

ORPHEUS

INTRODUCTION

The ancient Orpheus

For obvious reasons, the legend of Orpheus has always had a particular appeal for writers. Orpheus is the archetypal poet and the archetypal musician; beyond that, he can be seen as the embodiment of 'art' in its widest sense, of all kinds of creative activity, all human attempts to find or create harmony and order in the world, through literature, music, art, philosophy, science, politics, or religion. In his unsuccessful attempt to reclaim his wife Eurydice from death, and his own death at the hands of an angry mob, he embodies the limitations of art in the face of mortality and human irrationality. On a less abstract level, the Orpheus legend is a wonderful story. Dramatically structured, movingly tragic and ironic, it invites constant retelling and constant reinterpretation of the motives and feelings of the two principal characters.¹

The legend in its classic form can be quickly summarised. Orpheus came from Thrace, the wild region to the north of classical Greece. His mother was Calliope, one of the nine Muses; his father was either Oeagrus, an otherwise obscure Thracian king, or the god Apollo. Orpheus sang and played on the lyre with such beauty and skill that he enchanted not only humans but even wild nature: animals and birds flocked to hear him, rivers paused in their courses, even trees and stones uprooted themselves and lumbered to follow his voice. He sailed with the Argonauts on the quest for the Golden Fleece, where he caused fish to leap out of the water to hear his music, and outsang the seductive songs of the Sirens.

He married the nymph Eurydice, but lost her on the very day of their wedding when she was bitten by a snake and died. The grieving Orpheus descended to the underworld and played before Hades and Persephone, begging to be allowed to take his wife back to life. They agreed, on one condition: that he should go on ahead, and not look back to see if she was following. Orpheus had reached the very verge of the upper world when, overcome by love or fear, he looked back, and Eurydice was lost again, this time irretrievably. Inconsolable, Orpheus retreated into the wilderness to sing his songs to animals and trees, abandoning human company and rejecting the love of women (according to Ovid, he turned to homosexuality). Enraged at his misogyny, or his scorn of their love, or his allegiance to Apollo, or simply the insufferable harmony of his music, the Thracian Bacchantes (wild women followers of Dionysus) turned on him and tore him to pieces. His head and his lyre were thrown into the River Hebrus, floated out to sea, and landed on the island of Lesbos, which became a centre of poetry; some say that his severed head continued to give oracles until Apollo silenced it.

This is the classic form of the story, as set in place by the Roman poets Virgil and Ovid in the decades around the birth of Christ. The original Greek conception of Orpheus may have been rather different.

The Greeks believed Orpheus was a real person, an ancient poet (perhaps the inventor of poetry) and religious teacher. They attributed to him an unorthodox version of the creation of the world and the nature and destiny of the human soul. At the heart of this theology was a myth which strangely parallels the story of the death of Orpheus himself: how the young god Dionysus was torn to pieces and devoured by the Titans, who were then killed by a thunderbolt, and how human beings arose from their ashes, thus partaking both of the divine nature of the god and the evil of the Titans. Orpheus (it is said) taught that men could purify themselves of this taint of original sin by proper ritual practices and an ascetic lifestyle, including vegetarianism, celibacy, and avoidance of women (there seems to have been a misogynistic strain in his teaching which may be reflected in the myth of his death at women's hands). 'Orphic' poems expounding such doctrines still survive, though those that survive are clearly not pre-Homeric but of much later date.

Scholars still fiercely debate whether 'Orphism' was in fact a coherent religious tradition, or merely a conveniently antique label pinned on any kind of mystical otherworldly doctrine—and, even more unanswerably, whether there ever existed a real Orpheus. One suggestion is that behind the legend and the tradition lies the primitive figure of a Thracian shaman. Shamans (the word is Russian, but the concept exists in many cultures) are magicians who claim power over nature, the ability to talk with birds and animals, and in particular the ability to travel out of the body to the lands of the dead, and to guide the souls of the sick and dying there and back again. Such a magical traveller beyond death, it is suggested, may have subsequently been rationalised into the religious teacher who saves the souls of his disciples, and mythologised into the legendary bard who descends into the underworld to reclaim his wife.

In any case, the Greek figure of Orpheus as shaman/poet/teacher gives rise to two important conceptions of Orpheus in later tradition. One is that of the Orphic poet: the divinely inspired bard with profound insight into life and death and the nature of things—a figure epitomised in Apollonius's account of Orpheus's song to the Argonauts (**O1**).² The other is that of Orpheus the civiliser, teacher of arts and morals, whose melodious wisdom draws people together into an ordered and humane society—a figure classically depicted by the Roman poet Horace (**O3**). Both these conceptions can be metaphorically expressed in the image of Orpheus's power over nature—whether that power is conceived in terms of taming and subduing the wildness of nature, or of sympathetic oneness with the natural order.

All these Orpheuses—the shaman, the religious guru, the inspired poet, the civiliser—have one thing in common: they are essentially public figures, whose efforts are directed towards the welfare of their community or their disciples. The idea of the Orpheus legend as essentially a love story, and Orpheus as a hero driven by personal love and grief, is a later development. Eurydice is barely referred to by Greek writers, and it is hard to say at what point she entered the tradition. Her name ('wide-ruling' or 'wide-judging') has suggested to some scholars that she was originally an underworld goddess, an aspect of Persephone (in modern times Renault, **O42**, and Hoban, **O46**, play interestingly with this notion). Even when she was accepted as Orpheus's wife, there is some evidence that the story may once

have had a happy ending; ambiguous references in Euripides, Plato, and Moschus seem to imply that in the accepted Greek version of the story Orpheus succeeded in bringing back Eurydice from the underworld. It may have been some unknown Hellenistic poet, or possibly even Virgil, who invented the now canonical tragic ending of the story.

Virgil (O2) is the first to tell the story in its current form. It comes in the unexpected, even bizarre context of a didactic poem on farming. The *Georgics*, ostensibly a practical guide to the farmer, are in fact a poetic evocation of the beauty of the Italian countryside and the moral values of country life. The story of Orpheus comes at the end of the last book, which deals with bees, and is enclosed within the story of the demigod Aristaeus, inventor of beekeeping (and, as son of Apollo, Orpheus's half-brother). Aristaeus's bees have died of a mysterious plague; questioning the prophetic sea god Proteus, he learns that he is being punished for the deaths of Eurydice, who was snake-bitten while fleeing his advances, and of Orpheus; having heard the story, he is able to do penance and magically create a new hive of bees. The relevance of this story to the *Georgics* as a whole, and the relationship between the stories of Aristaeus and Orpheus, have been endlessly debated. Clearly Aristaeus's successful quest to recover his bees parallels Orpheus's failed quest to recover his wife. Aristaeus, the briskly unsentimental farmer, seems to be offered as a role model to the practical Roman, as his bees are a miniature model of the efficient Roman state. By contrast, Orpheus, the poet not as public teacher but as private singer of his own love and grief, seems to be offered as a moral warning against the dangers of excessive emotion. But Virgil is rarely so one-sided, and readers have always found the failed Orpheus by far the more memorable and sympathetic figure.

Ovid (O4), writing some forty years after Virgil, is very conscious of the need to do the story differently. In the *Metamorphoses* it becomes merely one of hundreds of mythological stories, and the intensity, starkness, and jagged abruptness of Virgil are replaced by smoothly flowing narrative, romance, quiet pathos, and subtly subversive humour. At the same time, with characteristic delight in the complex interweaving of his stories, Ovid makes Orpheus the narrator of a whole series of other stories. Ovid's Orpheus, in fact, is as much the master storyteller as the lover; at the point where Virgil's broken hero is wandering off into the snowy wastes to die, Ovid's is just getting into his stride as narrator of a series of cautionary tales of unhappy love and wicked women. Revelling like his Orpheus in the sheer pleasure of storytelling, Ovid imposes no obvious moral; perhaps for that very reason, his text invites, and has received, the widest range of interpretations.

The medieval Orpheus: allegory and romance

Of the three myths dealt with in this book, that of Orpheus was by far the most popular in the Middle Ages, and provides a fascinating case study in Christian strategies for dealing with a pagan story. The basic medieval strategy was allegorisation, making the story a metaphor for an acceptable moral or natural truth. This strategy was already in use in classical times (Horace, for instance, explains Orpheus's taming of savage beasts as a metaphor for his influence over uncivilised human beings), but it became much more popular in the Middle Ages.

There are three main strands to the allegorising of Orpheus. The first—appropriately enough, given his origins as shaman and religious teacher—is to treat him as a 'type' or

symbol of Christ. This approach perhaps begins in art, as early Christian artists conflate the figure of Orpheus playing to the animals with those of Christ the good shepherd and David the shepherd-psalmist-king. The theologian Clement of Alexandria (late second century) associates Orpheus with Christ, the incarnate Word of God, whose 'new song' harmonises the world and makes 'men out of stones, men out of beasts'; later writers see Orpheus's descent into the underworld to save Eurydice as a type of Christ's descent to earth, and later to hell, to redeem human souls from original sin—with more or less emphasis on the fact that Orpheus, unlike Christ, failed in his quest.

A second strand derives from the enormously popular and influential *Consolation of Philosophy* of the sixth-century writer Boethius (O5). In one of the poems in that work, the lady Philosophy retells the story of Orpheus and the fatal backward glance by which he 'saw, lost, and killed his Eurydice'. Orpheus here represents the human soul, seeking to rise out of darkness to (philosophical) enlightenment or (Christian) salvation, but in danger of backsliding if it is tempted to look back at the worldly things it is leaving behind. In later developments of this approach, Orpheus becomes specifically 'reason', the rational part of the soul, and Eurydice becomes its emotional and 'sensual' part, corrupted by temptation and led to hell by the bite of the serpent-devil; reason must bring the soul back out of hell while turning its back on sensual temptation.

A third strand takes the legend as an allegory of music. Fulgentius, a fifth-century mythographer with a taste for far-fetched etymologies, explained Orpheus as meaning 'best voice' (*oraia-phonos*) and Eurydice as 'profound judgement': the good musician must have not only Orpheus's technical skill but also the deeper understanding of musical theory represented by Eurydice. Later writers broaden this approach to equate Orpheus with eloquence and Eurydice with wisdom: the true practitioner of any art, literary or rhetorical as well as musical, must be wise as well as skilful with words and notes.

It is clear that these interpretations are potentially contradictory. Orpheus may be God incarnate, or the sinful human soul, or an aspiring musician; Eurydice may embody sensuality, which Orpheus must turn his back on, or wisdom, which he must seek out. They may also seem wildly inappropriate to the literal story: in one version Aristaeus, the would-be rapist, becomes an allegory of 'virtue'. Medieval commentators were untroubled by such problems: all that mattered was how many useful meanings could be spun out of a story, and commentators like Bersuire (O6a) move with a casual 'Or...' from one reading to another.

In the later Middle Ages a very different treatment of the story emerges. From the eleventh century onwards, in popular songs, ballads, and chivalric romances, Orpheus and Eurydice appear as ideal courtly lovers, the perfect minstrel-knight and his lady-love. The first important English (or Scottish) treatments of the story are in this tradition: *Sir Orfeo* (O7), a Middle English romance of the early fourteenth century, and the *Orpheus and Eurydice* of the fifteenth-century Scots poet Robert Henryson (O8). *Sir Orfeo* blends the classical myth with Celtic fairy tale: Orfeo, minstrel-king of Traciens (the old name for Winchester, the poet helpfully explains), successfully rescues his wife from fairyland after she is stolen away by the king of the fairies. Henryson reunites romance with allegory and musical learning, and restores the tragic ending: his Orpheus journeys through the heavens in search of Eurydice, learning the secrets of the music of the spheres, before descending into hell to reclaim her; but he loses her by a backward glance, and a long concluding *moralitas* imposes the Boethian moral.

