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Eurydice without Orpheus

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by

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"The love that consists in this: that two solitudes protect and border and greet each other."

For Mike Porter and Luisa Lopez.

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Preface

What follows is a poetic and critical reckoning with the Orpheus and Eurydice myth. First creatively and then in essay form, I strive to engage with the forces at play in the myth, the processes by which it has been given meaning, and its capacity to lend meaning of its own. Of consummate cultural endurance, the story of Orpheus and Eurydice proves its continued relevance with the wealth of retellings, reconsiderations, and reframings to which it lays claim: more, arguably, than any other Ancient Greek myth. In the first section, I follow in the tradition of reappropriating it; in the second I evaluate the motivations and implications for that reappropriation. Exploring the myth's capacity for insertion of other stories, I evaluate its use as a stage upon which numerous authors have elected to enact their own dramas. To conclude, I investigate the role that sociopolitical context plays, can play, and has been asked to play in the myth's readings and implications.

In Part 1, I follow the tradition of retelling the story of Orpheus and Eurydice as a framework for considering larger personal and structural concerns. I devote particular attention to Eurydice as a character, person, and role, and the implications each of these different frameworks bring to light. I focus especially on issues of contingency in the socialization of women and the heterosexual scripts, behavioral and psychological, that inform their relationships with men. Narrative offers a unique opportunity to present the perspective of one consciousness as a route by which the other is considered, placed, and interacted with. I am particularly interested, also, in the role that death and mortality play, within the myth and without it, in one's perception of and relationship with the loved other. I place the myth within the context of a cacophany of other voices, intended to

inform the myth's retelling and also to be informed by it. It is my hope that proximity alone demonstrates the flexibility and continued relevance of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth to other voices, other stories, all of which strive to come to terms with the loved, mortal, and sexualized other in relation to the self. This is also an effort to situate the myth within a litany of psychological and sociocultural issues of concern, while exploring the relationship between such larger-scale issues and the individuals that shape and are shaped by them.

In Part 2, I evaluate the myth's history, interpretations, and continued relevance from an academic perspective. Where the first section brings in a chorus of different voices intended either to echo or be in dialogue with Eurydice, the second explores her historic silence. I question the relationship between Orpheus and Eurydice through historiographic, literary, and feminist lenses, considering how they relate to each other and how each are presented and interpreted by their audiences. My ultimate goal is to arrive at a critical understanding of Orpheus and Eurydice's relevance as a story of two individuals and as a capsule of more structural concerns. How are we to read the myth? How has it been read, and to what end?

Finally, I close with an appendix that offers a selection of a number of the different (and often divergent) retellings and reframings of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth articulated in the centuries since it first came into being. This collage of interpretations is intended to illustrate the different uses to which the myth has been put, and its potency as a vehicle to that effect.

Eurydice without Orpheus

Part 1:

Prose

You who never arrived
in my arms, Beloved, who were lost
from the start,
I don't even know what songs
would please you.

– Rainer Maria Rilke[1]

The question, ultimately, is not why Orpheus looked back – not why the moment of hope, of love's triumph over mortality, was extinguished by its too hopeful, too loving, too mortal possessor. If we do not have one firm answer to that question, it is because we have too many – because, in fact, we have never stopped answering it. Our ease in so doing suggests a fundamental eagerness to prove Orpheus' innocence, his humanity: to answer so thoroughly that we demolish the question. And we may. Because in the end the real question, less easily rallied against, is this: why was Orpheus forbidden to look back? Why was blindness the condition of this perfected union, and why has this premise been accepted so unblinkingly – with such implicit, and absolute, understanding?

1: After the first death.

Anything that is not me is dead.

Eurydice's dying was not a surprise. Blood draining from the face, tremors of the neck subsiding, focus narrowed to the bite on her still white ankle. He had touched that skin when her heart beat alien beneath it. Lips he had kissed, ignorant of the precise sensation

[1]Rainer Maria Rilke, The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke, trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Vintage International, 1989) 131.

he provoked; what terror could rival that in kissing them, now, when they parted lifeless before him? He had searched in her mouth for the sea. Dark acres of the unfathomable, the silence that was life outside his eyes: capable of perishing while, unimaginably, he still had sight. When her eyes finally closed, it was almost a relief; the tension of her impossible existence dissipating in a rush. He had never really believed she was alive.

Suppose that you receive a letter one day. The handwriting is familiar, in the way that all letters pretend, promise, feint for a moment at being sourced from something ancient and heavy with love. Like a very old building, crumbling, flush against the curb, in which – never seeing it before, walking along – you seem to remember having played as a child. The handwriting is like that, though perhaps not at all; perhaps only a resonance with the letter you would like to have written, would like to have received, find yourself, now and then, quietly in search of. Impossible to say – and you don't.

Anything that is not me is a way to learn death.

As Orpheus played in the haze under ground, notes blooming softly from his lyre and echoing, in the throne room paved with black inhuman stones, as Orpheus laid down his plight for the gods with quiet intensity and the deathless skill of a translator – this love into words – Eurydice waited. "*My wife is the cause of my journey*," [2] he said, softening for Hades and Persephone the fierceness of his gaze with what melody he could muster (which was all melody – Eurydice watched – he had this skill. He had consumed her with this skill). She was still dead, but only for a moment longer.

[2] Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Book X. 1-85, trans. A. S. Kline, 2000, Electronic Text Center, 1 Nov. 2010 <http://etext.virginia.edu/latin/ovid/trans/Metamorph10.htm>.

The story cracks open and spills out. The extravagant yellow of egg yolk, it leaks through jagged shell and slowly pools.

There will be no lasting peace either in the heart of individuals or in social customs until death is outlawed.

– Albert Camus[3]

There was a cruelty in the word "you," a finality and a rejection. It put him on one side of the words, the mouth, the mind, while she was on the other. "He" and "she" did the same, and worse, but by then the damage was already done. It was as simple as that: *you* was not *me*, and nothing could be done about that.

So the love story had tripped into a horror story, but that was all right: he knew what to do with those.

You expect nothing at all from this letter, but only because you have been given no chance to. The moments that separate receiving the envelope, tearing it neatly open from corner to corner, extracting the sheet of paper, unfolding, setting it down on the counter under one forearm to keep it flat, and bringing your eyes to the beginning of the first nearly-familiar line – this is already almost too much. Expectation, with no context for it, begins artlessly to blossom. Why would someone write to you? With all of the reasonable possibilities exhausted, there is nothing for it but a moment of wild, excessive imagining.

[3] Albert Camus, Reflections on the Guillotine: an Essay on Capital Punishment (Fridtjof-Karla Publications, 1960).

At the very instant when from its address it interpellates you, uniquely you, instead of reaching you it divides you or sets you aside, occasionally overlooks you. And you love and you do not love, it makes of you what you wish, it takes you, it leaves you, it gives you.

– Jacques Derrida[4]

Of course they granted it to him; Orpheus, hers, in whose mouth the words took shape and took wing. Laced into sound, a candle lit toward the hope of mellifluous emergence – like something so physical could bear in it and from it the formless blaze she struggled only to douse. He tapped his foot on stones and ran his fingers along strings and his body was a way to tell the truth.

He asked and they gave: there had never been any question of that. So she moved again, she breathed again. She ascended the stair.

Because you are dealing in what is by definition unconscionable – that is, unknowable – your first action is, of course, to skip to the end in search of a signature. Failing that, you began at the beginning, as though willing to afford the author a reasonable chance to make his case as he proposed (is that what you thought? Did "he," shadowy infinite figure, slip gently and irrevocably into your mind – reminiscent of someone you had loved, or loved you, or who stood near you that day in a crowded building, spared no more thought than a brief and absolving: *I do not know this person*). Or was it she? Friend, lover, stranger, spirited moment of poetry? Can you read the words at all, obscured by these laborious and unsayable machinations? Something is at play here, inarticulate, sweeping, nearly sad. You set the letter down – for a long time.

[4] Jacques Derrida, The Post Card (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

"I longed to be able to accept it," Orpheus murmured, *"and I do not say I have not tried. Love won."*[5]

Nobody rushes into the land of the dead if they believe its power. That was his secret. He arrived ferocious and whole. Anyone can storm the underworld who does not accept that it has done damage.

He had been ready all his life, it seemed, for her to die, for the blot of foreign consciousness to swell and bleed until it overwhelmed, peopled his world with incomparable strangers, rendered fatal and brief and horrific everything not himself.

He never grudged her first death, and never forgave her second.

The difference between being alive and in love, always elusive, had never been clearer.

2: Epienopopontonphobia[6]

Shouldn't this most ancient of sufferings finally grow
more fruitful for us?

– Rainer Maria Rilke[7]

[5] Ovid Book X.
[6] Fear of crossing the wine-dark sea.
[7] Rilke 153.

I am tired and scared and I live in a beautiful world, I said, hands empty.

No, you said. I sighed with relief that you had ears and a mouth, and threw the rest away.

You agree to fall in love; prior. You prepare yourself, pressure leveled by the sky and the sea and the stars and the sun. Sip it in the morning. Taste it like light on the windowsill at tea. And in the dusty evenings, after night settles heavy and disconsolate, you stand like a statue erected in honor of yourself and you say: I promise.

Then it happens. The chance comes; you take the sky and the sea and the stars and the sun and stitch them into the line of someone's jaw. Every fragile bone. You hold their beating heart inside a star and wish on it. Their death to yours, eyes to yours, distance to sorrow and terror and cage of your skull. Fragments of your capacity spill out into the intervening molecules. And you search in their mouth for – yes, the sea.

Why are we not enough to ourselves?

There are these things I love and most of them are you.

Eurydice prepared herself, when it had been decided, for the steep passage to the upper world. She imagined the dense fog, the steps that formed themselves briefly out of the mist, his shoulderblades cutting through the damp air ahead of her. How would she walk? Her feet, after all this, bearing her carefully into life: how would they sound?

It should be a victory that I have made it here without you.

Tired of going home to other people, she slept in the street.

It should be a battle won but it feels like a loss, and this loss is something as old and aching as the redwoods but with all the sharpness of my inability to be alive in a correctly cavalier way, because I *miss* you, god help me, love you, have always loved you, will love you I think until my veins are no longer overwhelmed with the weight of my blood surging through, and your loss is like a gone tooth or gone eye or gone spine, a break, a hole, something in me that has never been filled but ever since it has known that in another world, another somehow, it could have been filled by you, your warmth, your eyes, the exquisite words that slip out of your mouth and the way you know too well what I mean, what I am, what I can do, which is everything, though you have never told me that – will never – ever since, it has ached and wept and known the rain and kept me lonely awake and wandering.

How much does public opinion matter on this?

We kill our gods, for fear that we pray too much.

My lover is obscure, my life, within limits.

I'd like to think you're not a place I go to
when I press on my eyelids.
- Ashley Anne Gamell[8]

They were, it seemed, purposefully unfinished letters. Not that they made an art out of remaining incomplete; they seemed to have been begun in earnest; but once they had trailed off, or been cast aside in a moment of distraction or anguish – once they were metamorphosed from tools to relics – some god or ritual, it seemed, had demanded their intended purpose be fulfilled. And so they were sent – yes, to you.

But when, even without knowing it, I thought of them, they, more unconsciously still, were for me the mountainous blue undulations of the sea, the outline of a procession against the sea. It was the sea that I hoped to find, if I went to some town where they had gone. The most exclusive love for a person is always a love for something else.

– Marcel Proust[9]

The way to the universe's heart is through the people that populate it.

The way to your heart is through the warm and moving figures it has never stopped wanting to hold, and keep, and kill, and die of with relief.

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[8] Ashley Anne Gamell, "If We Weave Our Bodies Together I Think We Can Build a Boat," *The Ampersand Review* 2 (2010).
[9] Marcel Proust, Remembrance of Things Past, vol. 2, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin (New York: Random House, 1982) 891.

At his back, invisible, invaluable, the presence of Eurydice would lie like shadow over his mind. The sound of her steps on the stair would rival his music. He would stumble forward, contingent, consumed; senseless to everything but her approach. All his being would burn with it.

He could only look back. He could do nothing else. She waited for his head to turn.

Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves.

– John Berger[10]

She felt his breathing quicken as she took the first step.

We went out to the edge of the world, late at night, and then stepped off it into the ravine. The lamps' haloes could not pursue us. The pavement remained, farther and farther away. "All the people we've ever loved," she said, "and hated – they don't know where we are right now. At this exact moment, no one has any idea."

A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself. Whilst she is walking across a room or whilst she is weeping at the

[10] John Berger, Ways of Seeing (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1977) 47.

death of her father, she can scarcely avoid envisaging herself walking or weeping. From earliest childhood she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually.[11]

Imagined it. Felt it.

And so she comes to consider the surveyor *and the* surveyed *within her as the two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman.*[12]

The fine hairs on the back of his neck raising, trembling with her proximity.

