away from intention through a disorienting detour; it demands a difficult accommodation, an uneasy negotiation. Honouring one vector requires the abnegation of an other. And then the neglected arena will insist on its due or take its toll.

To be 'Orphic' is to be engaged with psyche not only as it exists between consciousness and the unconscious, but also in the tensions between the lived life, the demands of creativity and the rigours of psychic change. Rhapsodic ecstasy and the poignancy of the *pavanne* are sounded simultaneously. They accompany the liminality of the union and separation, ecstasy and renunciation, celebration and purification inherent in the psychic and creative life.

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TRANSLATIONS OF ABSTRACT

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Dans cet article les thèmes centraux du mythe antique du musicien de Thrace Orphée et de son épouse perdue Euridyce sont remis et entendus dans leur contexte historique. L'auteur compare la juxtaposition du thème de mort et de mariage qu'il y a là avec les sensibilités exprimées dans les chants de l'époque, chants de mariage et lamentations funéraires courants en Méditerranée et dans les Balkans. Est aussi considéré le fait que des tonalités similaires se retrouvent dans d'autres mythes de métamorphoses et transformations. Le mythe met en lumière les virements émotionnels qui font écho et qui sont essentiels au processus psychologique, ainsi qu'à la dramaturgie créative et à la dynamique de transformation de l'expérience. Pour finir, le mythe est regardé comme une tentative d'expression des charges émotionnelles liées à l'effort humain et à la réalité soufferte qui font partie de la tension signifiante portée par le mythe Orphée/Euridyce.

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Die Leitmotive im archaischen Mythos des thrakischen Musikers Orpheus und seiner verloren gegangenen Braut Eurydike werden verfolgt und in ihrem historischen Kontext gehört. Ein Vergleich wird angestellt zwischen der dortigen Gegenüberstellung von Tod und Hochzeit und den Empfindungen, die zum Ausdruck kommen in zeitgenössischen Hochzeitsliedern und Klageliedern bei Beerdigungen, die im Mittelmeerraum und auf dem Balkan geläufig sind. Die vergleichbaren Klänge anderer Mythen von Metamorphosen und Wandlungen werden beachtet. Der Mythos zeichnet die schockierenden Wechsel von Gefühlen auf, die wesentlich sind für den psychischen Prozess, für das schöpferische Ringen und die Erfahrung der Wandlung. Schließlich wird der Mythos gesehen als Versuch, den aufgeladenen Merkmalen des menschlichen Unterfangens und der erlittenen Realität innerhalb des Bedeutungsbogens zu formulieren, der als Orpheus/Eurydike ausgedrückt ist.

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Vengono seguiti e ascoltati nel loro contesto storico i temi principali del mito arcaico del musicista Tracio Orfeo e della sua sposa perduta Euridice. Viene fatto un confronto tra la stretta associazione fra matrimonio e morte che troviamo nel mito e le sensibilità espresse nelle canzoni matrimoniali e nelle lamentazioni funebri attualmente in voga nel Mediterraneo e nei Balcani. Vengono ascoltate e confrontate le risonanze di altri miti di metamorfosi e trasformazione. Il mito tiene conto degli spostamenti drammatici delle emozioni essenziali al processo psicologico, alla sfida creativa e all'esperienza trasformativa. Infine si interpreta il mito come il tentativo di esprimere le noti pesanti dello sforzo umano e della sofferenza della realtà all'interno dell'arco di significato espresso come Orfeo/Euridice.

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Los motivos centrales del mito arcaico del músico Tracio Orfeo y su novia pérdida Eurídice son seguidos y escuchados en su contexto histórico. Se hace una comparación de la yuxtaposición de muerte y matrimonio y las sensiblerías que se expresan en las canciones de boda contemporáneas y los actuales lamentos funerarios del Mediterráneo y los Balcanes. Se aprecian los hilos comparativos de otros mitos de transformación y metamorfosis. El mito apunta al impresionante giro de emociones esencial

para el proceso psíquico, el agon creativo, y la experiencia transformativa. Finalmente se aproxima al mito como un intento para expresar las cargadas notas de esfuerzo humano y la sufriente realidad dentro del arco de significados que se expresan como Orfeo/Eurídice.

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