Orphic harmony in the Renaissance

In Renaissance England Orpheus remains a central myth, but Eurydice and the love story fade from prominence. The Renaissance Orpheus is primarily the musician and poet, whose powerful art reflects the harmony of the cosmos and creates harmony on earth and in the human soul.

The classic Renaissance account of Orpheus is in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* (O13b), where Lorenzo expounds to Jessica the idea of the music of the spheres. According to this ancient cosmological concept, which goes back to the fifth-century BC mathematician-philosopher Pythagoras, the planets are mounted upon crystal spheres which, as they turn around the earth, each give out a musical tone and combine to create a heavenly harmony. Here on earth, trapped inside our imperfect human bodies, we cannot hear this harmony, but we retain a buried memory of it; and that is why we instinctively respond to music:

Therefore the poet
Did feign that Orpheus drew trees, stones, and floods,
Since naught so stockish, hard, and full of rage
But music for the time doth change his nature.

Music is thus at the very heart of God's creation, and the musician, by tapping our innate sensitivity to it, can draw us closer to heavenly perfection on earth. Similarly Chapman's Ovid (in *Ovid's Banquet of Sense*, O12), listening to his mistress singing, wishes the 'Orphean' music could permeate the whole dull earth 'that she like heaven might move/ In ceaseless music and be filled with love'; and Milton in 'L'Allegro' (O20a) prays for heavenly verse and music, 'Untwisting all the chains that tie/The hidden soul of harmony', capable of 'quite'—rather than only half—releasing Eurydice from death. In each case, Orpheus's music stands for a principle capable of transforming our limited, dull, chained human condition into something nearer the divine.

Others portray Orpheus's power in social rather than cosmic terms. Critics like Puttenham (O10) and Sidney (*Apology for Poetry*) reiterate the Horatian theme of the poet as the architect of a civilised society; for Puttenham poets like Orpheus are, among other things, the world's first priests, prophets, legislators, politicians, and philosophers. For Spenser (O9b), Orpheus is the wise statesman whose harmony calms 'wicked discord', the 'firebrand of hell'; in Chapman's *Shadow of Night*, he is the Promethean poet who draws men from savagery to 'civil love of art'. Bacon (O14) identifies Orpheus with 'philosophy' (which includes what we would now call science); his descent into hell is the scientific attempt to prolong or make immortal human life; his charming of the animals is the political attempt to create a civilised and humane society.

It would be misleading to suggest that these lofty Renaissance views of Orpheus are blindly optimistic. Bacon acknowledges that his philosopher-Orpheus fails in both his projects, and ends with an apocalyptic vision of the collapse of civilisation in the face of ineradicable human barbarism. Shakespeare's praise of the transforming power of Orpheus's music is qualified by the recognition that its effect lasts only 'for a time', and that there are those upon whom it does not work at all; the memory of Shylock, 'the man who hath no music in himself', and the harsh treatment meted out to him, remains a discordant note in the harmony of the play's ending. For Spenser (O9a), the heroic achievements of Orpheus

also suggest a sad contrast with the poverty and neglect of poets today; and Milton, more powerfully, in *Lycidas* (O20c) and *Paradise Lost* (O20d), takes the death of Orpheus at the hands of the Bacchantes as a symbol of the dangers which threaten the poet in a world inherently hostile to poetry.

Not all Renaissance versions of Orpheus, of course, are at this level of seriousness; many are trivial or conventional. Praises of a poet or composer, for instance, called almost compulsorily for a comparison with Orpheus: so Michael Drayton advises the composer Thomas Morley, in 1595, not to worry about Orpheus's competition ('Draw thou the shepherds still, and bonny lasses, /And envy him not stocks, stones, oxen, asses'), and Thomas Jordan, in 1665, assures a fellow writer that 'Thy poetry would make great Orpheus lese/His lyre, and dance a part with his own trees.' To compare a lady's singing or playing to that of Orpheus is similarly a cliché of love poetry and courtly compliment, as in Sidney (O11) or Barnabe Barnes ('Thy sweet enchanting voice did Orpheus raise...'); Edmund Waller further trivialises the theme when he commends a lady's skill in cutting trees out of paper ('Orpheus could make the forest dance, but you/Can make the motion and the forest too'). Lyric poets and song-writers exploit the legend for songs either sad (like William Byrd's 'Come woeful Orpheus') or merry (like William Strode's delightful 'When Orpheus sweetly did complain', O16). Humorists use it for comic squibs, like Everard Guilpin's on the musician who has married a young wife and now 'plays continually both day and night', or John Davies of Hereford's 'Of Maurus his Orpheus-like Melody', in which the stones which come flying after the musician are thrown by his unappreciative mistress. Orpheus, in fact, crops up everywhere in Elizabethan and Stuart literature, in the most varied contexts—perhaps the most bizarre being when Sir Robert Chester cites him as an authority on the aphrodisiac qualities of the carrot ('The Thracian Orpheus.../By his example oftentimes did prove/This root procured in maids a perfect love').

Despite the popularity of Orpheus, occasional voices are raised to remind us that he is a pagan fiction. Giles Fletcher (O15) insists that Christ, rescuing human souls from hell, 'Another Orpheus was than dreaming poets feign'; and Milton (O20d), after an unforgettable vision of the death of Orpheus, turns away from the pagan Muse Calliope to his personal muse the Holy Spirit—'For thou art heavenly, she an empty dream.' Both Fletcher and Milton, however, are deeply imaginatively involved with the myth and fascinated by its relationship to Christian truth. A much more damaging rejection is that of Thomas Carew (O18), who in 1633 praises his mentor John Donne for abandoning the stale apparatus of mythological poetry such as 'good old Orpheus'. His dismissive attitude prefigures the decline of the Orpheus myth in the Restoration and eighteenth century.

Orpheus in the eighteenth century: translations and travesties

In the 'Augustan' period the Orpheus myth, like myth in general, loses much of its power. Though translations of Virgil, Ovid, and Boethius abound, there are few original treatments of the myth, and those few treat it decoratively rather than as a vehicle for the profound meanings that medieval and Renaissance writers saw in it. Poets like Dryden (O21) and Pope (O22) continue to use Orpheus to celebrate the power of music. But Dryden's vision of Orpheus/Purcell establishing harmony in hell is a witty conceit, not a serious claim; and Pope, after celebrating Orpheus for over a hundred lines, abandons him for St Cecilia

with a flippant ease very different from Milton's gravity in making a similar rejection. On a more trivial level, Orpheus is continually invoked in poems of social compliment with titles such as 'To Lucia Playing on Her Lute', 'Impromptu to a Young Lady Singing' (O26), or 'To the Elegant Seraphina, Performing on the Piano Forte at a Private Concert'.

The image of Orpheus the civiliser continues to have some serious resonance. Interestingly, however, later eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century versions place more emphasis on the domestic rather than the political virtues. William Collins (O28), around 1750, celebrates Orpheus in Horatian terms as the founder of 'Society, and law, and sacred order', but also of 'dear domestic life.../ And all the charities that softened man'. Anna Seward (O29), in 1780, compares Captain Cook to Orpheus, driven by Benevolence to reform the domestic manners of the savages: 'See! chastened love in softer glances flows—/ See! with new fires parental duty glows.' John Gait's opera *Orpheus* (published 1814–15) presents Orpheus as establishing 'primitive society' by separating out 'the most obvious and appropriate duties' of men and women: men must hunt, women must stay at home. Orpheus has become the archetype of bourgeois domestic virtue.

By far the greatest imaginative vitality in the period, however, goes into comic and ironic treatments of the myth. Much of this humour is misogynistic in tone, turning on the outrageousness of the notion that a man fortunate enough to lose his wife should actually want to get her back: this simple joke is the point of short squibs by R.M. (O24), Matthew Coppiner, Mary Monck, and the American Nathaniel Evans, and underlies William King's intermittently amusing travesty, in which Orpheus is a gipsy fiddler in quest of his nagging wife 'Dice'. Against these may be set Anne Finch's clever and unsettling feminist version (O23), in which the Bacchantes become 'resenting heroines' punishing the complacent male satirist Orpheus. Two dramatic versions parody operatic treatments of the myth: in Fielding's *Eurydice* (O27) a sophisticated Eurydice, very much at home in hell, cunningly evades the duty of going home with her wimpish *castrato* husband; in Garrick's less subtle *Peep Behind the Curtain* Orpheus has to extricate himself from his mistress's clutches in order to go and get his wife. Gay's fable of the educated monkey (O25) casts a disenchanting eye on the figure of Orpheus the civiliser and the whole notion of 'civilisation'. Treating the myth frankly as a joke allowed free play to the eighteenth-century love of satire and irony, when the myths taken straight seemed merely a bore.

Romantics and Victorians: from Orphic song to the melancholy lyre

The Romantic movement, with its renewed interest in myth and its lofty conception of poetry and art, might have been expected to bring Orpheus into new prominence. Surprisingly, this is not entirely true. A survey of the major Romantic poets reveals only two poems specifically about the legend: Shelley's (discussed below) and, perhaps, a rather weak Wordsworth poem which hails a blind street musician as 'An Orpheus! An Orpheus!' Moreover, the central critical texts of the movement—the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, Shelley's *Defence of Poetry*, Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*—noticeably omit the traditional homage to Orpheus as arch-poet, and Byron (O31) and Peacock (O32) irreverently send up the motif—as if the Horatian notion of Orpheus the poet-civiliser had become too hackneyed, or too associated with a pompously public type of poetry, to be taken seriously.

Nevertheless, the Romantics were drawn to the image of the ‘Orphic poet’, associated with the figure of the ancient poet-teacher, whose supposed hymns were re-edited with a commentary by Thomas Taylor in 1787. Wordsworth invokes this ideal of the poet as mystic philosopher at the start of *The Prelude* (O30): hesitating over his poetic vocation, he aspires to write ‘immortal verse/ Thoughtfully fitted to the Orphean lyre’, but then, with a significant half-pun, recoils from that ‘awful burden’. Later Coleridge acclaims the finished poem as ‘an Orphic song indeed, /A song divine of high and passionate thoughts/To their own music chanted’ (‘To William Wordsworth’, 45–7). And in Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*,

Language is a perpetual Orphic song,
Which rules with Daedal harmony a throng
Of thoughts and words, which else senseless and shapeless were.

Orpheus the poet fuses with Daedalus the craftsman in an image of the power of the creative imagination to remake reality.

Shelley embodies this remaking of reality in the one sustained Romantic treatment of the legend, his dramatic fragment ‘Orpheus’ (O33). Perhaps taking off from Ovid’s tongue-in-cheek remark (10. 104–6) about Orpheus’s convenient ability to create shade wherever he went, he places the poet in a bleak purgatorial landscape which, by the end of the poem, is miraculously transformed into an earthly paradise. Shelley’s Orpheus is not a public teacher or civiliser but a tormented individual, isolated from society, singing his pain in the wilderness. Nevertheless the power of his song is enough to—literally or metaphorically—transform the world. The extremity of Shelley’s claim for the power of art is perhaps exceeded only by a Victorian poet writing in the Romantic tradition, R.W.Dixon (O36), whose Prospero-like poet-mage commands thunder and lightning and comes to the very brink of apotheosis, before he declines it in order to pursue his earthly love. Such ‘art’, however, Dixon insists, depends on a pantheistic understanding of ‘the sources of eternal law’ which is now lost to us; his Orpheus is not a model of the modern artist but a superhuman figure from a lost age.

Other Victorian versions return to the more earthbound figure of Orpheus the civiliser and moral teacher. Coventry Patmore and R.C.Trench both take his victory over the Sirens as an allegory of the poet’s duty and power to lead people away from sensual temptation and towards virtue. R.W.Buchanan is more sceptical: his Orpheus, singing to the spirits of wild nature, can raise their moral consciousness—‘as they listened, satyrs, nymphs, and fauns/Conceived their immortality’—but (like Shakespeare’s Orpheus) only ‘for the time’; when the song ceases, ‘the satyr-crew/Rushed back to riot and carouse’, and Silenus ‘bawled for wine’.