She has to survey everything she is and everything she does because how she appears to others, and ultimately how she appears to men, is of crucial importance for what is normally thought of as the success of her life. Her own sense of being in herself is supplanted by a sense of being appreciated as herself by another.[13]

He did look back. That is certain.

3: Dialogue.

[11] Berger 46.
[12] Berger 46.
[13] Berger 46.

EURYDICE. Come closer to me.

ORPHEUS (holding her). Warmth, yes. Other warmth than one's own. That is something almost certain. Something resistant, too, an obstacle. A warm obstacle. Good, there is someone. I am not entirely alone. One mustn't ask too much.

– Jean Anouilh[14]

After three years of her loving him diffuse etc., their lips brushed accidentally in the middle of the bar etc. etc. while trying both of them in clumsy fashion to stand tiptoe on crumbling wall around edifices built, perhaps, in rainier seasons, and scatter pink flowers over. He was bending his head to press a kiss to her hair. They were not having sex. They were trying to be kind to each other.

She was moving to brush his cheek with her mouth. These were secrets, jewels, impermissible as words; slid glances, hands almost meeting, last stare into a sincere hollow before addressing the mirror – crystallized in the moment's softness he pierced, touched, held transfixed and tremulously whole against her neck.

"Let's touch until we're happy," one of them said in the bar. For a moment it was almost a possibility. The glasses on the table were empty and light splintered hazily over. She wanted to stop touching, she thought, in order to start touching; and she would never get away. They pressed distinctly against the space against each other. When she thought about his skin she could never stop thinking about her own.

They went home to their separate rooms. The pink flowers tossed softly in a nameless wind, and came at last to rest with a delicacy constituted almost of the invisible; and anyway the unlivable.

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[14] Jean Anouilh, "Eurydice," in Five Plays (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986) 153.

"--The rejection of self-interest and the autonomous individual in recognition of the self as collective, interdependent, and relational--"[15]

Does anyone fall in love?

Yes. Everyone.

Songs I have sung that are yours.

Traveling with the Argonauts, Orpheus had saved them all from this. The ship had lumbered past the islets where the sirens made their home, where the sirens tossed their hair, parted their lips with promises – where the sirens sung the sailors into the sea, into the sea, into the dark.

For truth. They offered truth.

I have not been what I would have wanted to be.

Deconstruct: If I had loved you less, perhaps you would have loved me more.

[15] Ula Y. Taylor, The Veiled Garvey: The Life & Times of Amy Jacques Garvey (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002) 64.

And what in that? The callous conceit of a balance, tradeoff, equation. If the ungathered threads of self, condensed into personhood, this statement, that timbre in the laugh, should falter – should fail at what we wish them to be, *transmit my beautiful*, if greater practice at the physical dialects of a human world might procure for us love –

If I could have gone home.

Your dialect knocks teeth with mine.

It is strange and beautiful that Homer should make the Sirens appeal to the spirit, not to the flesh.

– Jane Harrison[16]

He had taken up arms. At the sound of the sirens' voices, he had drawn his lyre. It was too late by then to try not to hear: the salt air breathed with the secrets they offered, swept up in the wind, his blood set leaping, coursing, with the overtones that etched new possibilities into the grooves in his bones, in the first moment, so he knew even then he could never go back. Nothing changed but that Orpheus was opened to dance to their rhythm. His eyes were wide and bright. He was more vulnerable than anyone.

[16] Jane Ellen Harrison, Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991) 198.

Could I be less specific; less human? Not that it would matter then. Unbounded, no need for what exists past the boundary. Being a person would not be a problem.

Orpheus's fingers shook on the strings of the lyre. The vibrations in his throat rose up through his frozen lips into the air. Loud, he thought, true, he thought, his music roared through him and over the churning sea, around the men, around the sailors, like a waterfall furious and white. They promised truth. He drowned them out. He saved the crew.

Those who wish to sing always find a song. At the touch of a lover, everyone becomes a poet.

– Plato

The spaces between the words became the words, became the promises; the executions. The spaces swelled to what language had once forgiven itself for being.

He could never have loved me, any more than I could have stopped myself from speaking.

The sirens were to live, it had been decreed, only so long as no one who listened could travel on unmoved. Surpassed by Orpheus, they flung themselves into the sea, and some god or law changed them swiftly into rocks.

4: Arrhythmia.

When in love, the sight of the beloved has a completeness which no words and no embrace can match: a completeness which only the act of making love can temporarily accommodate.

– John Berger[17]

EURYDICE. Don't look at me. I feel too moved when you look at me. . . . It's as if you had put your hands on my hips and entered me all aflame. Don't look at me.
ORPHEUS. Ever since yesterday I have been looking at you all the time.

– Jean Anouilh[18]

The way to a woman's heart is through its arteries. That branch into veins, that hold back the blood, that leap with the nerves scraped clean by the wind when they swell with a hot red pulse.

The way to a woman's heart is to admit her mind superior to her body and her body superior to her mind.

The way out is the same.

[17] Berger 8.
[18] Anouilh 126.

Your heart is full of blood, which sings in its turn. At fingers, paper, breeze or god – your heart is veined and strung up in its lodging, married and marionetted by damp strands in your chest. Someday someone will say “the body” in reference to you.

Your eyes wedded to the on-site demolition of eternity, falling light, lick up brief faces and blink away rust. You still hear the gulls on the sea.

Your heart is full of blood. It swims.

You would like to be touched like a burned poem, or a burning one. You would like to provoke violence. You would like to be an apology, a moment of crime and redemption with sorrowful large eyes: the aesthetic perfection of victimhood.

The desire to lose it. You want them to give you your humanity as much as you want them to take it away from you.

That feeling that you didn't deserve it in the first place.

True Stories from People Who End up Happy.

Not like you were never a person or could never be a person, but like you could be permitted to stop being one. Like you could punish yourself for being one in the first place.

That sense of not being able to forgive people for not being you. The world for not being yours.

What Foucault calls the paradox of subjectivation: the very processes and conditions that secure a subject's subordination are also the means by which she becomes a self-conscious identity and agent.

– Saba Mahmood[19]

You would like to be touched like a pet. You would like to be touched like a knife. You would like to be touched with guilt – possibly.

You are being eaten up. You are disappearing. All you have been given, all you are granted to be, you are willing to throw away – you are throwing away – you will burn or barter for change for a phone call to a place that can never be your home.

You are in love. You don't think you ever want to stop. It's ruining your life, and that might be terrible.

Maybe you're not in love anymore. Maybe there are whole new things ahead of you.

Maybe not.

[19] Saba Mahmood, Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005) 17.

Maybe there are whole new things, but you, you're so deeply attached to the old strand of a feeling you're not alone that you'll never let it go. No matter how it chokes you. And you'll never find those new things oh god no not ever.

You have tantrums like this.

Maybe you'll always be alone – you think – and maybe it'll be your fault.

It does hurt, doesn't it? he said one day, sober. To be right there, your wrist pulsing against someone else's. Their skin. And you can't get any closer, you can both feel yourselves a presence in each other's lives. It feels like you've won. But you're still you and they're still them, he said. You're still feeling different things.

Maybe I just don't like trying, he said, and failing.

I promise not to be your home.

Ashes of poetry you have written and willingly burned for sex lining your eyes and breasts and hips. When they judge you after death, you are guilty more for writing than for burning them.

If he were female, I would not be in love with him. Heterosexuality? – no – the suffocating mystique of the masculine, the too trammeled thoughts and scripts and worlds in which he, you, yes, always you, you masculine, offer, having alone possession of it, the world.

Does he? Or only a collective presumption? A faltering story in which god is demanded at every juncture, from every angle, until one with the greatest preparation for the task trudges up Olympus. Sisyphus in awe, surely, who readies himself for the heavy descent and dreams hesitant of moss.

Zeus, less drawn to mortal women, would have ruled wonderfully. But he slid down the mountain and elongated the neck, flexed the fingers into feathers, sweated white over trembling Leda and lit the match to burst Troy aflame, and – presumably – they kept on praying. They turned their faces to God.

He touches you with the quickening delight and skittishness of a vandal, the painting kissed and obscured with ink just outside the museum guard's watch. Someone should punish someone for this: someone like you.

Nighttime glances and quivering solitary moments you breathe with sometimes before bed smeared out, an embarrassment, a problem that needs solving and the solution is sweat: the mechanical exhausted electricity that refuses loneliness between aching and inhuman bodies.

" – How I crave people so much that I can no longer live with them."

Inside your body, at all times – now – it is completely dark.

When she finally considered a tactical retreat into self, it was only because there was nowhere else to go.

The possibility of death in the oblivion of purposed ecstasy.

What are you? Human? Your hands claw inarticulate furrows in his back, incomprehensible inconsolable, no tracing poems, legs kick spineless and ineffectual beneath the weight of his body suffused with the criminal and unknowable power to act as well as think. If you're so fucking human, ask for it.

How do we conceive of individual freedom in a context where the distinction between the subject's own desires and socially prescribed performances cannot be easily presumed, and where submission to certain forms of (external) authority is a condition for achieving the subject's potentiality? In other words, how does one make the question of politics integral to the analysis of the architecture of the self?

– Saba Mahmood[20]

[20] Mahmood 149.

The machinery has failed, the fingertips and lids of eyes, nerves that gasp and press for consciousness, questions and creation and sometimes a tear. Whittle it down. Swollen secret places receptive and gasping, gaping, vessels senseless without the confirmation and absolution of use, yearning to be filled, pierce into and through and entirely, flushed with shaking skin and red moments contracting, mouth feverish and consuming: the only window of permission for your ravaging, far-flung, last-ditch hope to take your glistening humanity, that tears into you and the fabric of air and time in woods and at night in your bed, and possess with it that world.

"And he told me to stay alive. So I did."

And you don't want to breathe or let it go. Do you. Without it the world remains out of your reach and disinterested, uncentered ungathered unraveling, strands composing it floating away from each other and returning to the lonesome stars, by whom you feel forsaken in a sorrowful and sexually appealing way: like they've tied you to the bed and left for work and there you are, alone, and your wrists are sore and your nose runs and your thighs are wet and it pulses, you pulse, desperate, incapable of relief, and you think of how little you mean and it's hot.

*

Write for instance: he took some measure of comfort from the pavement, brave and dry and unresponsive, beneath his feet; from the winter sun, high over his head, licking all around without teeth to bite. The slender dog on the leash, the great stone church elegiac on the right, the blue tulips, and the red tulips, and the girl who looked at him without smiling. Carry on, his soles beat pleasantly into the ground. How say this as a female author? How! – to use the male pronoun without bitterness, wonder, incumbent devotion?

These genders we put on like a way out of existence.

He approached the table on which he had left the letter.

She approached the table on which she had left the letter.

Which is you? Which murmurs your story most accurately - in the most appropriate tone of voice? Speaking directly, *you* is sufficient – your only descriptor that you are the subject of address, that attention is being paid – but when the attention lags, subject shifts, distance between *the rose* and *near it* – you have less to offer us, and we cut corners. She wrote in the margin of the book. He was handsomely dressed. He kissed her; she kissed him. They kissed each other? Who can say.

What is pinned to the page, what transfixed by this pronoun? What terrible too-near god, hot breath heavy at the base of our spines, is invoked with this breathless and interminable salute? Genderization: the process of the grammatical obligation to mark sex in an expression the primary function of which is independent of that sex, with the result of internalization of the centrality of that sex to identity.[21]

If we accept the notion that all forms of desire are discursively organized (as much of recent feminist scholarship has argued), then it is important to interrogate the practical and conceptual conditions under which different forms of desire emerge, including desire for submission to recognized authority.

[21] As proposed by Elizabeth Beardsley. In Sally McConnell-Ginet, Ruth Borker, and Nelly Furman, eds. Women and Language in Literature and Society (Praeger, 1980).

– Saba Mahmood[22]

"Respect me," he shouted.

"Respect me," she shouted.

Tell me what you want, show me what matters, what you seek from me, why I need to be alive.

Say this is life and it is mine.

An eye in his fist.

At the base of a cliff, though; where is your jumping-off point? And it becomes appallingly clear that the rush, the ecstatic terror of the freefall, can only take you so far.

5: The last word.

Breathless, we flung us on the windy hill,
Laughed in the sun, and kissed the lovely grass.

[22] Mahmood 15.

You said, "Through glory and ecstasy we pass;
Wind, sun, and earth remain, the birds sing still,
When we are old, are old...." "And when we die
All's over that is ours; and life burns on
Through other lovers, other lips," said I,
—"Heart of my heart, our heaven is now, is won!"

"We are Earth's best, that learnt her lesson here.
Life is our cry. We have kept the faith!" we said;
"We shall go down with unreluctant tread
Rose-crowned into the darkness!"… Proud we were,
And laughed, that had such brave true things to say.
—And then you suddenly cried, and turned away.

– Rupert Brooke[23]

Start the story again.

Who was she before? Her memory twisted and danced and threaded itself into tangles. How had it gone? She had heard his voice, heard his lyre; she had come upon him in a wood – he played – for her? – he played –

She remembered the rocks, trembling as though reminded how to stop being rocks. The trees with their branches clawing wild at the sky, suffused with music. The speed with which her head would jerk toward the phantom of his silhouette, the possibility of his arrival – had she had a different neck, then? Before?