In some minor poets (Mackay, Gosse, Ward) this scepticism rises to a sense of the irrelevance or impotence of poetry: Orpheus, the true poet, has no place in the vulgar, corrupt, prosaic modern world. These moralised readings often have an implicitly or explicitly Christian tenor. Isaac Williams, in *The Christian Scholar*, adapts Boethius’s moral to Victorian family values: the Orpheus-figure not only seeks his own salvation but also ‘with him draws to realms above/The objects of his earthly love’; but if he looks back, ‘He loses both himself and them.’ On the other hand, Charles Tennyson Turner (the laureate’s brother) raises a stern Miltonic objection to the old identification of Christ with

Orpheus: 'What means this vain ideal of Our Lord, /With "Orpheus" underwritten?' The pagan story has its own beauty and pathos, but Christians should not 'match Messiah with a shade' or attempt to 'fuse/Redemption into harp-notes'.

Others, especially in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, avoided such didacticism and instead exploited the story for its human pathos. Andrew Lang offers a poem about Orpheus and Eurydice as a tongue-in-cheek example of how 'When first we heard Rossetti sing, /We twanged the melancholy lyre.' In this tradition of autumnal melancholy are poems by De Tabley (O38), Gosse, Binyon, and William Morris, whose massive 1,386-line 'Story of Orpheus and Eurydice' plays on the Gothic horror of the haunted wood in which Orpheus tries to summon up his dead wife's spirit, and the conflicting emotions at work in his soul.

In this late Victorian humanising and psychologising of the myth we see the first attempts to take Eurydice as a subject in her own right and explore her feelings. Robert Browning shows her pleading with Orpheus to look at her (O35), and Bourdillon makes her the one who foolishly looks back, whereas Dowden's formidable Eurydice regrets that she had not taken the task of leading the way out of hell (O37). In some versions she is less than eager to be resurrected. Gosse's Eurydice begs Orpheus to 'forbear and leave me painless'; in T. Sturge Moore's play she balks at the last moment from returning to the 'hideous hunger' of mortal life. These hints would be taken up by twentieth-century writers.

Alongside such serious versions the comic tradition continues, especially in popular stage entertainments like Planché's extravaganzas and Brough's Christmas pantomimes. I have included a little of Brough's piece (O34), with its knockabout farce and appalling puns, as a slight corrective to the rather overpowering earnestness of most Victorian Orpheuses.

The twentieth century: Eurydice sings her own song and Orpheus remembers himself

In the twentieth century Orpheus remains an immensely powerful figure. It sometimes seems that every poet has written at least one poem on the theme—to say nothing of plays, novels, films, operas, and comic strips. The twentieth-century treatment of Orpheus, however, has been largely bleak. Orpheus the lover is subject to unprecedentedly harsh criticism; Orpheus the poet is seen most vividly in terms of his failure and death, and his power, if he has any, is gained painfully through suffering and loss.

Orpheus the lover, of course, is often depicted with great sympathy. Many male poets, and some female ones, have movingly identified with him as they use the legend to express personal experiences of loss and grief—among them Peter Davison, Denis Devlin, Lauris Edmond (O47), Edwin Honig, D.G. James, Louis Simpson. Others, however, have taken a more critical view of Orpheus's conduct towards Eurydice, seeing him as careless, weak, or self-indulgent. Sydney Goodsir Smith (O41) presents an Orpheus bitterly guilty for letting his wife die while he was lecherously 'daffan...wi the water-lassies'. Thomas Blackburn criticises his self-absorbed slide into despair, James Merrill the 'opulence of grief which has turned into a theatrical performance.

The most radical of such revisions of the story are the feminist versions which attempt to see the story from Eurydice's point of view. In the words of the American poet Alta:

all the male poets write of orpheus
 as if they look back & expect
 to find me walking patiently
 behind them, they claim i fell into hell.
 damn them, i say.
 i stand in my own pain
 & sing my own song.

The first and fiercest of these feminist Eurydices is H.D.'s in 1917 (**O39**), who bitterly condemns Orpheus for the 'arrogance' and 'ruthlessness' which have prevented her escape from hell, yet claims a kind of victory in her self-assertion: 'Against the black/I have more fervour/than you in all the splendour of that place'. Similarly Sandra Gilbert's Bacchante—rather in the spirit of Anne Finch's 'resenting heroines'—justifies her sisters' punishment of Orpheus for his callous betrayal of Eurydice (**O50**). The 'swaggering bastard', armed with his phallic flute, tried to silence the voices of nature and of women: 'Without his manly anthems, /everything...would sing, would sing.'

Others more subtly criticise Orpheus not for his failure to save Eurydice but for his attempt to do so in the first place: who says Eurydice *wanted* to return to life? Rachel Blau du Plessis's Eurydice deliberately retreats into dark labyrinthine caves to escape male control, transforming herself into a primeval fertility goddess. Elaine Feinstein's Eurydice (**O48**) loves Orpheus, and the music they make together is genuinely life-enhancing; nevertheless, they represent opposed and incompatible principles—the harsh male Apollonian sun of reason, order, control, language-as-power, versus the still shadowy waters of female intuition, emotion, acceptance, silence. His possessiveness is destructive, and his attempt to drag her out of the grave a horrible violation of nature. Margaret Atwood (**O49**) similarly presents an Orpheus who cannot accept Eurydice's acceptance of death, and tries to recreate her in the shape of what he wants her to be. He ultimately fails because the Eurydice he loves is the reflection of his own needs and desires, not the real woman: 'You could not believe I was more than your echo.' For all these feminist writers Orpheus's sin is his desire for control—of Eurydice, of the natural world, of mortality. We may recall Bacon's claim that the conquest of death would be the noblest achievement of 'philosophy'; for a writer like Feinstein such an Orphean quest to control and defeat nature epitomises destructive masculine hubris.

This feminist view of Orpheus's music as a controlling and repressive force is a radical reinterpretation of the myth; most twentieth-century versions more traditionally see Orpheus the poet-musician as a positive figure. A few are simply celebratory, especially those which deal with Orpheus's union with wild nature: for instance, Denise Levertov's imaginative recreation of his playing to the trees from a tree's point of view, or Donald Davie's exuberant vision of the stones dancing in an expression of 'his holy joy...that stones should be'. Feinstein, rather unexpectedly, also evokes this joyously life-enhancing and consciousness-raising quality in Orpheus's music: as he and Eurydice pass, spring breaks out, the city traffic comes to a stop, and men and women look up from their mechanical work with a new awareness of their own humanity.

More often, though, there is a wary scepticism about the effect to which art can actually change the world. Orpheus's music is often presented as impotent: Horace Gregory's

Orpheus waits helplessly as the Bacchantes approach and his birds desert him as ‘deathless music flies like hope to heaven’; John Hollander’s finds that since Eurydice’s death his songs have no effect on the natural world, and wryly waits for his ‘cracked lyre to crawl away/In silent tortoise-hood some day’. W.H.Auden’s challenging question ‘What does the song hope for?’ (O40), Yvor Winters’s image of the ‘immortal tongue’ singing ‘unmeaning down the stream’, John Ashbery’s quiet insistence on the transience of all things including poets and poetry, Paul Breslin’s vision of the mortal poet who cannot break ‘Death’s mortise-bond in all created things’—all use the Orpheus myth to raise disquieting questions about the value, effect, or permanence of art.

Such scepticism can be especially acute and ironic when Orpheus is brought anachronistically into juxtaposition with the modern world. In Michael Hamburger’s ‘Orpheus Street, SE5’ (O45) he is a drug-popping protest poet, ‘well paid’ for singing of love and peace and freedom, in a seedy com-commercialised London. ‘Orpheus transfigures, Orpheus transmutes all things’—but can he transfigure this world? The image of park benches taking off and flying, ‘narrowly missing the sparrows’, captures both the exhilaration and the improbability of the prospect. There is even less hope of redemption in the bored and cynical poet of Donald Justice’s ‘Orpheus Opens his Morning Mail’ or the rock musician of John Heath-Stubbs’s ‘Story of Orph’ (O51), whose death at the hands of a obsessed fan merely results in increased album and t-shirt sales; in this modern world, music and martyrdom are trivialised. More grimly, Stanley Kunitz presents Orpheus as a Holocaust survivor, traumatised and silenced by the horrors he has seen.

On the other hand, an Orpheus who is vulnerable and doomed can acquire a new kind of tragic heroism—David Gascoyne’s shaman-like figure, for instance, returning with his ‘shattered lyre’ to try to tell in ‘bewildered words’ of his experiences, or William Jay Smith’s, descending like Childe Roland into the darkness of the underworld ‘Bearing his flaming shield, his lyre’. Such portrayals suggest a psychological reading: the poet who risks his own sanity to explore the darkness of the human psyche on our behalf. Often there is a sense that the power and value of Orpheus’s music comes precisely from his confrontation with suffering and death. For A.D.Hope (O52) it is only after the loss of Eurydice that Orpheus’s music acquires its ‘deathless harmony’; Iain Crichton Smith’s Pluto tells Orpheus that he can play so movingly only because he has experienced loss, and sends him back without Eurydice to play his vision of ‘the human/ invincible spirit’ in twentieth-century slums. Paul Goodman (in a short story) and Rolfe Humphries (O44) go further to suggest that Orpheus deliberately sacrifices Eurydice. Aware that he must choose between happiness and artistic greatness, Humphries’s Orpheus looks back and consigns Eurydice ‘with everlasting love, to Hell’—a necessary sacrifice (though feminist writers might see it rather differently) to achieve the ‘immortal voice’ that in ‘The Thracian Women’ triumphs over the Bacchantes’ malice. Ted Hughes, by contrast, allows suffering to achieve both love and art. In his short musical play, Orpheus’s cheerful pop music jangles into discord when Eurydice dies, and then, in hell, is reborn as ‘solemn Bach, Handel, Vivaldi’; with this he wins her back, though as a spiritual presence that he alone can recognise—the nearest to a happy ending in any twentieth-century version.

Sometimes the power of Orpheus’s music is explicitly political. In Atwood’s ‘Orpheus (2)’ (O49c), Orpheus in the stadium, ‘trying to sing/love into existence again’, takes on

unmistakable overtones of the poet writing in the face of political tyranny: 'Praise is defiance.' One of the most bizarrely powerful images in Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* graphic novels (in which Orpheus is woven into Gaiman's complex mythology as the son of Morpheus/Dream/Sandman) is in the French Revolution story 'Thermidor': the head of Orpheus leads a chorus of guillotined heads in a song of liberty, silencing the despot Robespierre. In such versions, Orpheus the civiliser takes on a new life as Orpheus the rebel, defending civilised and humane values against tyranny.

Perhaps the most extreme vision of Orpheus achieving power through suffering is Muriel Rukeyser's (**O43**), which consciously re-enacts the Orphic myth of Dionysus: the dismembered parts of Orpheus's body, torn apart and scattered by the Bacchantes, come together again in a miraculous rebirth: 'He has died the death of the god... He has opened the door of pain. /It is a door and a window and a lens/opening on another land...' Russell Hoban (**O46**), describing the same process, sums it up in a brilliant pun: 'He's found his members, said Kleinzeit. He's remembered himself.' Hoban's version, however, one of the most complex as well as the wittiest of twentieth-century rewritings of the myth, goes further than that. His Orpheus is trapped in an endless cycle of death and rebirth. In what looks like a conscious reminiscence of the Fulgentian allegory of the quest of 'best voice' for 'profound judgement', he needs to be reunited with Eurydice, 'the female element complementary to himself, who dwells in 'the inside of things, the place under the places. Underworld, if you like to call it that.' But, as in Feinstein, Orpheus with his masculine desire for power and control cannot accept the nirvana-like peace of Eurydice's underworld, insists on pursuing worldly fame, and so loses Eurydice, dies, and is reborn to enact the cycle again. If only the cycle could be broken, Hoban implies, harmony could return to the world. The nonsense phrases that echo through the novel ('barrow full of rocks', 'harrow full of crocks', etc.) turn out absurdly to stand for Milton's 'The hidden soul of harmony' (**O20a**). As things are, harmony can only emerge into the world in a nonsensically garbled form, and we have to be content with what can be achieved by Kleinzeit, a 'small-time' Orpheus.