[23] Rupert Brooke, The Collected Poems of Rupert Brooke (New York: John Lane Company, 1920) 63.

How had she felt about music?

If the rest had blurred, traced and retraced over itself into a cacophanous moment, single and impermeable, the moment of her death was a blot entirely. There was a snake. They had been together in a grove. The tips of his fingers, roughened by lyre strings and the interminable pursuit of melody, stroked her collarbone and tore ragged at her nerve endings. The snake reared back its small and ugly head; she thinks she remembers fangs.

Only death offers love its true climate.

– Jean Anouilh[24]

He knew that death was not the last word, only because it had always been the first. Everything had promised this, everything had rusted with this color.

To live in this world

you must be able
to do three things:
to love what is mortal;
to hold it

against your bones knowing
your own life depends on it;

[24] Anouilh 184.

and, when the time comes to let it go,
to let it go.

– Mary Oliver[25]

Drifting into death, waiting, less dreaming than dreamed, no longer real but pierced at some point in her consciousness to the living world, a scrap of fabric kept by something from twisting off and away in the gust of death.

It was an impossibility: that was why. That there she was, tumbled into death, while he walked the earth. The two images could be collaged, fastened illogically together, if desired, but only in an effort to deny the unfathomable: not that he was here and she was there; but that he was, and she was not.

"Love unceasingly prepares its own disappearance, acts out its dissolution."[26]

If he could save her –

Not patience, then, or even fixity of purpose. She never had a moment to be lonely. Alive, him? Dead – her – dead?

Things could be done about this. The whole point was that things could be done about this.

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[25] Mary Oliver, American Primitive (Little, Brown: 1983).
[26] Gilles Deleuze, Proust and Signs: The Complete Text, trans. Richard Howard (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000) 19.

– then death would be defanged.

No: death was not the last word. They had both expected she would survive.

What was the alternative?

Nor, too, was it that they had existed drenched in knowledge of each other, with the stilled pulse that came between them now a rending of that. His eyes had ripped holes in the world. She ventured her glances into them as one staring at the sun. She felt her whole body contained, pleasing, warm – of a piece – in the gaze he leveled like a chord; she harmonized.

Love, yes, but what was that?

Solving death would be the first part.

He was going to be happy with her.

He could never take his eyes off her, she knew, at least. The other senses were in question. As he coaxed music from the trees, stones, animals, water; as he shaped – with what! trembling strings and a mouth stained purple – his sky and his earth into a laughing place, a grieving place, a place forever capable of vibrating at a frequency to cajole the stars – what was her voice, in the midst of that? What beat might her footsteps compel?

They took the upward path, through the still silence, steep and dark, shadowy with dense fog, drawing near to the threshold of the upper world.

– Ovid[27]

She would go to him. Her eyes would search and discard everything they encountered until they lit on him and rested, safe and saturated and overcome. It was like that with them. "I would go to you," she whispered, hoarse with the impossibility of words, in the grass. Plucked, held, and loosed to sing, the note she struck when he freed her with his look of understanding shook the air – shook her hands – grazed his eardrum, made him laugh, glad and low.

All he had to do was not look.

All he had to do was believe that she was alive behind him.

Her unknowable lips.

Dark acres of the unfathomable.

[27] Ovid Book X.

What was she thinking?

The tension of her impossible existence---------

Afraid she was no longer there, and eager to see her, the lover turned his eyes.[28]

She was alive behind him.

In an instant she dropped back, and he, unhappy man, stretching out his arms to hold her and be held, clutched at nothing but the receding air.[29]

Orpheus, from the hypothetical Proto-Indo-European orbhao-, "to be deprived"; from orbh-, "to put asunder, separate." Of course it was easier to lose your own life; hadn't she managed it twice?

Dying a second time, now, there was no complaint to her husband (what, then, could she complain of, except that she had been loved?).[30]

[28] Ovid Book X.
[29] Ovid Book X.
[30] Ovid Book X.

He knew the worst part of it, though: that his name had been Orpheus long before Eurydice had finally fallen away forever, returning to the underworld like an ebbing tide.

She spoke a last 'farewell' that, now, scarcely reached his ears, and turned again towards that same place.[31]

It was like looking at the sun, but in reverse. The sun spots, instead of in her vision, were burned into her body; she felt his gaze fiery and feverish on her neck and could not say if he looked then, or only had looked once before.

Who has destroyed us, miserable you and me, Orpheus?
What kind of utter madness? See there, the cruel Fates call [me]
back again and sleep darkens my swimming eyes.
And now goodbye. I am wrapped up in a vast night
holding out these strengthless hands that do not belong to you.

- Virgil[32]

6: The heart presents its defense.

[31] Ovid Book X.
[32] Virgil, *Georgics* IV, trans. Liz Locke (Indiana University, 2000). Eurydice's last words in Virgil's version of the story. Added to Ovid's "farewell," the only words attributed to Eurydice in Greek mythology.

Isn't it time that we lovingly freed ourselves from the beloved and, quivering, endured: as the arrow endures the bowstring's tension, so that gathered in the snap of release it can be more than itself.

– Rainer Maria Rilke[33]

He would always know her face.

Apollo, his fierce youth made warm and malleable as tallow in the light of Admetus' hospitality, honored Admetus with a respite from death. There is always a condition. Find found another to be given in exchange – and Admetus sought here and there, increasing desperate, and begged of his father and mother and friends that their death might take the place of his. None would go but Alcestis, his wife. The day of her promised death drew inexorably nearer, and there it was; when she lay pale, eyes in darkness, all her self readying for death, Admetus was heard to say:

But if the tongue and song of Orpheus had been given me, so that, having charmed either the daughter of Demeter or her husband by strains, I might have won thee from death, I would have descended; and neither the hounds of Pluto nor Charon at his oar, the conductor of souls, should have held me off, till I had brought thy life to the day.[34]

He was never one for hyperbole; exorcised all his trills and vibrato and keening into music, touch, taste. Blood pounded through the channels of his body and refused to be dammed. When she put cool fingers over his mouth and kissed the lids of his eyes, he

[33] Rilke 153.
[34] Euripides, "Alcestis."

quivered, like he had never known how much he had to sing until he forced himself to stop it up.

She never refused to let him sing, which in itself was unremarkable. No one would; he knew that. But now and then she left, flew riotous and not-quite-laughing through the grove, a small smile thrown over her shoulder for him to hold like a flower. Was it the music? Were there times that melody became intolerable? Perhaps she lay exhausted and serene, her hair a violent halo, and memorized the silence. Or screamed, discordant, every jangling songless organ to her name.

When she came back, breathless and quiet, he would touch her with the palms of his hands only, all over, slow and soft, and speak instead of sing; and could never say if she noticed, as the fire died down, how he tripped, unthinking, into iambs.

The point at which you say: at this moment, I need to be human more than I need to be happy.

And they had loved all the wrong people, really. They had lain awake through those nights like thunder or the space after birth. They had spent years and years wishing only for the courage to open up their eyes and mouths and shaking arms for the people they loved so badly and so well, to spill themselves out like gasoline in front of those other eyes so when they went up in flames they would burn in company. For once, for all. They had spent years of nights alone trembling for another's chest and neck, which they could almost feel, which they couldn't feel, which they were mourning for and never moving on from, not at night, not those nights, because that would be impossible and like telling the world no thank you for this perfect agony, that you have given me like a gift or

terrible lesson. Thank you. They shook in their beds with cracked lips and mouthed words and tried to remember who they had been before love, and laughed unbearably.

I do not want to be dead and I do not want to be comforted.

And then after those years, after the weight of those nights which shuttered their eyelids down like closed drawbridges and left their pupils bright and old with the effort of sight, victory, a tragic theatre, this is life, this is what it means, they said, I am in love my god and it is ruining my life, or creating it, the difference is minute and impossible – after so long a time the opportunity had come. The chance to breathe in front of someone else. To litter themselves on the floor, and leave a trace of their skin reflected in the mirror.

I do not want relief of personhood.

They had laid down their aching bones and started choking on their hearts. They had fixed their eyes, sideways, guiltily, fixedly, the way people in love with the wrong people always learn to do, on the staggering lines of the unbearable bones of those people they loved. Those wrong people lit up with that love, with gazes askance, who had created worlds for them, most lovely or shattering, sheer, impossible, exhausting, bursts of light in the night that had exploded walls like veins and left them blind. All other possible universes dimmed; a thousand alternative ways home burnt to the ground and smoking still. These people whom they had allowed to cast their fragile late night selves. And finally the chance to cry in front of them, to lose themselves.

I will claw out not a world for myself but a self for this world I find myself in.

And these people who had loved all the wrong people, who were sprawled out in front of them even now, mouths creaking open and years of travel at stake, who looked at them and knew they had chosen the worst possible people to love, the worst time to attempt this desperate crucial tightrope, really, the most untenable course of action, who were suddenly tired beyond bearing, whose feelings swelled within them past tears, past the keening point of that need and loss and hope that had sung in them since it first had cut them open years before, and maybe that was all they had needed or wanted to be given, and now they had made it theirs, had curled up in that blood and that need and that lack like the best bed and realest morning that life could offer –

wiped their eyes, without a word, and went home.

I will make its terms my terms, I will live within its terms if that is what is necessary to live here.

At the Battle of Karbala, 61 years after the death of the Prophet, 680 AD, Husayn ibn Ali pressed on and on against the army of Yazid, lips cracked with thirst, loved bodies scattered and pierced under the indomitable sun, weakening, blood pooling from the arrow he grasped and dislodged from his chest, the only living descendant of the Prophet.

As blood poured forth from the arrow wound he weakened and stopped fighting. Seeing that he was about to die, the soldiers hesitated to fight, but encircled him. Husayn's nephew Abd-Allah ibn Hassan, a young boy still, escaped from the tents and ran to his uncle. When a soldier moved to kill Husayn, Abd-Allah defended him with his arm, which was then severed. Husayn moved to embrace Abd-Allah, but the boy was pierced already with an arrow.

Husayn mounted his horse and tried to leave. The army pursued him. According to Shi'a tradition, a voice issued from the skies and said:

"We are satisfied with your deeds and sacrifices."

And he rested.

Someone had written on the bathroom wall: "I LOVE A BOY AND ISN'T IT SAD WE'LL ALL DIE EVINTUALLY."

Not just life but *this* life.

Look through pictures, false tone sepia, as though the physical truth of it can bleed meaning out. These are eyes, these are bones, this is the shape of the nose of what you call love.

The afterimage was burned into Orpheus's vision. He felt his gaze surge, her hazy form like the sun in his eyes, and could not say if he looked then, or only had looked once before.

One of us will someday live in a world without the other. Either I will endure your death, or you will endure mine.

It was a practical suggestion she made
not to look back.

– Paula Bonnell[35]

*

At length, you return to the anonymous letter. The heading greets you by name and with inexplicable tenderness. At the first line, though, you halt, a little indignant, deciding whether or not you are hurt.

It says:

This is not for you.
This is about you.

You read on.

[35] Paula Bonnell, Message (MillCreek Press: 1999).

Eurydice without Orpheus

Part 2:

Essay

> *Once the realization is accepted that even between the closest human beings infinite distances continue, a wonderful living side by side can grow, if they succeed in loving the distance between them which makes it possible for each to see the other whole against the sky.*
>
> - Rainer Maria Rilke[36]

Orpheus, the greatest musician in the lexicon of Ancient Greek mythology, falls in love with a young nymph named Eurydice. By all accounts, she is beautiful; by all implications, she loves him as well. On their wedding day, a snake bites her and she dies. Orpheus is devastated. Unable to cope with her loss, he travels to the underworld to beg for Eurydice's return. Drawing on his great skill, he sings and plays his lyre in an effort to move the rulers of the underworld, Hades and Persephone. He is successful: his desolation and melody bring tears to the eyes of all the denizens of death, and the gods are moved to grant his plea. His wife will be revived. When he makes the journey from the underworld up to the mortal sphere, she will follow behind. There is only one requirement: he is not to look behind him. Should he give in to the temptations of his love or anxiety and turn to see her before they reach the upper world, Eurydice will be lost forever. Orpheus agrees, and begins the ascent.

§

The chapter in cultural discourse afforded to the story of Orpheus and Eurydice betrays, in its richness and endurance, a collective fascination approaching the point of compulsion. Orpheus and Eurydice, together and apart, have inspired religions, operas,

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[36] Rainer Maria Rilke, Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke, vol 1, ed. Jane Bannard Greene (New York: W. W. Norton, 1945).

ballets, sculptures, films, plays, essays, paintings, poetry, and academic texts. Their story has been chronicled, referred to, retold, invoked, and weighed in on by Pindar, Virgil, Ovid, Euripides, Plato, Titian, Alexander Pope, Auguste Rodin, Anselm Feuerbach, Jean Anouilh, Claudio Monteverdi, George Balanchine, Igor Stravinsky, Rainer Maria Rilke, H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), Tennessee Williams, Ted Hughes, Maurice Blanchot, Margaret Atwood, Sarah Ruhl, Ted Hughes, Jean Cocteau, Czeslaw Milosz, and numberless others. (See Appendix for a selection.)

Artistic returns to the myth sometimes celebrate it, sometimes analyze it, and sometimes fill in information that artists feel the "original" story lacks. But to speak of an original story is already a dangerous endeavor: the simplest of questions it would imply – who wrote it? when? – are impossible to answer. The first mention of Orpheus is in the sixth century B.C., a two-word fragment by lyric poet Ibycus: *onomakluton Orphen*, "Orpheus famous of name."[37] Ibycus does not begin the story, only references its already rich history – this over 2600 years ago, and it is impossible to guess for how long Orpheus survived in oral tradition prior to that. Centuries later, Orpheus' descent for his wife is discussed in Euripides' play "Alcestis" and Plato's "Symposium." Even then, the tale is not entirely told: classics scholar M. Owen Lee notes that "in every literary reference . . . for at least three centuries subsequent to the myth, there is no second loss of Eurydice. In Eurypides (Alc), Isokrates, Hermesianax, etc…, Orpheus is clearly thought to have been successful in resurrecting Eurydice."[38] The myth, then, advances piece by piece. Latin poets Ovid and Virgil, whose tellings of the myth are most comprehensive

[37] M. Owen Lee, Virgil as Orpheus: A Study of the Georgics (Albany, State University of New York Press: 1996) 3.
[38] Lee, "Mystic Orpheus: Another Note on the Three-Figure Reliefs" (*Hesperia* 33: 1964): 401-404.

and most regularly referenced as sources, wrote between 70 B.C and 17 A.D. – 500 years after Orpheus' first recorded appearance on the scene. While generally credited with passing down the bulk of it, by that point in its history neither Virgil nor Ovid could be considered creators of the myth: only the authors of two particularly authoritative (occasionally complementary and occasionally contradictory) versions.

The myth of Orpheus and Eurydice warrants attention for the very reason that it is not an isolated and consistent work: no singular time-bound text can preside over it. Ovid, who details their story in his "Metamorphoses," attributes to Eurydice one word only: *farewell,* as her husband's glance sends her back into death. "There was no complaint to her husband," he writes, because what did she have to complain of, "except that she had been loved"?[39] (A statement to which I will return later.) Virgil frames it somewhat differently. His Eurydice produces a dying speech that is eloquent, sustained, and mature, replete with themes of gratuitous loss and the impotence of possession:

> Who has destroyed us, miserable you and me, Orpheus?
> What kind of utter madness? See there, the cruel Fates call [me]
> back again and sleep darkens my swimming eyes.
> And now goodbye. I am wrapped up in a vast night
> holding out these strengthless hands that do not belong to you.[40]

As Kaja Silverman notes, Virgil's Eurydice "establish[es] her death as a catastrophe for *her*, as well as for *him*."[41] Compare this Eurydice to Ovid's, who whispers farewell and returns obediently to the underworld, and it becomes clear that losing one is a substantively different thing from losing the other. From the two divergent narratives, distinct silhouettes of Eurydice emerge – or, more precisely, silhouettes of each author's relationship to Eurydice: what each wills and permits her to be. Ovid's relationship to

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[39] Ovid Book X.
[40] Virgil (Locke).
[41] Kaja Silverman, Flesh of My Flesh (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009) 48.

Eurydice is patently different from Virgil's; this relationship determines the place and persona available for Eurydice to occupy. The variation in Eurydice's character is proof of the degree to which the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice has always invited insertion, reclamation, and revision: there is no one character of Eurydice.

And the contrast between Ovid and Virgil is only the beginning. "Orpheus His Journey to Hell," a text attributed only to an R.B, circa 1595, tends toward themes of overt masculine possession – in furious dialogue with Virgil's "strengthless hands that do not belong to you":

> In all his wearie journey up againe,
> hee should not once looke back unto his loue:
> But from the speaking to her should refraine,
> untill he came up to the world aboue,
> Which if he did, then should he all his life,
> Enjoy her bodie as his married wife.[42]

A look at that Eurydice – reducible to a body to be enjoyed, following the appropriate context of marriage and Orpheus' success in the underworld – makes clear again the extent to which each iteration of the characters have had sewn into them the authors' own desires, perspectives, and context. Compare sixteenth century Eurydice with imagist poet H.D.'s "Eurydice," a first person expression of Eurydice's perspective written during H.D.'s own rupture with her husband. The poem closes with:

> 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;
>
> and my spirit with its loss
> knows this;
> though small against the black,

[42] R.B., "Orpheus His Journey to Hell," *Early English Books Online,* URL: http://eebo.chadwyck.com/home, accessed March 2011.

small against the formless rocks,
hell must break before I am lost;

before I am lost,
hell must open like a red rose
for the dead to pass.[43]

Even having lost external definition (herself in relation to Orpheus, as she tends to be portrayed) and life itself, this Eurydice is one of sharp, defiant, and furious clarity.

With so much room for artistic license, the only common denominators across tellings of the myth are a few bare facts. Eurydice is loved; killed; offered reprieve from death; and, as a result of her lover's inability to keep his gaze away from her for the duration of their ascent, returned to death. Orpheus, alternatively, loves; ventures; secures hope; and loses his lover forever because – for whatever reason – unable to obey the law of the gods, he glances behind for a look at Eurydice. The elements of the story are raw, understated, and centered around dramas, at once deeply personal and universal, integral to the human experience. Armed with these salient features, reading or retelling the myth begins to resemble the act of gravestone rubbings. The attempt to assess meaning and character from grooves in the stone leaves one recording the topography of their own sensation. Something emerges on the paper as one touches the tomb: the impact, to each surveyor, of what is etched in the stone.

The legacy of Orpheus and Eurydice, how the story is read and how reclaimed, has progressed in two divergent directions. First, as a love story – words I use as shorthand for a human story, a transcript of individuals. In this guise, the story is considered and repossessed through the lens of what takes place within and between Orpheus and Eurydice: it is treated, in other words, as a true and relevant story about the

[43] H.D., Collected Poems, 1912-1944, ed. Louis L Martz (New York: New Directions Books, 1983) 51.

human experience. This reading lends itself to reclamation of both characters by the authors and artists who follow it: they insert themselves in the story, claim the title of Orpheus or Eurydice, and, in so doing, assert the truth of Orpheus and Eurydice's experiences by aligning them with their own.

The other construction and evaluation of the myth consists of a step further away (where the first tradition entailed a closer look). In this tradition, explanations are proposed for the myth that follow in a history of analysis and theory – aesthetic, feminist, philosophical, art historical, and any number of others. As semiotician Roland Barthes writes in his "Mythologies," "Myth is a language."[44] Analytic perspectives in this tradition explore what that language is saying. Here, the focus is more structural, considering relations between groups: Orpheus and Eurydice are not so much individuals as symbols of something more, indicative of the *female* experience, the *artistic* experience, or the *loving* experience rather than the human experience. The myth shifts from story to allegory. Historically, those who evaluate and explore the myth tend to choose one perspective or the other: to read Orpheus and Eurydice as people or as archetypes. At some point, these come into conflict: an argument to which I will return later.

In a first look at the myth, Orpheus and Eurydice appear each forever bounded by the other. Their fame and their death are both functions of the role played in each others' lives – a phenomenon admittedly endemic to most canonically great love stories. Such a characterization distinguishes itself in the Orpheus myth, however, by what might be called its superfluity. While Orpheus owes to Eurydice the climax and denouement of his life, his achievements prior to and independent of her render him, by all rights,

[44] Roland Barthes, Mythologies, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972) 11.

memorable on platonic counts alone. And once they did. Early references to Orpheus mention no wife at all, alluding only to his musical ability: Ibycus refers to his fame; Simonides describes him playing ("Not a breath of wind arose to rustle the leaves of the trees, or to interrupt the honied voice . . .")[45]; Pindar names him "the master lyrist, father of songs."[46] He traveled with the Argonauts. He founded and inspired the Orphic mysteries, a religious sect obsessed with katabasis (the epic descent into the underworld) and his poetry. He is, in other words, memorialized as an artist long before encountering any immortality as a lover.

In contrast, Euripides and Plato, the earliest sources of Orpheus' plunge into death to retrieve his wife, do not name her at all. First to do so is the Alexandrian poet Hermesianax, in the fourth century B.C., who calls her "Agriope" – she of the wild eyes, or, potently, the wild voice.[47] (The one word that Ovid attributes to her, *farewell,* is, he notes, barely heard by Orpheus.) As the woman for whom Orpheus braves death gradually takes shape in the pages of mythology, she becomes Eurydice: a wood nymph, or water nymph, or perhaps a daughter of Apollo, beloved of Orpheus and lost twice. Little is known. Even the name Eurydice, "she whose justice extends widely," "wide ruling," often served as a title, and may be only an honorific. The details are vague, and with reason. While Orpheus' legacy has flourished for centuries without her, Eurydice is late to arrive and slow to solidify as a distinct character – if, indeed, she ever becomes one. Kaja Silverman notes that "most of [the myth's] 're-editions' allegorize the story and

[45] Karl Otfried Müller, History of the Literature of Ancient Greece, trans. George Cornwall Lewis (London: Robert Baldwin, 1847) 212.
[46] Pindar, *Pythian 4*, trans. Steven J. Willett, 2001, Perseus, 5 Dec. 2010 <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu>.
[47] Kathryn J. Gutzwiller, A Guide to Hellenistic Literature (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2007) 65.

focus on Orpheus – often to the complete exclusion of Eurydice."[48] If Orpheus and Eurydice are dependent upon and inextricable from each other, Eurydice's genesis seems to suffer considerably more for it than that of Orpheus, who is at least permitted personality and biography beyond his devotion.

Ultimately, however, the etymology of his name suggests a dependence just as great, and as terminal. Orpheus appears to stem from the Proto-Indo-European orbhao-, "to be deprived," orbh-, "to put asunder, separate."[49] More than any prior accomplishment, the image now most associated with Orpheus is consistent with that fundamental sense of deprivation, as author Donna Tartt sketches briefly: "poor Orpheus turning for a last backwards glance at the ghost of his only love and in the same heartbeat losing her forever"[50] It is for Eurydice that he ventures into death; it is for Eurydice that he looks behind. And it is for Eurydice that he grieves, consumingly, voluptuously – a grief that results in both unparalleled musical ability and untimely death. Successes and failures alike rest on the love for a woman whom mythology barely took the time to name. So that Orpheus, now, is remembered mostly for Eurydice – and Eurydice was never remembered for anything else.

Feminist scholar Margaret Bruzelius argues that

> Eurydice is twice forgotten: forgotten first because she is remembered only as the occasion of Orpheus's first miracle, his descent to the underworld, and forgotten again when her

[48] Silverman 52.
[49] William K. Freiert, "Orpheus: A Fugue on the Polis," Myth and the Polis, eds. Dora Carlisky Pozzi and John Moore Wickersham (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991) 46.
[50] Donna Tartt, The Secret History (New York: Ballantine Books, 2002) 555.

> second death endows Orpheus's voice with such overwhelming power that her loss seems nugatory (1998).[51]

Her function, as Bruzelius frames it, is to provoke action and response. On the one hand, muse, inspiration, and catalyst are personae not without authority, especially within their classical context. The actions Eurydice inspires are momentous, unquestionably, and indicative of the colossal impact she has on Orpheus. Any characterization of her role as facilitative must therefore attribute to Eurydice significant influence even as it disavows it.

On the other hand, this still leaves on the table the initial imbalance of Orpheus' being granted artistry in the first place while Eurydice is heir to no particular talents – should one be inclined to draw comparisons. The uncomfortable accrual of creative talent exclusive to male characters bears noting; a glance back to etymology illustrates it well. Agriope, wild-voiced, finds an echo in the name of Orpheus' mother, Calliope: beautiful-voiced. And, too, one of Orpheus' earlier appearances (before any reference to Eurydice) is in the cast of Appollonius of Rhodes' *Argonautica*, the story of Jason and his band of heroes' sea-voyage. The ship must sail past the Sirens, singers of bewitchingly beautiful songs that lure men to their death. Orpheus comes along to save the Argonauts from their song. When the sailors sail past the Sirens' rocks, Orpheus plays his lyre so loudly and beautifully that the Sirens' music is drowned out. The crew survives. One form of the myth has it that the Sirens may only sing as long as no one can resist their song; bested by Orpheus, they throw themselves into the sea.

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[51] Margaret Bruzelius, "H.D. and Eurydice," *Twentieth Century Literature* Vol. 44 (1998).