Notes

- 1 The popularity of the Orpheus myth means that there are far more literary treatments of it than of Adonis or Pygmalion; however, it also tends (perhaps because of its familiarity) to be treated more briefly. That is why the present chapter contains almost twice as many texts as chapters 5 and 6, but is approximately the same length.
- 2 Reference codes in **bold** refer to texts in the anthology: **O1** is the first text in the 'Orpheus' section. Bibliographical details for these texts can be found in the footnote attached to the title of each text. For texts which are referred to but not included in the anthology, brief bibliographical details are given in 'Other Versions of Orpheus', below.

yet armed him with his blazing bolts, his thunder, and his lightning—the weapons which guarantee Zeus his glory.

This was his song. He checked his lyre and his divine voice, but though he had finished, the others all still leaned forwards, ears straining under the peaceful spell; such was the bewitching power of the music which lingered amongst them.

**O2 Virgil, from the *Georgics*, c. 29 BC. Trans. C. Day
Lewis, 1940^o**

Virgil (Publius Vergilius Maro), 70–19 BC, Roman poet of the Augustan period, author of the *Eclogues*, *Georgics*, and *Aeneid*. The story of Orpheus and Eurydice comes from the end of the *Georgics*; the problems of its relevance to the rest of the poem and the relationship between Orpheus and Aristaeus are discussed in the introduction to this chapter. The extract begins as Aristaeus prepares to catch and question the sea god Proteus, who (as his mother Cyrene has warned him) will change into various forms to try to evade questioning.

Virgil wrote in hexameters, the lines of six metrical feet that are the standard form for serious long poems in Greek and Latin. C. Day Lewis's translation uses an English line of similar length with a loose six-beat pattern.

- 430 Now Proteus came to his custom'd
Den from the water: around him the dripping tribes of the deep
Frolicked, flinging the bitter spray far and wide about them.
All over the beach the seals were sprawled for their siesta.
The wizard himself, just like a herdsman might on the mountains,
When evening herds the calves homeward out of their pasture
435 And wolves prick up their ears hearing the lambs bleating,
Sat in the midst of them on a rock and took their tally.
Aristaeus saw his chance:
Scarcely letting the old man lay down his weary limbs,
He rushed him with a great shout and shackled him where he lay.
440 The wizard for his part remembered well his magic
And turned himself into all kinds of uncanny things—
Became a fire, a fearful wild beast, a flowing river.
But, seeing that no deception could spirit him away, beaten
He returned to himself and spoke at last in human tones.
445 'Boldest of youths, who bade you

^o from *The Georgics of Virgil*, trans. C. Day Lewis, London: Jonathan Cape, 1940, book 4 (line numbers are the same in the Latin and the English translation). Reproduced by permission of Jonathan Cape and the Executors of the Estate of C. Day Lewis and Peteis Eraser v Dunlop. 503/4 The Chambers, Chelsea Harbour, London SW10 0XF.

Approach my house? What do you want with me?' The other,
 'You know, Proteus, you know very well: for nothing escapes you.
 Stop being stubborn. Obeying the gods' commands we are come
 To ask the oracle how to revive my drooping fortunes.'

450 So much he said. At last now the seer convulsively
 Rolled his glaring eyes so they shone with a glassy light,
 Harshly ground his teeth, and thus gave tongue to Fate.—

'Not without sanction divine is the anger that hunts you down.

Great is the crime you pay for. Piteous Orpheus calls
 455 This punishment on you. Well you deserve it. If destiny
 So wills it. Bitter his anguish for the wife was taken from him.

Headlong beside that river she fled you. She never saw,
 Poor girl, her death there, deep in the grass before her feet—
 The watcher on the river-bank, the savage watersnake.

460 The band of wood-nymphs, her companions, filled with their crying
 The hilltops: wailed the peaks of Rhodope: high Pangaea,
 The warlike land of Rhesus,

The Getae lamented, and Hebrus, and Attic Orithyia.^o

Orpheus, sick to the heart, sought comfort of his hollow lyre:

465 You, sweet wife, he sang alone on the lonely shore,
 You at the dawn of day he sang, at day's decline you.

The gorge of Taenarus^o even, deep gate of the Underworld,
 He entered, and that grove where fear hangs like a black fog:

470 Approached the ghostly people, approached the King of Terrors^o
 And the hearts that know not how to be touched by human prayer.

But, by his song aroused from Hell's nethermost basements,
 Flocked out the flimsy shades, the phantoms lost to light,
 In number like to the millions of birds that hide in the leaves
 When evening or winter rain from the hills has driven them—

475 Mothers and men, the dead

Bodies of great-heart heroes, boys and unmarried maidens,

Young men laid on the pyre before their parents' eyes—

And about them lay the black ooze, the crooked reeds of Cocytus,
 Bleak the marsh that barred them in with its stagnant water,

^o **Rhodope...Orithyia:** all these names are associated with Thrace, Orpheus's homeland: **Rhodope** and **Pangaea** are mountains, **Hebrus** a river, the **Getae** a Thracian tribe; **Rhesus** was a Thracian king who fought in the Trojan war; **Orithyia** was an Athenian (**Attic**) princess who was abducted by Boreas, the god of the north wind, to his home in Thrace.

^o **Taenarus:** the southernmost point of mainland Greece, in legend containing an entrance to the underworld.

^o **King of Terrors:** i.e. Pluto.

480 And the Styx coiling nine times around corralled them there.^o
 Why, Death's very home and holy of holies was shaken
 To hear that song, and the Furies with steel-blue snakes entwined
 In their tresses; the watch-dog Cerberus gaped open his triple mouth;
 Ixion's wheel stopped dead from whirling in the wind.
 485 And now he's avoided every pitfall of the homeward path,
 And Eurydice, regained, is nearing the upper air
 Close behind him (for this condition has Proserpine made),
 When a moment's madness catches her lover off his guard—
 Pardonable, you'd say, but Death can never pardon.
 490 He halts. Eurydice, his own, is now on the lip of
 Daylight. Alas! he forgot. His purpose broke. He looked back.
 His labour was lost, the pact he had made with the merciless king
 Annulled. Three times did thunder peal over the pools of Avernus.^o
 "Who," she cried, "has doomed me to misery, who has doomed us?
 495 What madness beyond measure? Once more a cruel fate
 Drags me away, and my swimming eyes are drowned in darkness.
 Good-bye. I am borne away. A limitless night is about me
 And over the strengthless hands I stretch to you, yours no longer."
 Thus she spoke: and at once from his sight, like a wisp of smoke
 500 Thinned into air, was gone.
 Wildly he grasped at shadows, wanting to say much more,
 But she did not see him; nor would the ferryman of the Inferno^o
 Let him again cross the fen that lay between them.

What could he do, where go, his wife twice taken from him?
 505 What lament would move Death now? What deities hear his song?
 Cold she was voyaging now over the Stygian stream.
 Month after month, they say, for seven months alone
 He wept beneath a crag high up by the lonely waters
 Of Strymon,^o and under the ice-cold stars poured out his dirge
 510 That charmed the tigers and made the oak trees follow him.
 As a nightingale he sang that sorrowing under a poplar's
 Shade laments the young she has lost, whom a heartless ploughman
 Has noticed and dragged from the nest unfledged; and the nightingale
 Weeps all night, on a branch repeating the piteous song,
 515 Loading the acres around with the burden of her lament.
 No love, no marriage could turn his mind away from grief:

^o **Cocytus...Styx:** two of the four rivers of the underworld; for these and other features and inhabitants of Virgil's underworld, see 'The gods of the underworld' in ch. 2, pp. 30–1 above.

^o **Avernus:** a lake near Naples, near which was supposed to be an entrance to the underworld.

^o **ferryman of the Inferno:** Charon (see ch. 2).

^o **Strymon:** a Thracian river.

Alone through Arctic ice, through the snows of Tanais, over
 Frost-bound Rhiphaean plateaux^o
 He ranged, bewailing his lost Eurydice and the wasted
 520 Bounty of Death. In the end Thracian Bacchantes, flouted
 By his neglect, one night in the midst of their Master's revels
 Tore him limb from limb and scattered him over the land.
 But even then that head, plucked from the marble-pale
 Neck, and rolling down mid-stream on the river Hebrus—
 525 That voice, that cold, cold tongue cried out "Eurydice!"
 Cried "Poor Eurydice!" as the soul of the singer fled,
 And the banks of the river echoed, echoed "Eurydice!"
 Thus Proteus spake, and dived into the sea's depths,
 And where he dived the water, foaming, spun in a funnel.

530 Cyrene waited and spoke a word to her frightened son:
 'You may cast your cares away,'
 She said, 'For here is the whole truth of your bees' sickness
 And the death they were dealt by the nymphs with whom Eurydice
 Danced in the deep woods. So offer them gifts and make your
 535 Peace with them, and pray to the Gracious Ones of the grove.^o
 They will answer your prayers with forgiveness, they will forget their anger.
 But first let me tell you the form your orisons^o must take.
 Choose four bulls of excellent body that now on the heights of
 Green Lycaeus are grazing,
 540 And as many heifers whose necks have never felt the yoke.
 Build for these four altars beside the lofty shrines
 Of the goddesses, and let the sacred blood from their throats,
 Then leave the oxen's bodies alone in a leafy thicket.
 When the ninth day has dawned
 545 You shall send oblivion's poppies as a funeral gift to Orpheus,
 Slay a calf in honour of Eurydice placated,
 Slaughter a black ewe and go to the thicket again.'

Without delay he acts at once on his mother's advice:
 He comes to the shrine, erects—as she told him—altars, and brings
 550 Four bulls of excellent body
 With as many heifers whose necks have never felt the yoke:
 When the ninth day has dawned,
 Sends funeral gifts to Orpheus and goes to the thicket again.
 Here, to be sure, a miracle sudden and strange to tell of

- The **Tanais** (or Don river) and the **Rhiphaean** mountains are in Scythia, the region to the north of the Black Sea.
- **Gracious Ones of the grove:** the wood-nymphs.
- **orisons:** prayers.

555 They behold: from the oxen's bellies all over their rotting flesh
 Creatures are humming, swarming through the wreckage of their ribs—
 Huge and trailing clouds of bees, that now in the treetops
 Unite and hang like a bunch of grapes from the pliant branches.°

**O3 Horace, from *The Art of Poetry*, c. 10 BC. Trans.
 Wentworth Dillon, Earl of Roscommon, 1680°**

Horace (Quintus Horatius Flaccus), 65 BC–AD 8, Roman poet of the Augustan period, contemporary of Virgil, wrote with great virtuosity in two very different styles: compactly lyrical in his *Odes*, humorously conversational in his *Satires* and *Epistles*. The epistle on *The Art of Poetry* is an informal letter of advice to the two sons of his friend Piso, aspiring poets. Here he presents Orpheus—along with another mythical bard, Amphion, whose music caused stones to rise and build the walls of the city of Thebes—as symbols of the civilising power of poetry. The 1680 translation comes from a period when Horace's urbane and civilised view of poetry was especially influential.

440 Orpheus, inspired by more than human power,
 Did not (as poets feign) tame savage beasts,
 But men as lawless and as wild as they,
 And first dissuaded them from rage and blood.
 Thus, when Amphion built the Theban wall,
 445 They feigned the stones obeyed his magic lute.
 Poets, the first instructors of mankind,
 Brought all things to their proper, native use:
 Some they appropriated to the gods,
 And some to public, some to private ends.
 450 Promiscuous love by marriage was restrained,
 Cities were built, and useful laws were made.
 So ancient is the pedigree of verse,
 And so divine a poet's function.
 Then Homer's and Tyrtaeus'° martial muse
 455 Wakened the world and sounded loud alarms.
 To verse we owe the sacred oracles
 And our best precepts of morality.

° **clouds of bees:** that bees and other insects could be spontaneously generated from rotting flesh was a popular superstition, but almost certainly not one that Virgil literally believed.

° from *Horace's Art of Poetry. Made English by the Right Honourable the Earl of Roscommon*, London, 1680, pp. 27–8.

° **Tyrtaeus:** a Spartan soldier-poet of the seventh century BC.

Some have by verse obtained the love of kings
 (Who with the Muses ease their wearied minds).
 460 Then blush not, noble Piso, to protect
 What gods inspire and kings delight to hear.

**O4 Ovid, from the *Metamorphoses*, c. AD 10. Trans.
 A.D. Melville, 1986°**

Ovid (Publius Ovidius Naso), 43 BC–AD 17, Roman poet of the Augustan period, a generation younger than Virgil and Horace; for an account of his life, and his masterpiece the *Metamorphoses*, see chapter 1. The story of Orpheus, which spans books 10–11 of the *Metamorphoses*, is only casually related to the poem's supposed theme of changes of shape by the final transformation of the Bacchantes into trees. But Ovid, with characteristic delight in interweaving his stories or enclosing them within one another (Chinese-box fashion), uses Orpheus as the frame and narrator for a whole series of other tragic love stories, supposedly sung by the grieving bard to his audience of trees, rocks, and animals. Ovid's poem, like Virgil's, is written in hexameters. A.D. Melville translates it into blank verse, 'the tried and tested measure of English tradition' (xxxix), varied with occasional rhyming couplets for special emphasis.

Thence Hymen° came, in saffron mantle clad,
 At Orpheus' summons through the boundless sky
 To Thessaly, but vain the summons proved.
 True he was present, but no hallowed words
 5 He brought nor happy smiles nor lucky sign;
 Even the torch he held sputtered throughout
 With smarting smoke, and caught no living flame
 For all his brandishing. The ill-starred rite
 Led to a grimmer end. The new-wed bride,
 10 Roaming with her gay Naiads through the grass,
 Fell dying when a serpent struck her heel.
 And when at last the bard of Rhodope
 Had mourned his fill in the wide world above,
 He dared descend through Taenarus' dark gate

- ° from *Metamorphoses*, trans. A.D. Melville, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986, books 10 (1–154) and 11 (1–84). Reprinted by permission of Oxford University Press. Line numbers in the text are those of the English translation, which runs to more lines than the Latin.
- ° **Hymen**: Roman god of marriage, depicted wearing a yellow robe and bearing a torch. **Thence**: from Crete, where at the end of Book 9 he was presiding over the wedding of Iphis and lanthe; Ovid moves from a wedding which ends a comic story to one which begins a tragic story.

15 To Hades to make trial of the shades;
 And through the thronging wraiths and grave-spent ghosts
 He came to pale Persephone and him,
 Lord of the shades, who rules the unlovely realm,
 And as he struck his lyre's sad chords he said:
 20 'Ye deities who rule the world below,
 Whither we mortal creatures all return,
 If simple truth, direct and genuine,
 May by your leave be told, I have come down
 Not with intent to see the glooms of Hell,
 25 Nor to enchain the triple snake-haired necks
 Of Cerberus, but for my dear wife's sake,
 In whom a trodden viper poured his venom
 And stole her budding years. My heart has sought
 Strength to endure; the attempt I'll not deny;
 30 But love has won, a god whose fame is fair
 In the world above; but here I doubt, though here
 Too, I surmise; and if that ancient tale
 Of ravishment is true, you too were joined
 In love.^o Now by these regions filled with fear,
 35 By this huge chaos, these vast silent realms,
 Reweave, I implore, the fate unwound too fast
 Of my Eurydice. To you are owed
 Ourselves and all creation; a brief while
 We linger; then we hasten, late or soon,
 40 To one abode; here one road leads us all;
 Here in the end is home; over humankind
 Your kingdom keeps the longest sovereignty.
 She too, when ripening years reach their due term,
 Shall own^o your rule. The favour that I ask
 45 Is but to enjoy her love; and, if the Fates
 Will not relieve her, my resolve is clear
 Not to return: may two deaths give you cheer.'

 So to the music of his strings he sang,
 And all the bloodless spirits wept to hear;
 50 And Tantalus forgot the fleeing water,
 Ixion's wheel was tranced; the Danaids
 Laid down their urns; the vultures left their feast,

^o **if that ancient tale...joined in love:** a tactful allusion to the story of Pluto's rape of Proserpina.

^o **own:** acknowledge.

And Sisyphus sat rapt upon his stone.^o

Then first by that sad singing overwhelmed,
 55 The Furies' cheeks, it's said, were wet with tears;
 And Hades' queen and he whose sceptre rules
 The Underworld could not deny the prayer,
 And called Eurydice. She was among
 60 The recent ghosts and, limping from her wound,
 Came slowly forth; and Orpheus took his bride
 And with her this compact that, till he reach
 The world above and leave Avernus' vale,
 He look not back or else the gift would fail.

The track climbed upwards, steep and indistinct,
 65 Through the hushed silence and the murky gloom;
 And now they neared the edge of the bright world,
 And, fearing lest she faint, longing to look,
 He turned his eyes—and straight she slipped away.
 He stretched his arms to hold her—to be held—
 70 And clasped, poor soul, naught but the yielding air.
 And she, dying again, made no complaint
 (For what complaint had she save she was loved?)
 And breathed a faint farewell, and turned again
 Back to the land of spirits whence she came.

75 The double death of his Eurydice
 Stole Orpheus' wits away; (like him who saw
 In dread the three-necked hound of Hell with chains
 Fast round his middle neck, and never lost
 His terror till he lost his nature too
 80 And turned to stone; or Olenos, who took
 Upon himself the charge and claimed the guilt
 When his ill-starred Lethaea trusted to
 Her beauty, hearts once linked so close, and now
 Two rocks on runnelled Ida's mountainside).^o
 85 He longed, he begged, in vain to be allowed
 To cross the stream of Styx a second time.
 The ferryman repulsed him. Even so
 For seven days he sat upon the bank,

^o **And Tantalus...upon his stone:** see 'The underworld' in ch. 2, pp. 30–1 for these famous inmates of Tartarus.

^o **like him...mountainside:** nothing else is known of these two metamorphoses: the man who turned to stone in terror at seeing Cerberus is probably part of the story of Hercules' twelfth labour (see ch. 3); the story of Lethaea and her husband Olenos looks like a familiar kind of punishment-for-hubris legend, similar to that of Niobe.

90 Unkempt and fasting, anguish, grief and tears
 His nourishment, and cursed Hell's cruelty.
 Then he withdrew to soaring Rhodope
 And Haemus^o battered by the northern gales.

Three times the sun had reached the watery Fish
 That close the year,^o while Orpheus held himself
 95 Aloof from love of women, hurt perhaps
 By ill-success or bound by plighted troth.
 Yet many a woman burned with passion for
 The bard, and many grieved at their repulse.
 It was his lead that taught the folk of Thrace
 100 The love for tender boys, to pluck the buds,
 The brief springtime, with manhood still to come.

There was a hill, and on the hill a wide
 Level of open ground, all green with grass.
 The place lacked any shade. But when the bard,
 105 The heaven-born bard, sat there and touched his strings,
 Shade came in plenty. Every tree was there:
 Dodona's holy durmast,^o poplars once
 The Sun's sad daughters,^o oaks with lofty leaves,
 Soft limes, the virgin laurel and the beech;
 110 The ash, choice wood for spearshafts, brittle hazels,
 The knotless fir, the ilex curving down
 With weight of acorns, many-coloured maples,
 The social plane,^o the river-loving willow,
 The water-lotus, box for ever green,
 115 Thin tamarisks and myrtles double-hued,
 Viburnums bearing berries of rich blue.
 Twist-footed ivy came and tendrilled vines,
 And vine-clad elms, pitch-pines and mountain-ash,
 Arbutus laden with its blushing fruit,
 120 Lithe lofty palms, the prize of victory,
 And pines, high-girdled, in a leafy crest,
 The favourite of Cybele, the gods'

^o **Haemus:** a mountain in Thrace.

^o **the watery Fish...close the year:** Pisces, the last sign of the zodiac, marks the end of the (northern) winter.

^o **durmast:** a type of oak, associated with the temple of Zeus at Dodona.

^o **The Sun's sad daughters:** in book 2 Ovid related how the Sun's daughters were turned to poplar trees in grief for their brother Phaethon.

^o **social plane:** the plane tree, with its broad spreading branches, was a traditional shade tree.

Great mother, since in this tree Attis doffed
His human shape and stiffened in its trunk.^o

125 Amid the throng the cone-shaped cypress stood,
A tree now, but in days gone by a boy...

Ovid briefly tells the story of Cyparissus, a boy whom Apollo loved, who pined away with grief after accidentally killing his pet stag, and was metamorphosed into a cypress tree.

Such was the grove the bard assembled. There
He sat amid a company of beasts,
A flock of birds, and when he'd tried his strings
And, as he tuned, was satisfied the notes,

175 Though different, agreed in harmony,
He sang this song: 'From Jove, great Mother Muse,
Inspire my song: to Jove all creatures bow;
Jove's might I've often hymned in days gone by.
I sang the giants in a graver theme

180 And bolts victorious in Phlegra's plains.^o
But now I need a lighter strain, to sing
Of boys beloved of gods and girls bewitched
By lawless fires who paid the price of lust...'

The remainder of book 10 is taken up with the tales told by Orpheus, including those of Hyacinthus, Pygmalion, Myrrha, Adonis, and Atalanta. Orpheus's own story resumes at the beginning of the next book.

Book 11

While Orpheus sang his minstrel's songs and charmed
The rocks and woods and creatures of the wild
To follow, suddenly, as he swept his strings
In concord with his song, a frenzied band
5 Of Thracian women, wearing skins of beasts,
From some high ridge of ground caught sight of him.
'Look!' shouted one of them, tossing her hair
That floated in the breeze, 'Look, there he is,
The man who scorns us!' and she threw her lance

- ^o **pines...in its trunk:** Attis, lover of the goddess Cybele, castrated himself; his transformation into a pine tree (sacred to Cybele) may be Ovid's invention.
- ^o **Phlegra's plains:** the volcanic region around Mount Vesuvius, traditionally the site of the war between the gods and giants

10 Full in Apollo's minstrel's face, but, tipped
 With leaves, it left a bruise but drew no blood.
 Another hurled a stone; that, in mid air,
 Was vanquished by the strains of voice and lyre
 And grovelled at his feet, as if to ask
 15 Pardon for frenzy's daring. Even so
 The reckless onslaught swelled; their fury knew
 No bounds; stark madness reigned. And still his singing
 Would have charmed every weapon, but the huge
 Clamour, the drums, the curving Phrygian fifes,
 20 Hand-clapping, Bacchic screaming drowned the lyre.
 And then at last, his song unheard, his blood
 Reddened the stones. The Maenads first pounced on
 The countless birds still spellbound by his song,
 The snakes, the host of creatures of the wild,
 25 His glory and his triumph. Next they turned
 Their bloody hands on Orpheus, flocking like
 Birds that have seen a midnight owl abroad
 By day, or in the amphitheatre
 Upon the morning sand a pack of hounds
 30 Round a doomed stag. They rushed upon the bard,
 Hurling their leaf dressed lances, never meant
 For work like that; and some slung clods, some flints,
 Some branches torn from trees. And, lest they lack
 Good weapons for their fury, as it chanced,
 35 Oxen were toiling there to plough the land
 And brawny farmhands digging their hard fields
 Not far away, and sweating for their crop.
 Seeing the horde of women, they fled and left
 Their labour's armoury, and all across
 40 The empty acres lay their heavy rakes,
 Hoes and long-handled mattocks. Seizing these,
 Those frantic women tore apart the oxen
 That threatened with their horns, and streamed to slay
 The bard. He pleaded then with hands outstretched
 45 And in that hour for the first time his words
 Were useless and his voice of no avail.
 In sacrilege they slew him. Through those lips
 (Great Lord of Heaven!) that held the rocks entranced,
 That wild beasts understood, he breathed his last,
 50 And forth into the winds his spirit passed.