It seems reasonable to conclude, tentatively, that Orpheus' musical voice has been portrayed in opposition to – even antagonistic toward – that of the women he encounters. And at least Ovid, as one of his principal storytellers, encourages this paradigm: Orpheus singing in a crowd of apparently vocal but effectively muted women. Orpheus has full monologues and is even cast as narrator of other stories in the Metamorphoses, roles difficult to imagine Ovid's Eurydice or Appollonius' Sirens taking on.

Art historian Judith Bernstock frames Orpheus and Eurydice's relation to each other in the context of Orpheus' art:

> His obsessive need for Eurydice and yet his revived creativity after her final death correspond to the ambivalence of the male artist toward the source of inspiration on whom he depends and yet whom he regards as a destructive obstacle to his creativity.[52]

The relationship between Pygmalion and Galatea, two other characters in Ovid's "Metamorphoses," illustrates the weight of this paradigm – male artistic ambivalence toward female inspiration – for at least one of the Orpheus myth's major storytellers. The story of Pygmalion and Galatea, which Ovid has Orpheus narrate, features the only happy ending earned by a couple in the "Metamorphoses." It goes like this: Pygmalion is a master sculptor, so disgusted by "the failings that nature gave the female heart" that he lives without the companionship of women. This is reminiscent of Orpheus' preferences following his reluctant ascent from the underworld:

> "Orpheus had abstained from the love of women, either because things ended badly for him, or because he had sworn to do so . . . Indeed, he was the first of the Thracian

[52] Judith Bernstock, Under the Spell of Orpheus: The Persistence of a Myth in Twentieth-Century Art (Southern Illinois University, 1991) 179.

> people to transfer his love to young boys, and enjoy their brief springtime, and early flowering, this side of manhood."

Both Orpheus and Pygmalion, in Ovid's telling, participate in the lineage of heterosexual love stories. The dominant narratives about them are centered around their great love for a woman, their romantic and sexual fulfillment (or search for it) at the hands of one. And yet Pygmalion, before his successful heterosexual love affair, "lived as a bachelor, without a wife or partner for his bed," and Orpheus abstains expressly as a result of "things end[ing] badly for him" with Eurydice. Ovid explicitly sets heterosexual love at the core of both men's lives and stories. More marginal sexual preferences (homosexuality and asexuality) occupy the sidelines of this supreme but also problematic heterosexuality: Orpheus and Pygmalion practice other courses as a response to and remedy for failures, seemingly quite common, incurred in the pursuit of love for women.[53]

To explain this, feminist philosopher Judith Butler's ideas on gender may provide some support. She describes gender identity as in part founded upon a repudiated *other*, against whom one's own identity is defined: a specter one must constantly work to keep at bay.[54] I am this because I am *not that* (e.g. "I am male because I am not female.") Heterosexuality draws both its strength and its destruction from such an imperative: normative masculinity demands heterosexuality, which implies a sexual recourse between two whose gender identities are founded upon being as different from each other as possible. Pygmalion's asexuality and Orpheus' turn to homosexuality are presented by Ovid as directly following from the failings of women or the pitfalls of romantic

[53] Ovid Book X.
[54] Judith Butler, Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex" (New York: Routledge, 1993).

investment in them; consistent with Bernstock's observations about "the ambivalence of the male artist toward the source of inspiration," both are artists.

Pygmalion begins his masterpiece in direct reaction to his sexless and misogynistic existence. "Offended" by the women he sees "spending their lives in wickedness," he denies them all and begins to sculpt a superior instance of womanhood. This statue, carved "with wonderful skill," is, it is clarified, "no mortal woman." (Remember here that Ovid has Orpheus narrating.) What next? Pygmalion falls in love "with his own creation," the woman-and-work-of-art he has forged. "He marvels: and passion, for this bodily image, consumes his heart": his love is prompted equally by the woman, as an aesthetic and static image, and his own ability to produce art. Obsessed with his creation, he touches it – imagines it is real – "kisses it and thinks his kisses are returned." he has projected not only personality but life itself onto the statue: deaf and dumb and immobile, or docile, silent, and female. He compliments the statue, gives it gifts, dresses and adorns it. Then he sleeps next to it, and "calls it his bedfellow."[55]

On the day of Venus' festival, Pygmalion makes an offering to the goddess of love and asks to have as a bride "one like my ivory girl." Venus, in response, makes the shrine's flame flare three times "as a sign of the gods' fondness for him" and to indicate the fulfilment of his wish. Far from being angry with Pygmalion for previously hating women (and choosing to try his own hand at their creation), Venus forgives his misogyny as either negligible or reasonable. Whichever it is, Pygmalion's devotion earns him what he had hoped for: his ivory girl come to life. Coming home after the festival, he finds her warm, amenable, and in all respects alive. Subsequently and somewhat inexplicably, they

[55] Ovid Book X.

live happily ever after.[56] (Pygmalion creates; his new wife Galatea exists, as an image and a sexual partner; this story, and this alone, Ovid presents a successful love affair.) Now satisfied with Galatea, one presumes, Pygmalion has no more need to make sculptures of women.

However much the women in their lives influence them, the art of both Orpheus and Pygmalion exists in a space where the women who inspire it are absolutely, furiously absent. Orpheus plays his greatest music when Eurydice is dead – in his plea to Hades and Persephone for her return, and in his grief when her death becomes irrevocable. Had Eurydice been around, one imagines, the time spent in happy union with her would have left little energy – or motivation – for such masterworks as those inspired by her absence.

Return to Bruzelius' claim of Eurydice as a catalyst. In that sense, her influence matches exactly her impotence. Supremely responsible for creation but incapable of it herself, Eurydice is defined and validated by her absence – by the places she does not and cannot inhabit. What position, then, does she occupy? Eclipsed by Orpheus' achievements, but at all times their origin, nearly irrelevant and of ultimate relevance, Eurydice is at once bit player and star of the show. Treatment of the myth as allegory attempts to resolve these roles by treating her as the plot itself.

The title of impetus and phenomenon becomes a valid one by virtue of the myth's inability to declare her anything more (or, just as importantly, less). The only mortal ever allowed by the gods to breathe again, once dead, and what do we know about her? What common features emerge in all the myth's different iterations? Almost nothing: that she

[56] Ovid Book X.

is beautiful, she marries Orpheus, she is mortal. Permitted no greater access to her character than the barest of details, one is left to reconcile its descriptive poverty with the overwhelming force the character exerts on the story she occupies. The etymology, again, reinforces this conflict. Orpheus and Agriope – he deprived; she wild-eyed, wild-voiced, wide-ruling. One marked by deficit, the other, etymologically, suffused with power and character. On paper the dynamic seems clear; in actuality, it strikes one as an ironic opposite. An attempt to read the characters as singular and real seems to have failed in the wake of the paucity of detail, and a larger-scale, allegorical reading steps up to offer an alternative. The tension between Eurydice's sway and her silence can be reconciled – if one reads Eurydice not as a failed *persona* in her own right, but as a successful *personification* of the forces and conflicts her role (woman, muse, beloved, mortal other) brings into play.

Apollodorus and Pindar have it that Orpheus was the son of Oeagrus, a Thracian king.[57] Others suggest his father was Apollo. His mother might have been a daughter of Pierus but is more commonly thought to be Calliope, muse of epic poetry. He was born in Pimpleia, a city near Mount Olympus, and died, Pausanias writes, in Dion.[58] His story begins at birth and extends until death. Eurydice's, on the other hand, begins at her introduction as love interest, and ends at her second death and the wreckage her loss leaves behind.

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[57] Appollodorus 1.3.1; Pindar fragment 126.

[58] Pausanias. *Description of Greece.* Ed. W. H. S. Jones and H. A. Ormerod. 6 vols. London: William Heinemann, 1918.

The text of the "Metamorphoses" underscores the absence integral to Eurydice's presence. Ovid describes Orpheus' ill-fated and ominous wedding, the marriage torch "sputter[ing] continually," concluding that "The result was worse than any omens." Following this, the reader meets Eurydice, just as she dies: "While the newly wedded bride, Eurydice, was walking through the grass with a crowd of naiads as her companions, she was killed, by a bite on her ankle, from a snake sheltering there."[59] Michael Schmidt writes in *The First Poets* that "I take Orpheus to have been an actual man with an actual harp in his hand"; while few today are certain of this, most of the ancients held it to be the case.[60] No one, on the other hand, has ever suggested that Eurydice was a real person.

The stage, then, is appropriately set for a story composed not of two characters, but one character and one conflict – symbol – archetype. We are given no further information beyond that Eurydice is female, mortal, and inspires love, and in fact, the authors suggest, need no more: the fundamentals are already at our disposal. "The ancient image of this never-lived, long-dead Dryad nymph," argues Liz Locke in a dissertation about the body of Eurydice, captures the cultural imagination to this day because it "continue[s] to serve so well as the incorporeal sign-woman in its most extreme form."[61] Freed from the burden of particulars or personality, Eurydice can, in fact, function in many ways as a placeholder; perhaps it makes the most sense for her to.

This perspective, however, quickly becomes problematic. Bruzelius' assessment of Eurydice (eclipsed catalyst for Orpheus' more valuable art) frames artistry only in a

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[59] Ovid Book X.
[60] Michael Schmidt, The First Poets: Lives of the Ancient Greek Poets (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2004).
[61] Liz Locke,"Eurydice's Body: Feminist Reflections of the Orphic Descent Myth in Philosophy and Film" (Diss. Indiana University, 2000).

context of power and currency, fame and legacy – in which senses Orpheus certainly has the jump on Eurydice. And a myth that has remained and obsessed for centuries in so many permutations, the story of Orpheus and Eurydice has undeniable roots and repercussions in the realm of the sociopolitical. But to treat a description of love and art solely according to this framework (ten points for Orpheus, zero for Eurydice!) seems to be setting our goals rather low. Stories endure when they explore ideas of interest; they may be created with an eye to exploring these ideas; but one must presume at least an original grounding in characters, individuals, specifics. However sparing the details, however formless the features, the story of Orpheus and Eurydice is intended initially as a description not of men and women, artists and muses, or living and dead – but of the two lovers alone.

That said, neither they nor anyone have the privilege of being wholly singular or absent of context, and the story invites exploration by virtue of its implications extensible from those two to, perhaps, others. I will return to this tension, at the crux of the myth and its repossessions, regarding where to strike a balance between Orpheus and Eurydice as representative and Orpheus and Eurydice as individuals. Suffice for now to acknowledge that the story at least begins with individuals, not symbols; I will be leery of the landscapes in which I place them.

To return to the question of art as a capsule for the inequality of Orpheus and Eurydice, Orpheus powerful and Eurydice negligible, I proceed permitting both characters to be individuals in relation to each other. Art cannot and could not be reduced to power alone. Consider the many other functions art plays in mythology: specifically,

here, art as expression and transmission. The talent of Orpheus, especially after Eurydice's death, is not a capitalization on the vagaries of fate that afford him new material. Both in the story of the couple and in the historiography of the myth, Orpheus was a musician long before Eurydice entered the scene.

Whatever the reasons or implications for Orpheus' casting as the single voice amid and against the silence of women, Orpheus' musical talent is a pre-existing personality trait. It reaches its height at two important moments: in the underworld, attempting to win back Eurydice's life, and in mourning after her second death. In both cases, these moments of monumental creative output are uses of previous talent as a means to an end. Consistent with my aim of treating Orpheus and Eurydice first as characters and second as writing on the wall, it must be noted that Orpheus plays his music not *as a man,* but as a person in difficult situations using all the arrows in his quiver to accomplish his goals. First, he uses his art to sway the hearts of the rulers of the underworld (admittedly a "power to" in its own right, with implications of Orpheus as savior on the behalf of an immobile Eurydice), and second – a point which warrants some attention – out of grief.

Orpheus' song is bourne from what appears to be overpowering anguish at the loss of his lover. Singing conveys this heartache and, presumably, offers some relief: "He endeavoured in vain to re-enter the infernal regions; and his sorrows during the remainder of his life admitted of no alleviation but from the sound of his lyre, amid the deepest solitude."[62] His life after Eurydice's death is characterized by loss. It is true that Orpheus, "deprived," "separated," lives and creates music while Eurydice lies silent under the earth,

[62] The British Controversialist, and Literary Magazine (London: Houlston and Wright, 1868) 464.

and the ability to produce art is undeniably a privilege. But the overwhelming power of Orpheus' voice, following the second loss of Eurydice, is not a consolation prize after his wife's death but a visceral and consuming embodiment of his longing – of *lack*.

Bruzelius notes that Orpheus' musical success follows directly from his loss of Eurydice, perhaps in fact eclipsing it; but this need not imply a zero-sum game in which Orpheus, endowed with voice and life, wins and Eurydice loses. One can hardly conclude a trade-off ordained of his profit and her privation. The temptation to frame their relationship with the simplicity of cause and effect (she dies, his talent increases) risks neglecting the potential for any greater humanity and exchange possible between a man and a woman, then or now. And as Bruzelius adds:

> But the story of Orpheus's gaze is not only the story of the mute female object passive before the male artist's gaze. It is also the story of the artist's dependence on that erotic other, the external subject that enables him to become the artist who is Orpheus.[63]

The capacity of Orpheus too, then, is defined and formed by that other. And Orpheus and Pygmalion depend not just on the erotic other but on the *absent* erotic other: an idea made more comprehensible with a look at Roland Barthes, who, in "A Lover's Discourse," describes the experience of the absent lover.