The sorrowing birds, the creatures of the wild,
 The woods that often followed as he sang,
 The flinty rocks and stones, all wept and mourned
 For Orpheus; forest trees cast down their leaves,

55 Tonsured in grief, and rivers too, men say,
 Were swollen with their tears, and Naiads wore,
 And Dryads too, their mourning robes of black
 And hair dishevelled. All around his limbs
 Lay scattered. Hebrus' stream received his head
 60 And lyre, and floating by (so wonderful!)
 His lyre sent sounds of sorrow and his tongue,
 Lifeless, still murmured sorrow, and the banks
 Gave sorrowing reply. And then they left
 Their native river, carried out to sea,
 65 And gained Methymna's shore on Lesbos' isle.
 There, as his head lay on that foreign sand,
 Its tumbled tresses dripping, a fierce snake
 Threatened, until at last Apollo came
 To thwart it as it struck and froze to stone
 70 That serpent's open mouth and petrified,
 Just as they were, its jaws that gaped so wide.

The ghost of Orpheus passed to the Underworld,
 And all the places that he'd seen before
 He recognized again and, searching through
 75 The Elysian fields, he found Eurydice
 And took her in his arms with leaping heart.
 There hand in hand they stroll, the two together;
 Sometimes he follows as she walks in front,
 Sometimes he goes ahead and gazes back—
 80 No danger now—at his Eurydice.

Bacchus did not permit this crime to pass
 Unpunished, unavenged. Distressed to lose
 The minstrel of his mysteries, at once
 He fastened in the woods by twisting roots
 85 All the women who had seen that wickedness,
 Each at the place of her pursuit, their toes
 Drawn down to points forced deep in the firm soil.
 And as a bird, its foot held in a snare
 Hidden by a clever fowler, feels it's caught
 90 And flaps its wings and by its flutterings
 Tightens the trap, so each of them was stuck
 Fast in the soil and struggled, terrified,
 In vain, to escape and as she jerked away,
 The lithe root held her shackled. When she asked

95 Where were her toes, her nails, her feet, she saw
 The bark creep up her shapely calves. She tried,
 Distaught, to beat her thighs and what she struck
 Was oak, her breast was oak, her shoulders oak;
 Her arms likewise you'd think were changed to long
 100 Branches and, thinking so, you'd not be wrong.^o

**O5 Boethius, from *The Consolation of Philosophy*,
 c. AD 520. Trans. J.T., 1609^o**

Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius, c. AD 480–524, late Roman writer on philosophy, theology, music, and mathematics; he held high office under the Gothic king Theodoric, but was accused of treason, imprisoned, tortured, and executed. In *The Consolation of Philosophy*, written during his imprisonment, he presents himself as visited in prison by the lady Philosophy, who teaches him to bear his misfortunes courageously by instructing him in the nature of good and evil and the way in which the world is governed by divine providence. The prose dialogue is interspersed with short poems and songs. At the end of book 3, which deals with the nature of the Good, Philosophy ‘with a soft and sweet voice, observing due dignity and gravity in her countenance and gesture’ sings the story of Orpheus, which becomes a parable of the search for spiritual enlightenment.

The *Consolation* was enormously popular and influential in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, and was translated by, among others, Alfred the Great, Chaucer, and Elizabeth I. This passage is from an early seventeenth-century translation published under the initials ‘J.T.’.

Happy is he that can behold
 The well-spring whence all good doth rise;
 Happy is he that can unfold
 The bands with which the earth him ties.

5 The Thracian poet, whose sweet song
 Performed his wife's sad obsequies,^o
 And forced the woods to run along
 When his mournful tunes did play,
 10 Whose powerful music was so strong

^o **you'd not be wrong:** the transformation of the Bacchantes into trees neatly mirrors Orpheus's earlier summoning of the trees: where Orpheus's music brought motionless wood to life, the murderers who silenced his music are transformed into motionless wood.

^o from *The Consolation of Philosophy*, with the English translation of ‘I.T.’ (i.e. J.T., 1609), revised by H.F. Stewart, in *Boethius*, Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1918, book 3, metre 12.

^o **obsequies:** funeral rites.

4. Christ is the true Orpheus, who by the sweetness and force of his evangelical music caused the gentiles,^o who before were stocks and stones in knowledge and no better than beasts in religion, to follow after him. It was he only who went down to hell, to recover the Church, his spouse, who had lost herself by running away from Aristaeus (even goodness itself) and, delighting herself among the grass and flowers of pleasure, was stung by that old serpent the Devil. What was in vain attempted by Orpheus was truly performed by our Saviour, for he alone hath delivered our souls from the nethermost hell; and at last was he torn with whips and thorns and pierced with nails and a spear upon the cross for our transgressions.

O20 John Milton on Orpheus^o

John Milton, 1608–74, English poet, whose central work is the epic poem *Paradise Lost* (1667); his other works include the masque *Comus* (1637), the pastoral elegy *Lycidas* (1637), the tragedy *Samson Agonistes* (1671), *Paradise Regained* (1671), and many pamphlets on political and religious questions including *Areopagitica* (1644) on freedom of the press.

The first two passages come from ‘L’Allegro’ and ‘II Penseroso’, a matched pair of poems (perhaps written in 1631, while Milton was at Cambridge), expressing two contrasting temperaments. L’Allegro (Italian for ‘the cheerful man’) declares his allegiance to Mirth, II Penseroso (‘the thoughtful man’) declares his allegiance to Melancholy, and each praises his chosen way of life. The sequence of ideas in each poem is closely parallel; in each, Orpheus appears near the end, in the context of the pleasures of theatre and music.

(a) from ‘L’Allegro’, c. 1631

Then to the well-trod stage anon,^o
 If Jonson’s learned sock^o be on,
 Or sweetest Shakespeare, fancy’s child,
 Warble his native wood-notes wild;^o
 35 And ever against eating cares,^o
 Lap me in soft Lydian airs,^o
 Married to immortal verse,
 Such as the meeting soul may pierce

^o **gentiles:** pagans.

(a, b, c) from *Poems of Mr John Milton*, London, 1645, pp. 36, 41, 59; (d) from *Paradise Lost: A Poem in Twelve Books*, 2nd edition, London, 1674, pp. 173–4.

^o **anon:** presently.

^o **sock:** a low-soled slipper worn by ancient comic actors, used as a symbol of comedy, as the **buskin**, a high boot, is used to symbolise tragedy.

^o **Jonson’s learned sock... wood-notes wild:** This contrast between the learned Ben Jonson and the natural and spontaneous Shakespeare, who relied solely on his **fancy** (imagination), was a critical commonplace.

^o **against eating cares:** for protection against cares which eat away at the mind.

^o **Lydian airs:** Lydian was one of the modes (styles, keys) of ancient music, said by one ancient writer to provide ‘relaxation and delight, being invented against excessive cares and worries’.

In notes, with many a winding bout
 140 Of linkèd sweetness long drawn out,
 With wanton heed and giddy cunning,
 The melting voice through mazes running,
 Untwisting all the chains that tie
 The hidden soul of harmony;
 145 That Orpheus' self may heave his head
 From golden slumber on a bed
 Of heaped Elysian flowers, and hear
 Such strains as would have won the ear
 Of Pluto, to have quite set free
 150 His half-regained Eurydice.
 These delights if thou canst give,
 Mirth, with thee I mean to live.

(b) *from 'Il Penseroso', c. 1631*

Sometime let gorgeous Tragedy
 In sceptred pall^o come sweeping by,
 Presenting Thebes, or Pelops' line,
 100 Or the tale of Troy divine,^o
 Or what (though rare) of later age
 Ennobled hath the buskined stage.^o
 But, O sad virgin,^o that thy power
 Might raise Musaeus^o from his bower,
 105 Or bid the soul of Orpheus sing
 Such notes as, warbled to the string,
 Drew iron tears down Pluto's cheek,
 And made hell grant what love did seek.

^o **sceptred pall:** robe and sceptre.

^o **Thebes... Troy divine:** Milton invokes three of the tragic cycles of Greek myth: the stories of Thebes (Oedipus and his family), of Argos (**Pelops' line** included Atreus and Thyestes, Agamemnon and Orestes), and of the Trojan War.

^o **Or what... buskined stage:** i.e. those few later tragedies which are worthy to stand beside the classical Greek ones; **buskined** see **sock** above.

^o **O sad virgin:** addressing Melancholy.

^o **Musaeus:** another mythical early Greek poet.

(c) from Lycidas, 1637

A pastoral elegy for a Cambridge acquaintance of Milton's, Edward King, an Anglican priest and poet, who was drowned on the Irish Sea. For Milton, King/ Lycidas becomes a type of the poet and his potential fate in a world hostile to poetry.

Where were ye, nymphs, when the remorseless deep
 Closed o'er the head of your loved Lycidas?
 For neither were ye playing on the steep,
 Where your old bards, the famous Druids, lie,
 Nor on the shaggy top of Mona high,
 Nor yet where Deva spreads her wizard stream.^o
 Ay me, I fondly dream!
 Had ye been there—for what could that have done?
 What could the Muse herself that Orpheus bore,
 The Muse herself, for her enchanting son,
 Whom universal nature did lament,
 When by the rout that made the hideous roar
 His gory visage down the stream was sent,
 Down the swift Hebrus to the Lesbian shore.

(d) from Paradise Lost, 1667

These are the opening lines of Book 7 (1–39), at the mid-point of *Paradise Lost*. As he passes from events in Heaven and Hell to the climactic events in the Garden of Eden, Milton invokes his Muse. He calls her by the name of 'Urania', the classical Muse associated with astronomy, but at the same time stresses that this is merely a convenient name: his Urania is *not* one 'of the Muses nine' but a Christian figure, a companion of God and sister to divine Wisdom, sharply distinguished from the 'empty name' of the classical myth.

Here again Milton uses the Orpheus myth to express his sense of the poet's vulnerability. In the 1660s Milton was both literally in 'darkness' (he became totally blind in 1652), and politically in 'evil days' and 'dangers' as a prominent republican under the newly restored monarchy: he was briefly imprisoned in 1659, and copies of his books were publicly burned.

He also draws on the story of Bellerophon's hubristic attempt to fly to heaven on the winged horse Pegasus, and his crippling fall to earth. Pegasus was a traditional symbol of poetic inspiration (the Muses' fountain of Hippocrene was said to have sprung up where his hoof struck the ground on taking off), and Milton here takes Bellerophon as an image of the fate of the over-ambitious poet.

For neither... wizard stream: places close to the scene of King's shipwreck: **Mona** is Anglesey, and the **steep** is perhaps that of Bardsey—both mountainous islands off the Welsh coast which were centres of the **Druids**, ancient Celtic bard-priests. **Deva** is the River Dee in north Wales, which flows into the Irish Sea; it is called **wizard** because it was said to magically shift its course as an omen of disaster.

Descend from heaven, Urania, by that name
 If rightly thou art called, whose voice divine
 Following, above the Olympian hill I soar,^o
 Above the flight of Pegasean wing.
 5 The meaning, not the name, I call: for thou
 Nor of the Muses nine, nor on the top
 Of old Olympus dwell'st,^o but heavenly born,
 Before the hills appeared or fountain flowed,
 Thou with eternal Wisdom didst converse,
 10 Wisdom thy sister, and with her didst play
 In presence of the Almighty Father, pleased
 With thy celestial song.^o Up led by thee
 Into the heaven of heavens I have presumed,
 An earthly guest, and drawn empyreal^o air,
 15 Thy tempering.^o With like safety guided down
 Lest from this flying steed unreined (as once
 Bellerophon, though from a lower clime)^o
 Dismounted, on the Aleian field I fall,
 20 Erroneous^o there to wander and forlorn.
 Half yet remains unsung, but narrower bound
 Within the visible diurnal^o sphere;
 Standing on earth, not rapt above the pole,
 More safe I sing with mortal voice, unchanged
 25 To hoarse or mute, though fallen on evil days,
 On evil days though fallen, and evil tongues;
 In darkness, and with dangers compassed round,
 And solitude; yet not alone, while thou
 Visit'st my slumbers nightly or when morn

- o **whose voice... I soar:** i.e. 'following whose voice, I soar...'; the inverted syntax mirrors the sense.
- o **for thou... dwell'st:** i.e. 'for thou art not one of the nine Muses, nor dost thou dwell...'
- o **Thou with eternal Wisdom... celestial song:** see Proverbs 8, where Wisdom speaks of being with God before the creation of the world: 'When there were no depths, I was brought forth; when there were no fountains abounding with water. Before the mountains were settled, before the hills was I brought forth.... There I was by him, as one brought up with him: and I was daily his delight, rejoicing always with him' (8:23-4, 30).
- o **empyreal:** of the empyrean, the highest part of heaven.
- o **Thy tempering:** i.e. the air of heaven having been tempered by Urania to make it breathable by the poet.
- o **clime:** region.
- o **Erroneous:** in the literal Latin sense of 'wandering'.
- o **diurnal:** daily.

brates with a symphony; which are only metaphors for the faculty of leading multitudes by the nose.

O33 Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'Orpheus', c. 1820 °

Percy Bysshe Shelley, 1792–1822, is perhaps the epitome of the Romantic poet, controversial in his lifetime and since for his radical enthusiasm for political, religious, sexual, and artistic freedom, and for the hyperbolic intensity of his poetry. His love of Greek literature and myth is discussed in chapter 1. 'Orpheus' is presented as a fragment from a Greek tragedy (though there is no evidence that Shelley wrote or planned to write any more of it): a messenger, 'A', is describing to the Chorus how the bereaved Orpheus sings in the wilderness.

Orpheus

A: Not far from hence. From yonder pointed hill,
 Crowned with a ring of oaks, you may behold
 A dark and barren field, through which there flows,
 Sluggish and black, a deep but narrow stream,
 Which the wind ripples not, and the fair moon
 Gazes in vain, and finds no mirror there.
 Follow the herbless° banks of that strange brook
 Until you pause beside a darksome pond,
 The fountain of this rivulet, whose gush
 Cannot be seen, hid by a rayless night
 That lives beneath the overhanging rock
 That shades the pool—an endless spring of gloom,
 Upon whose edge hovers the tender light,
 Trembling to mingle with its paramour°—
 But, as Syrinx fled Pan,° so night flies day,
 Or, with most sullen and regardless° hate,
 Refuses stern her heaven-born embrace.
 On one side of this jagged and shapeless hill
 There is a cave, from which there eddies up
 A pale mist, like aërial gossamer,
 Whose breath destroys all life—awhile it veils
 The rock—then, scattered by the wind, it flies
 Along the stream, or lingers on the clefts,
 Killing the sleepy worms, if aught bide there.

° from *The Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. H.B. Forman, London, 1880, vol. iv, pp. 54–6.

° **herbless**: bare of vegetation.

° **paramour**: lover (Shelley implies that light and darkness are, or should be, lovers and partners).

° **as Syrinx fled Pan**: see 'Tales of love' in ch. 3, p. 40.

° **regardless**: contemptuously indifferent.

- 25 Upon the beetling^o edge of that dark rock
 There stands a group of cypresses; not such
 As, with a graceful spire and stirring life,
 Pierce the pure heaven of your native vale,
 Whose branches the air plays among, but not
- 30 Disturbs, fearing to spoil their solemn grace;
 But blasted and all wearily they stand,
 One to another clinging; their weak boughs
 Sigh as the wind buffets them, and they shake
 Beneath its blasts—a weather-beaten crew!
- 35 CHORUS: What wondrous sound is that, mournful and faint,
 But more melodious than the murmuring wind
 Which through the columns of a temple glides?
 A: It is the wandering voice of Orpheus' lyre,
 Borne by the winds, who sigh that their rude king
- 40 Hurries them fast from these air-feeding notes;
 But in their speed they bear along with them
 The waning sound, scattering it like dew
 Upon the startled sense.
- CHORUS: Does he still sing?
 Methought^o he rashly cast away his harp
- 45 When he had lost Eurydice.
- A: Ah, no!
 Awhile he paused.—As a poor hunted stag
 A moment shudders on the fearful brink
 Of a swift stream—the cruel hounds press on
 With deafening yell, the arrows glance and wound—
- 50 He plunges in: so Orpheus, seized and torn
 By the sharp fangs of an insatiate grief,
 Maenad-like waved his lyre in the bright air,
 And wildly shrieked 'Where she is, it is dark!'
 And then he struck from forth the strings a sound
- 55 Of deep and fearful melody. Alas!
 In times long past, when fair Eurydice
 With her bright eyes sat listening by his side,
 He gently sang of high and heavenly themes.
 As in a brook, fretted with little waves
- 60 By the light airs of spring—each ripplet^o makes
 A many-sided mirror for the sun,

^o **beetling**: overhanging.

^o **Methought**: it seemed to me.

^o **ripplet**: little ripple.

While it flows musically through green banks,
 Ceaseless and pauseless, ever clear and fresh,
 So flowed his song, reflecting the deep joy
 And tender love that fed those sweetest notes,
 The heavenly offspring of ambrosial food.^o
 But that is past. Returning from drear Hell,
 He chose a lonely seat of unhewn stone,
 Blackened with lichens, on a herbless plain.
 Then from the deep and overflowing spring
 Of his eternal ever-moving grief
 There rose to Heaven a sound of angry song.
 'Tis as a mighty cataract that parts
 Two sister rocks with waters swift and strong,
 And casts itself with horrid roar and din
 A down a steep;^o from a perennial source
 It ever flows and falls, and breaks the air
 With loud and fierce, but most harmonious roar,
 And as it falls casts up a vaporous spray
 Which the sun clothes in hues of Iris^o light.
 Thus the tempestuous torrent of his grief
 Is clothed in sweetest sounds and varying words
 Of poesy. Unlike all human works,
 It never slackens, and through every change
 Wisdom and beauty and the power divine
 Of mighty poesy together dwell,
 Mingling in sweet accord. As I have seen
 A fierce south blast tear through the darkened sky,
 Driving along a rack^o of wingèd clouds,
 Which may not pause, but ever hurry on,
 As their wild shepherd wills them, while the stars,
 Twinkling and dim, peep from between the plumes.
 Anon^o the sky is cleared, and the high dome
 Of serene Heaven, starred with fiery flowers,
 Shuts in the shaken earth; or the still moon
 Swiftly, yet gracefully, begins her walk,
 Rising all bright behind the eastern hills.
 I talk of moon, and wind, and stars, and not
 Of song; but, would I echo his high song,

^o **ambrosial food:** (according to Homer, the gods eat ambrosia—an unidentified but supernaturally delicious food).

^o **steep:** cliff.

^o **Iris:** rainbow (Iris is the goddess of the rainbow).

^o **rack:** formation of scattered clouds.

^o **Anon:** soon afterwards.

100 Nature must lend me words ne'er used before,
 Or I must borrow from her perfect works,
 To picture forth his perfect attributes.
 He does no longer sit upon his throne
 Of rock upon a desert herbless plain,
 105 For the evergreen and knotted ilexes,
 And cypresses that seldom wave their boughs,
 And sea-green olives with their grateful^o fruit,
 And elms dragging along the twisted vines,
 Which drop their berries as they follow fast,
 110 And blackthorn bushes with their infant race
 Of blushing rose-blooms; beeches, to lovers dear,
 And weeping willow trees; all swift or slow,
 As their huge boughs or lighter dress permit,
 Have circled in his throne, and Earth herself
 115 Has sent from her maternal breast a growth
 Of starlike flowers and herbs of odour sweet,
 To pave the temple that his poesy
 Has framed, while near his feet grim lions couch,
 And kids, fearless from love, creep near his lair.
 120 Even the blind worms seem to feel the sound.
 The birds are silent, hanging down their heads,
 Perched on the lowest branches of the trees;
 Not even the nightingale intrudes a note
 In rivalry, but all entranced she listens.

**O34 Robert B. Brough, from *Orpheus and Eurydice:*
or, The Wandering Minstrel, 1852^o**

Robert Barnabas Brough, 1828–60, journalist and comic playwright. He specialised in burlesque plays, full of anachronistic jokes, excruciating puns, and garbled literary allusions; he declares that, whatever questions may be raised about his 'classic erudition', his jokes demonstrate 'an intimate acquaintance with the ancients—even to the remotest period of antiquity'. In this passage from *Orpheus and Eurydice*, Pluto becomes a Victorian paterfamilias, cosily toasting muffins by the fireside, when he is interrupted by Orpheus in the guise of an Italian barrel-organ-grinder.

A street organ is heard outside, playing 'Jeannette and jeannot'. Pluto starts, with an agonized expression of countenance. Cerberus growls.

^o **grateful:** pleasant, welcome.

^o from *A Cracker Bon-Bon for Christmas Parties: consisting of Christmas Pieces for Private Representation*, London, 1852, pp. 40–59.

65 A cold wind passes; and fierce shocks surprise^o
 Those slow sublimities; a radiant flood
 Of light supernal^o bursts o'er hill and wood,
 And smites the eyeballs of that lifted face.

Now might he gain the heaven, now might raise
 70 Himself on pinions of eternal youth;
 The latitude, the amplitude of truth
 He might for ever now achieve, made nigh
 To those serener regions of the sky
 Above all change, where no time-cloud doth sail,
 75 But an eternal zephyr waves the veil
 Of changeless azure, and earth's days return
 Like a faint blush below; ah, he might learn
 Eternal joy and stillness. Shall he so?
 Far other destiny doth Love bestow
 80 Upon the children whom he honours most:
 For at that mighty moment, when the coast
 Of heaven he might in ecstasy attain,
 Yawns the dread cave wherein the dead remain;
 The sea-god's statue, like a giant bole^o
 85 Uprooted, leaps from out the charnel-hole;
 And Love, the exalter, is the summoner
 To places all with writhing shades astir;
 A peal of groans comes ringing on his ear,
 And the distressful furrows toss with fear,
 90 And he descends; whom not all sorrow's art
 Could ransom from the pangs of sorrow's heart.

O37 Edward Dowden, 'Eurydice', 1876^o

Edward Dowden, 1843–1913, Irish critic and poet, Professor at Trinity College, Dublin; best known as a Shakespearean scholar, he also wrote biographies of Shelley and Browning. 'Eurydice' is one of a group of dramatic monologues called *The Heroines*; it is perhaps the first serious attempt to give Eurydice a voice and to see the Orpheus-Eurydice relationship from her point of view.

Eurydice

'Now must this waste of vain desire have end:
 Fetter these thoughts which traverse to and fro

- ^o **solvèd:** dissolved, melted.
- ^o **surprise:** overtake.
- ^o **supernal:** heavenly.
- ^o **bole:** tree-trunk.
- ^o from *Poems*, London, 1876, pp. 69–76.