> Now, absence can only exist as a consequence of the other: it is the other who leaves, it is I who remain. The other is in a condition of perpetual departure, of journeying; the other is, by vocation, migrant, fugitive; I — I who love, by converse vocation, am sedentary, motionless, at hand, in expectation, nailed to the spot, *in suspense* — like a package in some forgotten corner of a railway station. Amorous absence functions in a single direction, expressed

[63] Bruzelius.

> by the one who stays, never by the one who leaves: an always present *I* is constituted only by a confrontation with an always absent *you*. To speak this absence is from the start to propose that the subject's place and the other's place cannot permute."[64]

Orpheus' position, consistent with Barthes' framing, is a deeply lonely one. Note that after the second death of Eurydice, Orpheus begs the guardians of the underworld to let him back in – not to try again to save his wife, but to join her in death. He is not allowed to. (Here, consider the dissenting view, proposed by the character Phaedrus in Plato's *Symposium.*[65] According to Phaedrus, Eurydice was never resurrected at all. The gods offered Orpheus only a ghost of his wife, in order to punish him for the cowardice of being unwilling to join her in death. Instead of doing the brave thing by dying also, Phaedrus argues, which would have proved his love to be true, Orpheus flouts the laws of life and death by trying to get his wife back. As such, the chance the gods seem to offer – Eurydice's life restored – is totally false, and intended to hurt. Plato presupposes the impossibility of a permanent union between two mortals: the only solution for Orpheus, in love with a woman dead, is to join her there.)

Ovid punctuates Eurydice's death with a parenthetic inquiry, brutal in its naivete: "what, then, could she complain of, except that she had been loved?"[66] One may presume that she could complain of several things. Blithely rhetorical as the spirit of the question may be, it demands consideration beyond and because of its tone. What, in fact, *could* Eurydice complain of – even, and especially, if all complaints may in the end fall under the heading of being loved?

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[64] Roland Barthes, A Lover's Discourse, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1979) 13.
[65] Plato, Symposium, trans. Harold Fowler (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1925).
[66] Ovid Book X.

The fame and death that, interlinked, unite and circumscribe the couple provide a hint. Such an intertwining serves simultaneously as commemoration and warning, a monument to love and to love's destructive power. Indeed, that fame and that death prove narratively inextricable, even interchangeable: the story of Orpheus and Eurydice renders itself a tragedy at the moment its romance is affirmed, and earns its classification as a love story by dint of the tragedy such love brings about. Tragically, he looks back; beautifully, he looks back; the combined force of loss and love is not coincidental. Devotion is wed with destruction.

Spurred by love, he looks to confirm that she lives, and confirmation of her life results immediately in her death. Why? Her second death does not come as a surprise, either to Orpheus or the reader, both of whom have been warned throughout (as in this scene from Jean Anouilh's play "Eurydice"):

> M. HENRI. Repeat it. If you were to forget that condition I could do no more for you.
> ORPHEUS. I am not to look her in the face.
> M. HENRI. It is not going to be easy.
> ORPHEUS. If I once look her in the face before morning, I lose her again.
> M. HENRI (*stops and smiles*). You are not asking why or how any longer, then?
> ORPHEUS (*always looking towards the door*). No.[67]

Neither Orpheus nor the scholars and writers following in his wake have questioned the initial prescript that pairs the critical look at one's lover with their permanent loss. This imperative cannot be reduced to the caprice and trickery of divinity. For the first and only time in mythology, Hades and Persephone are genuinely moved by a mortal's plea: they

[67] Jean Anouilh, "Eurydice," in Five Plays (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986).

sincerely intend to help him, and their proposal is not intended as false hope. Ovid writes that they "cannot bear to refuse his prayer."[68] That aside, even if we do presume the rule is a trap – a condition offered in the awareness that it cannot be fulfilled – the question remains. As tricks go, this is hardly an overtly impossible task. Presupposing the most sinister intentions on the part of the gods, they still are driven by a belief that the impulse to look behind, even at the cost of the lover's life, is consummately irresistible. Either their intentions are good, and the law against looking is beyond even the gods' power to mitigate – or else bad, in which case the gods uphold the law's weight and danger by deeming it unavoidably subject to transgression.

"Only death offers love its true climate," writes Jean Anouilh in his play "Eurydice."[69] In Ovid's rendering of the story, when Orpheus is killed he joins Eurydice in the underworld, and the picture painted of the lovers after death is made idyllic by explicit contrast with the life that preceded it:

> And when he found her, wound her in his arms
> And moved with her, and she with him, two forms
> Of the one love, restored and mutual –
> For Orpheus now walks free, is free to fall
> Out of step, into step, follow, go in front
> And look behind him to his heart's content.[70]

The meaning is clear: this happy scene is possible for Orpheus and Eurydice only when both are dead. If sympathetic readings of the Orpheus myth are derived from an understanding that love does and must induce such a look – anxiety and the need to

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[68] Ovid Book X.
[69] Jean Anouilh, "Eurydice," in Five Plays (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986) 184.
[70] Ovid, "Death of Orpheus," trans. Seamus Heaney, After Ovid: New Metamorphoses, ed. Michael Hofmann and James Lasdun (Noonday Press, 1996).

assuage it – what does that imply about the relationship between love and mortality in the myth?

The lack of equivalence between Orpheus and Eurydice (his agency and her immobility, his life and her death, etc.), while representative of an uneven distribution of power, also results in an irreparable disjunction between the two. Nowhere is such a disjunction – the *I* opposed criminally and irrevocably to the *you* – more colored with tragedy than in the relationship between lovers. Barthes' "A Lover's Discourse" begins with the premise that "the lover's discourse is today *of an extreme solitude*."[71] I propose that Orpheus exemplifies this lover's solitude: that one must neglect at least briefly any considerations of power and politics to consider Orpheus and Eurydice's existence in relation to each other as a fundamentally personal, and therefore lonely (or: lonely, and therefore personal), endeavor.

Orpheus and Eurydice, "two forms / of the one love," are, following Orpheus' death, "restored and mutual." The sense here is of the nature of romantic love as union (e.g. "my better half," "soul-mates," and other common expressions), a union done violence to by the fitfulness of life – and solved by death, which removes the catastrophic risk of one hurting or dying without the other. Donna Tartt illustrates the experience of a circumscribed and mortal self:

> But isn't it also pain that often makes us most aware of self? It is a terrible thing to learn as a child that one is a being separate from all the world, that no one and no *thing* hurts along with one's burned tongues and skinned knees, that one's aches and pains are all one's own.[72]

[71] Barthes 1.
[72] Tartt 36.

On the one hand Eurydice, dying without her husband, suffers most from this phenomenon. But the other side of the predicament of singularity – that no other is or can be aligned with oneself to the point of sharing experience and pain – is that the other, even and especially the beloved other, is unforgivably liable to pains and loss that leave the lover *lonely in the limits of his empathy.*

In the Orpheus myth, only Orpheus is present (literally, on earth, and figuratively as a character) enough to be wounded by the phenomenon of singularity. In fact, his life, from the point of Eurydice's first death to his only one, is a tribute to this wound and his attempts both to correct it and come to terms with it. The risk of separation and disconnection characteristic of love between two people is not loss of self, but loss of the other. So the reader experiences the loss of Eurydice with Orpheus, not with Eurydice: we do not grieve for her losing her life, but for Orpheus losing her presence. Eurydice, loved, may lose her life – but Orpheus, loving, must be prepared at every moment for the distance, alienation, and loss of his lover. Less terrible than the self in isolation is the other in isolation: one must cope with sensation and even death affecting one's lover alone; one must survive them.

Maurice Blanchot, in his essay "Literature and the Right to Death," articulates this danger:

> When I say, "This woman," real death has been announced and is already present in my language; my language means that this person, who is here right now, can be detached from herself, removed from her existence and her presence and suddenly plunged into a nothingness in which there is no existence or presence; my language essentially signifies

> the possibility of this destruction; it is a constant, bold allusion to such an event.[73]

Blanchot describes not the experience of loving a person – a woman, specifically – prone to the threats of mortality, but something more insidious: the route by which the death of the other is conceptualized, made possible and likely within the framework of one's worldview. In this sense, the task with which Orpheus grapples is not his wife's death but the fact that he lives within a world in which his wife can die. This is where Barthes' statement comes in, that "an always present *I* is constituted only by a confrontation with an always absent *you* . . . the subject's place and the other's place cannot permute." In this way the experience of the lover becomes synonymous with that extreme solitude: to love is to come to terms, or to be *forced* to come to terms, with the distance and danger of the other, the impossibility of union. Jean-Paul Sartre describes the fundamental rupture between the self and what exists outside of it: "The reality of that cup is that it *is* there and that it *is not me*. We shall interpret this by saying that the series of its appearances is bound by a principle which does not depend on my whims."[74]

Marcel Proust, while cognizant of the dangers that adhere to the phenomenon of loving something not oneself, marks these dangers as, also, one great strength of it.[75] According to his view, the act of loving can be an attempt to overcome the pain of singular existence described by Tartt. Loving another admits access to those parts of the world unknown – that is, everything outside of the self. Aligning oneself with another human being allows one to conceptualize what it is like to exist as something *not oneself*:

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[73] Maurice Blanchot, The Gaze of Orpheus and Other Literary Essays, trans. Lydia Davis (Barrytown: Station Hill Press, 1981).
[74] Jean-Paul Sartre, Being and Nothingness, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Citadel Press, 2001) xlvii.
[75] Proust, Remembrance of Things Past.

an awareness that the singularity of existence can make, or make appear, absolutely untenable. The ultimate task, as poet Rainer Maria Rilke phrases it, is to "love life in a form that is not your own": a visceral coming to terms with the extent of the world and those within it that are ultimately alien and ultimately perishable.[76] Friedrich Nietzsche describes love, ideally, as the internalization of this truth, arguing that it amounts to "the understanding and rejoicing in the fact that another person lives, acts, and experiences otherwise than we do."[77] Similarly, Erich Fromm says that "love is union with somebody, or something, outside oneself, under the condition of retaining the separateness and integrity of one's own self."[78] Interaction between two people implies, without fail, an encounter with a different perspective, set of experiences, and way of existing in the world. Here, to an extent, the benefit of love: a coming to terms with the fact that others are not oneself, are fundamentally distant from oneself, that their existence is not a function of one's own. A way out of the too-circumscribed self, a transcendence of it, is made tentatively possible.

Roland Barthes notes further, in his discussion of absence, that: "This endured absence is nothing more or less than forgetfulness. I am, intermittently, unfaithful. This is the condition of my survival; for if I did not forget, I should die. The lover who doesn't forget *sometimes* dies of excess, exhaustion, and tension of memory."[79] Orpheus does exactly this. He never forgets the grief of having lost Eurydice; his inability to move beyond it and accede to the Maenads' request for sex is what costs him his life. The

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[76] Rainer Maria Rilke, Letters to a Young Poet, trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Vintage Books, 1986) 42.
[77] Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Quotations Page," 15 Mar. 2011 <http://www.quotationspage.com/quote/33413.html>.
[78] Erich Fromm, The Sane Society (Fawcett Publications, 1965).
[79] Barthes 14.

Maenads, followers of Dionysus consumed by the abandon of bacchanalia, are attracted to Orpheus and demand that he join them.[80] Since the second loss of Eurydice, however, Orpheus has sworn off sex with women, and he denies the Maenads. Infuriated, they tear him to pieces.

According to Barthes' reading, it seems almost that Orpheus is guilty of loving *too much.* His love is an unlivable one, irreconcilable with the mortal world. Emmet Robbins, detailing the progression of the myth, notes that, "to the Romantics and to [the twentieth] century he has been the eternal seeker beyond the threshold."[81] If we return to Blanchot's remarks on "this woman" and her death, it might be said that Orpheus never actually metabolizes these ideas: his love admits no possibility of the death of the other, and that gives rise to both his successes and failures as a lover. Refusing to acknowledge death allows him to descend into hell and earn back Eurydice's life. His success as a lover is indicated by his continued popularity as one of the great mythical lovers – even his look behind as, sometimes, proof of love without limit. He fails, though, in that there is no room in his love for trust of Eurydice as a separate and distinct human being: the ultimate task, it turns out, for which he has failed to prepare. He loves her so much that he cannot come to terms with a world in which either of them can exist outside the sight or the life of the other.

It is for this reason that he descends to the underworld to rescue his lover (the only hero in mythology to embark on a katabasis for that reason): he has not capitulated to the possibility of her dying while he lives. He goes to the underworld because he loves

[80] Ovid Book X.
[81] Qtd. in Silverman 52.

Eurydice so much that he refuses to recognize a world in which he can be parted from her, separable – the separation for which he is named – and not unified. But then the tables are turned, and limitless love can no longer help him: success, during that critical ascent, is for Orpheus contingent upon the restraint of sight and impulse. The act of believing that the loved and mortal other exists outside one's scope of sight and certainty is presented as both his best hope and beyond his capability. The consuming passion of Orpheus, the lover, aggravates the perils of mortality. Trust in the life of the one's beloved is, it may be, offered as a solution to the problem of lovers existing in separate and mortal bodies.

It should be clear now that, while Orpheus lays claim to significantly more color, in the pages of mythology, than Eurydice, she is hardly the only victim. However much speculation there may be about power dynamics, the reader is granted access to Orpheus' state of mind alone; one can be fairly certain that for him to exist without her is an overwhelmingly desolate experience. Because Eurydice never lives without Orpheus, and is never present (in life or as a character in the story) enough to have a voice, she is inscrutable. For that reason, it is difficult to conclude anything more than that *he* seems to be emotionally dependent upon *her*. No one claims to know how she felt about him. The legacy of repossessions of the myth to explore her perspective are proof of the original story's inability, or unwillingness, to provide one. Orpheus' life is marked by his love for and loss of Eurydice to such an extent that it causes his most notable actions, his art, his death, and his mythological legacy. I have endeavored to prove the degree to which Orpheus' life and happiness depends on Eurydice, as well as the other way around.

The difference between Orpheus' dependence on Eurydice and Eurydice's dependence on Orpheus, however, rests on one crucial distinction. Orpheus' life, as stated,

is determined by his love for and feelings of loss after Eurydice; Eurydice's life, on the other hand, is determined by Orpheus himself. Eurydice has power to affect action – Orpheus has power to effect it. In this way, we can understand Eurydice and Orpheus as both bound up with and contingent upon the actions and influence of the other, but Orpheus emerges as significantly more an agent. The very ability to be affected by Eurydice – to have a character that can be affected – and to respond with actions and with art, proves him a person where Eurydice is a figure, acted upon and waiting for her life to be determined.

However much Orpheus' story may be prompted by Eurydice, therefore, the two are not equally endangered by the emphasis placed on the other. What Eurydice loses is not what Orpheus loses. And the losses Orpheus sustains, on the other hand, are losses that Eurydice was never colored in enough to have, as a character, survived. She exists to be loved and lost; he, to love and lose. Later, when Orpheus dies, Eurydice has long been dead – it is impossible to imagine a scenario in which she survives him – and one may grieve for Orpheus' life alone. The reader's alliance is consistent throughout.

Because only Orpheus is fully known, Eurydice's inscrutability comes to the reader through his perspective – his limited cognition of her as the loved other. In Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, she writes of Nabokov's novel *Lolita* that "We don't know what Lolita would have become if Humbert had not engulfed her. . . . Lolita on her own has no meaning; she can only come to life through her prison bars."[82] Eurydice's story might be read through a similar lens. The story of Orpheus and Eurydice is comparably framed to "Lolita" in that the reader is permitted a look at one character

[82] Azar Nafisi, Reading Lolita in Tehran (New York: Random House, 2004) 37.

through the perspective and narrative – the mythologizing – of the other character, in whose perspective the real subject, even at her most vaunted, is reduced to character, inspiration, influence.

The prescript of the gods – that Orpheus not, at all costs, look behind him – amounts to an injunction for him to trust, fundamentally, that Eurydice exists as separate from him: a being capable of existing while he is not looking at her. "Everything is at stake in the decision of the gaze," writes Blanchot in his essay "The Gaze of Orpheus."[83] Orpheus and Eurydice could be happy, by Nietzsche and Fromm's definition of love, if he can make it up to the mortal world without looking. All he has to do is make it to the top believing that Eurydice is alive, that both can be alive outside of the sight of each other: that loneliest and most redeeming aspect of love. But – ultimately, fatally, understandably, irrevocably – he has to check, and make sure. His trust in her existence as not contingent to his own fails him; and so he loses her. We know as little as we do about Eurydice because *Orpheus* knows that little: because he loves without admitting strangeness, without acknowledging and accepting the necessary horror of solitude.

Conclusion

The story described in this essay is the story of Orpheus and Eurydice. It is also the story of men and women, artists and muses, singers and mutes, lovers and loved, living and dead. How is one to reconcile these relationships – these categories of existence, distinct, uneven, and in dialogue with each other – with the individuals who occupy them? How, in other words, ought the story of Orpheus and Eurydice be read?

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[83] Blanchot 104.

Collective fascination with the myth certainly implies an enduring thematic preoccupation: the categories into which Orpheus and Eurydice fall are relevant, resonant: significant, in the sense that they signify. "Myth is a language," writes Barthes. Communicating, it justifies its validity as a route to the articulation or accomplishing of meaning. When the story is remembered, told, or reconsidered, it functions as a stage on which to enact nonspecific human dramas – their strength drawn from the specificity of experience that inspires them. The fact of their being told is testament to the worth in telling them, the work they continue to do.

H.D. casts herself as Eurydice in a poem coming to terms with her divorce from her husband; Ted Hughes frames his elegy for Sylvia Plath with him as the Orpheus to her Eurydice.[84] Thousands of years after its origin, something in the myth, reduced to the broad flatlines of the interactions it details, appeals. H.D. sees in the figure of Eurydice, Hughes in that of Orpheus, an identifiable and applicable phenomenon: to be a woman dependent, to be an artist whose love is rendered impotent by death, or any other sympathetic reading. Neither Eurydice nor Orpheus are alone in the positions they occupy or the events they are subject to: a fact asserted every time the myth is reinterpreted. Orpheus endures because he is not only Orpheus – because there is space in what he does, is, and represents for Ted Hughes, H.D.'s estranged husband, and any number of others. The experience of being Orpheus can be extended past the boundaries of Orpheus alone; he is more and less than he claims to be; and in that flexibility his relevance persists. It seems reasonable to conclude, then, that the story is more than that of just Orpheus and Eurydice.

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[84] Ted Hughes, Birthday Letters (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998).

And yet Orpheus and Eurydice cannot, must not, be reduced to man and woman, lover and loved, or the violence of any other placeholder. Consider a retelling framed as: *Man falls in love with woman;* or, *artist reclaims muse; lover mourns loved*; and so on. A reduction of the myth to interaction between these demographics is (in addition to being a somewhat dry affair) not story but parable. Myth may be language, but language is not reducible to truth. The variety of retellings – Orpheus bumbling, Orpheus anxious, Orpheus jealous, Orpheus consumed with love; Eurydice docile, Eurydice loving, Eurydice furious, Eurydice denied – is testament to the ambiguity of that language. There is no clean line available to delineate when the myth began being told and when it was completed. As far as the artists, academics, and audience interested are concerned, it remains unfinished, added and amended with striking regularity. As such, the story cannot be stripped of specifics to lay bare its true implications – which, by their nature, cannot help but shift.

The danger in construing the myth too heavily as a symbolic or sociopolitical endeavor follows from neglect of the communal and variable nature of its authorship. To explain what the myth says about *the woman and the man* is to say what is thought and who thinks it. Can we answer either? There is no singular lesson in the story of Orpheus and Eurydice: where one reader concludes that looking behind is Orpheus' tragic flaw, the other is touched by it; where one is confused, the other nods with understanding. One analysis argues for the power Eurydice possesses, the other bemoans her disenfranchisement. None need be right or wrong.

At the same time, context is invaluable: as readers, artists, and academics immediately identify and cleave to, Orpheus and Eurydice are divided along several lines of power and distance. These separations inform their experiences, actions, and relationships with each other. Many of the separations (male and female, lover and beloved, artist and inspiration) still hold water today: these are enduring structures that shape, complicate, and problematize relationships between individuals. However singular one may be, however rare and specific one self's relationship with another self, we have learned ways to conceive of one's relevance to the other and the other's relevance to oneself that prove, often, irreversible. This is difficult: artists' invocation of the myth is proof of the degree to which the interference and sway of these structures in mediating human relationships is, at times, intolerable.

The context of societal roles, now, the crudeness of demographics and the sociopolitical, is important to consideration and reception of the myth by virtue of its incongruity with the individuals of interest. The parable version ("man falls in love with woman," etc.) is uncomfortable, even demeaning, because in the service of exploring broader structural phenomena it neglects or refuses the lived experience of those who are subject to its structures. There is no relationship between *man* and *woman*, however helpful a broad overview of gendered relationships might be: there are only human beings, striving toward meaning and fulfilment within and beyond what gender roles and expectations have determined, encouraged, circumscribed. Love anchors the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, as well as many of those who interpret and retell it; love, between one individual and another, framed by Barthes as the loneliest and most singular of

experiences – yet more universal than anything else, and, as such, perpetually constructed and informed by the relationship ordained between the categories to which one belongs.

The discomfort the sociopolitical framing produces is sourced in its opposition between categories: the vast expanse of men opposed to the vast expanse of women, etc. Wrongs have been done, throughout history, to categories by other categories: this is unquestionable. Wrongs are done, in the Orpheus and Eurydice myth, to categories by categories: women *do* come off the worse, artists win out over muses, and so on. But the indignity provoked by categorization arises long before one expressly disempowers the other. The violence of structure lies in the difficulty for denizens who have learned and tried to learn to live within it, who are forced to relate to others on a meaningful and individual level from within the category that describes, teaches, and disciplines them – that forces them to present themselves and be encountered first, before anything else, as members and representatives of their category.

In this sense, a *man vs. woman, artist vs. muse*, and so on analysis of the myth risks further reification and reinforcement of these categories as crucial and all-relevant. No man or woman can be reduced to "man" or "woman": every man and woman is, to greater or lesser degree, encouraged to be. The difficulty is in transcending the desires and limitations prescribed by these structures; too great an insistence upon them as all-determining factors admits little of the day to day navigation of individuality as obscured, inhibited, and mediated by structure that is so difficult and so necessary. I do not seek to answer the question of Man's relationship to Woman for the simple reason that there is no space in individual lives for it.

The individual scope cannot escape the structural, and the tragedy and crux of the structural is that it is not an allegory: not symbols but real and struggling people are housed within its walls. Eurydice *must* be read as both an individual and a woman. The tension of the myth and of the character is not that, at the end of the day, she is an individual, nor that at the end of the day she is a woman: but that, at the end of the day, being an individual and being a woman are inextricable and often incompatible.

Here is where I propose to place the myth. Orpheus and Eurydice cannot be read as characters in a vacuum any more than they can be read as placeholding pawns of a sinister and pervasive structure; their placement in the context of cultural discourse demands a reconciliation between these opposing but necessary forces. They are emblematic of the tension between individual and structure, inextricable from each other. For all the information lost to us or never created at all, our search to find and instill meaning in the Orpheus and Eurydice myth demands that we see the characters, like ourselves, as full fledged individuals shaped and contextualized by the series of structures in which they find themselves taking part. Is this true? The limited character development and dubious genesis of Eurydice's character suggests it likely is not.

But the myth has endured, in its permutations and repossessions, out of a desire to read the story of Orpheus and Eurydice as true to our lived experience – and, when it is not, to create it anew. There is little interest evidenced in allegory; the story enthralls, the story survives, out of an indomitable and unconscious will to treat Orpheus and Eurydice as real people about whom we know relatively little. Rather than allegory, the myth gains its greatest resonance and possibility, as a bridge between individuals and the stories and

forces that buffet them, as a true story, obscured. True how? However you like; however you wish to extract what details are obscured. The myth is ours now.

Appendix

This is not intended to be a complete compendium of references, since its origin, to the Orpheus and Eurydice myth. Rather, I offer a selection of the artistic and academic interpretations and reclamations that have flowered in its wake. These indicate the myth's endurance, relevance, and the variety of perspectives it has provoked, which I hope will provide an extended example of the myth's cultural presence and flexibility.

"In all his wearie journey up againe,
hee should not once looke back unto his loue:
But from the speaking to her should refraine,
untill he came up to the world aboue,
Which if he did, then should he all his life,
Enjoy her bodie as his married wife.

But if fond jealousie should make him doubt,
and he looke backe to see his Loues sweet face:
Before he were from his vast kingdome out,
and past the fatall limmits of that place.
Then should his wife be snatch'd away againe,
and he should nere the like good turne obtaine-

Which curtesie the Poet gentlie tooke,
and with contentment did accept this thing
Expecting her with manie a lingring looke
the cause that drew him thether for to sing.
Till at the length as the grim God commands,
Euridice was rendred to his hands."

R.B., from "Orpheus His Journey to Hell." Poem.

"Who has destroyed us, miserable you and me, Orpheus?
What kind of utter madness? See there, the cruel Fates call [me]
back again and sleep darkens my swimming eyes.
And now goodbye. I am wrapped up in a vast night
holding out these strengthless hands that do not belong to you."

Virgil, from “Georgics.” Prose poem.

“Eurydice is twice forgotten: forgotten first because she is remembered only as the occasion of Orpheus's first miracle, his descent to the underworld, and forgotten again when her second death endows Orpheus's voice with such overwhelming power that her loss seems nugatory. Most accounts of the legend assume (even if they do not articulate) Ovid's blithe disregard of Eurydice's plight: "What did she have to complain of? One thing, only: He loved her" (Book X, lines 61-62, p. 36). But the story of Orpheus's gaze is not only the story of the mute female object passive before the male artist's gaze. It is also the story of the artist's dependence on that erotic other, the external subject that enables him to become the artist who is Orpheus.”

Margaret Bruzelius, from “H.D. and Eurydice.” Academic text.

“But Orpheus, son of Oeagrus, they sent back with failure from Hades, showing him only a wraith of the woman for whom he came; her real self they would not bestow, for he was accounted to have gone upon a coward's quest, too like the minstrel that he was, and to have lacked the spirit to die as Alcestis did for the sake of love, when he contrived the means of entering Hades alive. Wherefore they laid upon him the penalty he deserved, and caused him to meet his death.”

Plato, from “Symposium.” Prose.

Auguste Rodin, “Orpheus and Eurydice.” Sculpture.

“That was the law of the infernal powers; no one must look at them. Sacrifice to the deities of the dead was made with averted face; no looking, only the voice, was allowed in the realm of the departed. That could work miracles, but had no power to undo death, to effect release from the gods of that other realm. The law of those below was the law of Persephone, and was only confirmed when the living strove against it. Only when it was violated did the law take its course. Eurydike might follow her loving husband; that much Orpheus had accomplished with his singing, but on the hard road which led from death to life, he must not look upon her. Then why did the singer do so? What was the reason, except the great and final separation between the living and the dead? Was it madness? Did he wish to kiss her? Or was he only anxious to make sure she was following him?”

Karl Kerenyi, from “Pythagoras und Orpheus.” Prose.

"But if the tongue and song of Orpheus had been given me, so that, having charmed either the daughter of Demeter or her husband by strains, I might have won thee from death, I would have descended; and neither the hounds of Pluto nor Charon at his oar, the conductor of souls, should have held me off, till I had brought thy life to the day."

Euripides, from "Alcestis." Play.

"Orpheus famous of name."

Ibycus. Fragment.

"And from Apollo came
the master lyrist, father of songs,
renowned Orpheus."

Pindar, from "Pythian 4." Ode.

"Countless birds flew around his head; fishes sprang out of the dark waters at his beautiful song. Not a breath of wind arose to rustle the leaves of the trees, or to interrupt the honied voice which was wafted to the ears of mortals."

Simonides. Fragment.

Anselm Feuerbach, "Orpheus and Eurydice." Painting.

Jacopo Peri, "Euridice." Earliest opera whose music has survived to present day.

Claudio Monteverdi, "L'Orfeo." Opera.

Frederic Lord Leighton, "Orpheus and Eurydice." Oil painting.

Orpheus makes a sweeping gesture with his arm, indicating the sky.
EURYDICE. All those birds? Thank you.
He nods. They make a quarter turn and he makes a sweeping gesture, indicating an invisible sea.
And – the sea! For me? When?

Orpheus opens his hands.
Now? It's mine already?
Orpheus nods.
Wow.
They kiss. He indicates the sky.
Surely not – surely not the sky and the stars too?!
Orpheus nods.
That's very generous.
Orpheus nods.
Perhaps too generous?
Orpheus shakes his head no.

Sarah Ruhl, from "Eurydice." Play.

Jean Coctaeu, "Orphée." Film.

Marcel Camus, "Orfeo Negro." Film.

Tennessee Williams, "Orpheus Descending." Poems.

Rainer Maria Rilke, "Sonnets to Orpheus" and "Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes."

Poems.

"Long-accepted interpretations hold that the peerless bard loved his wife so well that he braved the realm of the gods of the dead to bring her back to life, only to be foiled at the crucial moment by his overeager impulse to glance/gaze lovingly at her. A twentieth-century reader, however, might ask: What is the nature of enduring art and of heterosexual love as refracted through the lens of a tale whose female protagonist appears only to die twice, leaving no trace?"

Liz Locke, from "Eurydice's Body: Feminist Reflections of the Orphic Descent

Myth in Philosophy and Film. Academic text.

"Before your eyes you held steady
the image of what you wanted
me to become: living again.
It was this hope of yours that kept me following.

You could not believe I was more than your echo."

"This love of his is not something
he can do if you aren't there;"

Margaret Atwood, "Orpheus" and "Eurydice." Poems.

"In the stories they always say I turned around to look at her too soon, but that isn't how it was: I turned *away* too soon, turned away before I'd ever looked long enough, before I'd ever fully perceived her."

Russell Hoban, from "The Medusa Frequency." Novel.

"When Thracian Orpheus, the poet of Rhodope, had mourned for her, greatly, in the upper world, he dared to go down to Styx, through the gate of Taenarus, also, to see if he might not move the dead. Through the weightless throng, and the ghosts that had received proper burial, he came to Persephone, and the lord of the shadows, he who rules the joyless kingdom. Then striking the lyre-strings to accompany his words, he sang: 'O gods of this world, placed below the earth, to which, all, who are created mortal, descend; if you allow me, and it is lawful, to set aside the fictions of idle tongues, and speak the truth, I have not come here to see dark Tartarus, nor to bind Cerberus, Medusa's child, with his three necks, and snaky hair. My wife is the cause of my journey. A viper, she trod on, diffused its venom into her body, and robbed her of her best years. I longed to be able to accept it, and I do not say I have not tried: Love won.'"

Ovid, from "Metamorphoses," translation by A. S. Kline. Prose poem.

"Close to the rim of earth when Orpheus –
Anxious for her, wild to see her face –
Turned his head to look and she was gone
Immediately, forever, back and down.
He reached his arms out, desperate to hold
And be held on to, but his arms just filled
With insubstantial air. She died again,
Bridal and doomed, but still did not complain
Against her husband – as indeed how could she
Complain about being loved so totally?"

Ovid, from "Metamorphoses," translation by Seamus Heaney. Prose poem.

ORPHEUS. I thought you were feeling unhappy.
EURYDICE. So you don't understand a thing? An ordinary man, eh? Well I never! A nice fix we're in, standing here face to face, the pair of us, with everything that's going to happen to us all lined up already behind us. . . .
ORPHEUS. You think a lot of things will happen to us?
EURYDICE (*gravely*). Absolutely everything. All the things that happen to a man and a woman on earth, one by one.
ORPHEUS. The amusing, the gentle, the dreadful things?
EURYDICE. The shameful and the sordid ones, too. We are going to be very unhappy.
ORPHEUS (*taking her in his arms*). What bliss! (68)

ORPHEUS (*shouts suddenly*). Yes, one look, into the depths of your eyes, as into deep water. Head first into the depths of your eyes. I would like to rest there, and drown there.
EURYDICE. Yes, darling.
ORPHEUS. For in the long run to be two is unbearable. Two skins, two impenetrable sheaths round us, each of us on our own, each quite shut in, do what we will, with our own air, our own blood, all alone in this bag of skin. We hold one another tight, we touch one another to get ever so little beyond that terrifying solitude. We have a little pleasure, a little illusion, but soon we are quite alone again with our liver, our spleen, our guts, and these are our only friends.
EURYDICE. Stop it.
ORPHEUS. Then we speak. That we discovered, too. That sound the air makes in the throat and against the teeth. That simplified morse. Two prisoners . . . each tapping on the wall from the depth of his cell. Two prisoners who will never see one another. Oh! How lonely we are – too lonely, aren't we?
EURYDICE. Come closer to me.
ORPHEUS (*holding her*). Warmth, yes. Other warmth than one's own. That is something almost certain. Something resistant, too, an obstacle. A warm obstacle. Good, there is someone. I am not entirely alone. One mustn't ask too much.

Jean Anouih, from "Eurydice." Play.

"What she dreamed, as she watched him turning with the bend in the road (can you understand this?)—what she dreamed

was of disappearing into the seen

not of disappearing, lord, into the real—"

Jorie Graham, from "Orpheus and Eurydice." Poem.

Naomi Iizuka, "Polaroid Stories." Play.

“He sang the brightness of mornings and green rivers,
He sang of smoking water in the rose-colored daybreaks,
Of colors: cinnabar, carmine, burnt sienna, blue,
Of the delight of swimming in the sea under marble cliffs,
Of feasting on a terrace above the tumult of a fishing port,
Of the tastes of wine, olive oil, almonds, mustard, salt.
Of the flight of the swallow, the falcon,
Of a dignified flock of pelicans above a bay,
Of the scent of an armful of lilacs in summer rain,
Of his having composed his words always against death
And of having made no rhyme in praise of nothingness.
I don’t know - said the goddess - whether you loved her or not.
Yet you have come here to rescue her.”

“Unable to weep, he wept at the loss
Of the human hope for the resurrection of the dead,
Because he was, now, like every other mortal.
His lyre was silent, yet he dreamed, defenseless.
He knew he must have faith and he could not have faith.
And so he would persist for a very long time,
Counting his steps in a half-wakeful torpor.
Day was breaking. Shapes of rock loomed up
Under the luminous eye of the exit from underground.
It happened as he expected. He turned his head
And behind him on the path was no one.
Sun. And sky. And in the sky white clouds.
Only now everything cried to him: Eurydice!
How will I live without you, my consoling one!
But there was a fragrant scent of herbs, the low humming of bees,
And he fell asleep with his cheek on the sun-warmed earth.”

Czeslaw Milosz, from “Orpheus and Eurydice.” Poem.

“Orpheus, the night is full of tears and cries,
And hardly for the storm and ruin shed
Can even thine eyes be certain of her head
Who never passed out of thy spirit's eyes,
But stood and shone before them in such wise
As when with love her lips and hands were fed,
And with mute mouth out of the dusty dead
Strove to make answer when thou bad'st her rise.”

Algernon Charles Swinburne, from “Eurydice – To Victor Hugo.” Poem.

“But soon, too soon the lover turns his eyes;
Again she falls, again she dies, she dies!
How wilt thou now the fatal sisters move?
No crime was thine, if 'tis no crime to love.
Now under hanging mountains,
Beside the falls of fountains,
Or where Hebrus wanders,
Rolling in meanders,
All alone,
He makes his moan,
And calls her ghost,
Forever, ever, ever lost!
Now with furies surrounded,
Despairing, confounded,
He trembles, he glows,
Amidst Rhodope's snows.
See, wild as the winds o'er the desert he flies;
Hark! Hæmus resounds with the Bacchanals' cries.
Ah, see, he dies!
Yet even in death Eurydice he sung,
Eurydice still trembled on his tongue:
Eurydice the woods
Eurydice the floods
Eurydice the rocks and hollow mountains rung.”

Alexander Pope, from “Ode for St. Cecilia’s Day.” Poem.

“Over and over he recalls
the clockwise motion of his body at the bend
in the uphill path as he turned
to glance back, and glimpsed her gazing at him.

Before her face scattered, swept away
as if in a roiling sandstorm, her looking back
at him rippled through his whole body,
binding them together.

In the same clockwise motion seconds turn
into minutes and are worn down, compacted
into memory, his image of her watching him
fills his new afterlife, so when he closes

his eyes to recall her, he remains unsure
is it he who sails through the space

that excludes her, or is it she
who travels across it and keeps coming toward him."

Lenny Lianne, "Orpheus After Eurydice." Poem.

"In Balanchine's ballet
the failure seems Eurydice's fault
who tempted his blindfold off,
as if the artist must be absolved,
as if what matters
is the body itself –
that instrument stringed
with tendon and bone
making its own music."

Linda Pastan, from "Orpheus." Poem.

"The sun of your expectations rose on a female form
and at noon curved over it, missing the point.
It shone on a luminous body
of smooth-skinned verse and you copied, copied,
till you were melodious with seductive charm
and we joined the perpetual ceremony.
I am not dead set against all that,
but in eclipse I found what storms suggest:
that the center is dark, dark and unexplained,
and full, full of more than children.
Taste with me more than milk and formula –
suck the difficult juice of the pomegranate,
enter the stony passage, tell the truth.
Be more than artful – I am more than a muse.

v

It was a practical suggestion she made
not to look back."

Paula Bonnell, from "Eurydice." Poem.

Ted Hughes, "Birthday Letters." Poems.

Neil Gaiman, "The Sandman." Graphic novel.

Kaja Silverman, “Flesh of My Flesh.” Academic text.

“what was it that crossed my face
with the light from yours
and your glance?
what was it you saw in my face?
the light of your own face,
the fire of your own presence?”

“So for your arrogance
and your ruthlessness
I have lost the earth
and the flowers of the earth,
and the live souls above the earth,
and you who passed across the light
and reached
ruthless;

you who have your own light,
who are to yourself a presence,
who need no presence”

“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;

and my spirit with its loss
knows this;
though small against the black,
small against the formless rocks,
hell must break before I am lost;

before I am lost,
hell must open like a red rose
for the dead to pass.”

H.D., from “Eurydice.” Poem.

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