The road which has no issue! We are judged.
 O wherefore could I not uphold his heart?
 5 Why claimed I not some partnership with him
 In the strict test, urging my right of wife?
 How have I let him fall? I, knowing thee
 My Orpheus, bounteous giver of rich gifts,
 Not all inured in practice of the will,
 10 Worthier than I, yet weaker to sustain
 An inner certitude against the blank
 And silence of the senses; so no more
 My heart helps thine, and henceforth there remains
 No gift to thee from me, who would give all,
 15 Only the memory of me growing faint
 Until I seem a thing incredible,
 Some high, sweet dream, which was not, nor could be.
 Aye, and in idle fields of asphodel
 Must it not be that I shall fade indeed,
 20 No memory of me, but myself; these hands
 Ceasing from mastery and use, my thoughts
 Losing distinction in the vague, sweet air,
 The heart's swift pulses slackening to the sob
 Of the forgetful river,^o with no deed
 25 Pre-eminent to dare and to achieve,
 No joy for climbing to, no clear resolve
 From which the soul swerves never, no ill thing
 To rid the world of, till I am no more
 Eurydice, and shouldst thou at thy time
 30 Descend, and hope to find a helpmate here,
 I were grown slavish, like the girls men buy
 Soft-bodied, foolish-faced, luxurious-eyed,
 And meet to be another thing than wife.

Would that it had been thus: when the song ceased
 35 And laughterless Aidoneus^o lifted up
 The face, and turned his grave persistent eyes
 Upon the singer, I had forward stepped
 And spoken—"King! he has wrought well, nor failed,
 Who ever heard divine large song like this,
 40 Keener than sunbeam, wider than the air,

^o **the forgetful river:** Lethe.

^o **Aidoneus:** another name for Hades/Pluto.

And shapely as the mould of faultless fruit?
And now his heart upon the gale of song
Soars with wide wing, and he is strong for flight,
Not strong for treading with the careful foot:
15 Grant me the naked trial of the will
Divested of all colour, scents and song:
The deed concerns the wife; I claim my share.”
O then because Persephone was by
With shadowed eyes when Orpheus sang of flowers,
50 He would have yielded. And I stepping forth
From the clear radiance of the singer’s heights,
Made calm through vision of his wider truth,
And strengthened by deep beauty to hold fast
The presences of the invisible things,
55 Had led the way. I know how in that mood
He leans on me as babe on mother’s breast,
Nor could he choose but let his foot descend
Where mine left lightest pressure; so are passed
The brute three-visaged, and the flowerless ways,
60 Nor have I turned my head; and now behold
The greyness of remote terrestrial light,
And I step swifter. Does he follow still?
O surely since his will embraces mine
Closer than clinging hand can clasp a hand:
55 No need to turn and dull with visible proof
The certitude that soul relies on soul!
So speed we to the day; and now we touch
Warm grass, and drink the Sun. O Earth, O Sun,
Not you I need, but Orpheus’ breast, and weep
70 The gladdest tears that ever woman shed,
And may be weak awhile, and need to know
The sustenance and comfort of his arms.

Self-foolery of dreams; come bitter truth.

Yet he has sung at least a perfect song
75 While the Gods heard him, and I stood beside
O not applauding, but at last content,
Fearless for him, and calm through perfect joy,
Seeing at length his foot upon the heights
Of highest song, by me discerned from far,
80 Now suddenly attained in confident
And errorless ascension. Did I ask

The lesser joy, lips' touch and clasping arms,
 Or was not this salvation? For I urged
 Always, in jealous service to his art,
 85 "Now thou hast told their secrets to the trees
 Of which they muse through lullèd summer nights;
 Thou hast gazed downwards in the formless gulf
 Of the brute-mind, and canst control the will
 Of snake, and brooding panther fiery-eyed,
 90 And lark in middle heaven: leave these behind!
 And let some careless singer of the fields
 Set to the shallow sound of cymbal-stroke
 The Faun a-dance; some less true-tempered soul,
 Which cannot shape to harmony august
 95 The splendour and the tumult of the world,
 Inflame to frenzy of delirious rage
 The Maenad's breast; yea, and the hearts of men,
 Smoke of whose fire upcurls from little roofs,
 Let singers of the wine-cup and the roast,
 100 The whirling spear, the toy-like chariot-race,
 And bickering counsel of contending kings
 Delight them: leave thou these; sing thou for Gods."
 And thou hast sung for Gods; and I have heard.

I shall not fade beneath this sunless sky,
 105 Mixed in the wandering, ineffectual tribe;
 For these have known no moment when the soul
 Stood vindicated, laying sudden hands
 On immortality of joy, and love
 Which sought not, saw not, knew not, could not know
 110 The instruments of sense; I shall not fade.
 Yea, and thy face detains me evermore
 Within the realm of light. Love, wherefore blame
 Thy heart because it sought me? Could the years'
 Whole sum of various fashioned happiness
 115 Exceed the measure of that eager face
 Importunate and pure, still lit with song,
 Turning from song to comfort of my love,
 And thirsty for my presence? We are saved!
 Yield Heracles, thou brawn and thews of Zeus,
 120 Yield up thy glory on Thessalian ground,
 Competitor of Death in single strife!^o

o **Yield...single strife!**: Heracles successfully wrestled with Death for the soul of Alcestis, wife of the Thessalian king Admetus.

The lyre methinks outdoes the club and fist,
 And beauty's ingress the outrageous force
 Of tyrant though beneficent; supreme
 25 This feat remains, a memory shaped for Gods.

Nor canst thou wholly lose me from thy life;
 Still I am with thee; still my hand keeps thine;
 Now I restrain from too intemperate grief
 Being a portion of the thoughts that claim
 30 Thy service; now I urge with that good pain
 Which wastes and feeds the spirit, a desire
 Unending; now I lurk within thy will
 As vigour; now am gleaming through the world
 As beauty; and if greater thoughts must lay
 35 Their solemn light on thee, outshining mine,
 And in some far faint-gleaming hour of Hell
 I stand unknown and muffled by the boat
 Leaning an eager ear to catch some speech
 Of thee, and if some comer tell aloud
 40 How Orpheus who had loved Eurydice
 Was summoned by the Gods to fill with joy
 And clamour of celestial song the courts
 Of bright Olympus—I, with pang of pride
 And pain dissolved in rapture, will return
 45 Appeased, with sense of conquest stern and high.'

But while she spoke, upon a chestnut trunk
 Fallen from cliffs of Thracian Rhodope
 Sat Orpheus, for he deemed himself alone,
 And sang. But bands of wild-eyed women roamed
 50 The hills, whom he had passed with calm disdain.
 And now the shrilling Berecynthian^o pipe
 Sounded, blown horn, and frantic female cries:
 He ceased from song and looked for the event.^o

O38 Lord De Tabley, from 'Orpheus in Hades', 1893^o

John Byrne Leicester Warren, 1835–95, 3rd Baron De Tabley from 1887, poet, dramatist, lawyer, botanist, numismatist, and bibliographer. Much of his poetry is

- ^o **Berecynthian:** an adjective associated with Cybele (after a mountain sacred to her): Dowden combines or confuses the rites of the Asian mother-goddess with those of Dionysus.
- ^o **looked for the event:** awaited what would happen.
- ^o from *The Collected Poems of Lord De Tabley*, London, 1903, pp. 362–6.

no longer human their toes
 grow roots and their knees are
 185 gnarled—their arms branch leaves:
 who will release them?

Their flesh is wood.

8

As dreamers now together
 we forget Apollo's day
 190 that cruel light in which at last
 all men become shadows;
 and we forgive even those
 dead gods, who sleep among us.
 For all their gifts, not one
 195 of them has power to summon us.
 In this green silence
 we conceal our one true marriage.

**O49 Margaret Atwood, 'Orpheus (1)', 'Eurydice',
 'Orpheus (2)', 1984°**

Margaret Atwood, 1939–, Canadian novelist and poet, born in Ottawa. Her poems, like her novels, are characterised by sharp, vivid language and images, and an unsparing, angry or sardonic analysis of power relationships between men and women.

Orpheus (1)

You walked in front of me,
 pulling me back out
 to the green light that had once
 grown fangs and killed me.

5 I was obedient, but
 numb, like an arm
 gone to sleep; the return
 to time was not my choice.
 By then I was used to silence.
 10 Though something stretched between us
 like a whisper, like a rope:
 my former name,
 drawn tight.
 You had your old leash
 15 with you, love you might call it,
 and your flesh voice.
 Before your eyes you held steady

° from *Selected Poems II: Poems Selected and New 1976–1986*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987.

the image of what you wanted
 me to become: living again.
 0 It was this hope of yours that kept me following.

I was your hallucination, listening
 and floral, and you were singing me:
 already new skin was forming on me
 within the luminous misty shroud
 5 of my other body; already
 there was dirt on my hands and I was thirsty.

I could see only the outline
 of your head and shoulders,
 black against the cave mouth,
 0 and so could not see your face
 at all, when you turned
 and called to me because you had
 already lost me. The last
 I saw of you was a dark oval.
 5 Though I knew how this failure
 would hurt you, I had to
 fold like a gray moth and let go.
 You could not believe I was more than your echo.

Eurydice

He is here, come down to look for you.
 It is the song that calls you back,
 a song of joy and suffering
 equally: a promise:
 that things will be different up there
 than they were last time.

You would rather have gone on feeling nothing,
 emptiness and silence; the stagnant peace
 of the deepest sea, which is easier
 0 than the noise and flesh of the surface.

You are used to these blanched dim corridors,
 you are used to the king
 who passes you without speaking.

The other one is different
 5 and you almost remember him.
 He says he is singing to you
 because he loves you,

not as you are now,
so chilled and minimal: moving and still
20 both, like a white curtain blowing
in the draft from a half-opened window
beside a chair on which nobody sits.

He wants you to be what he calls real.
He wants you to stop light.
25 He wants to feel himself thickening
like a tree-trunk or a haunch
and see blood on his eyelids
when he closes them, and the sun beating.

This love of his is not something
30 he can do if you aren't there,
but what you knew suddenly as you left your body
cooling and whitening on the lawn

was that you love him anywhere,
even in this land of no memory,
35 even in this domain of hunger.
You hold love in your hand, a red seed
you had forgotten you were holding.
He has come almost too far.
He cannot believe without seeing,
40 and it's dark here.

Go back, you whisper,
but he wants to be fed again
by you. O handful of gauze, little
bandage, handful of cold
45 air, it is not through him
you will get your freedom.

Orpheus (2)

Whether he will go on singing
or not, knowing what he knows
of the horror of this world:

He was not wandering among meadows
 all this time. He was down there
 among the mouthless ones, among
 those with no fingers, those
 whose names are forbidden,
 those washed up eaten into
 among the gray stones
 of the shore where nobody goes
 through fear. Those with silence.

He has been trying to sing
 love into existence again
 and he has failed.

Yet he will continue
 to sing, in the stadium
 crowded with the already dead
 who raise their eyeless faces
 to listen to him; while the red flowers
 grow up and splatter open
 against the walls.

They have cut off both his hands
 and soon they will tear
 his head from his body in one burst
 of furious refusal.

He foresees this. Yet he will go on
 singing, and in praise.
 To sing is either praise
 or defiance. Praise is defiance.

**O50 Sandra M. Gilbert, 'Bas Relief: Bacchante',
 1984°**

Sandra M. Gilbert, born 1936, American critic and poet, most famous as coauthor (with Susan Gubar) of *The Madwoman in the Attic*, an influential feminist study of nineteenth-century women writers. 'Bas Relief: Bacchante' allows one of the Bacchantes to justify the killing of Orpheus. It is one of a sequence of poems about exhibits in a museum; a bas relief is a classical carving in low relief, in which the figures project only slightly out of a flat background.

Bas Relief: Bacchante

She's not at all as we expected, wearing
 (instead of oiled breasts, a torn toga, a sexy swoon)
 a sort of fur ruff and the calm look
 of those animal-headed judges, wise as roots,

° from *Emily's Bread*, New York: Norton, 1984, p. 42. Reprinted by permission of the author and W.W.Norton and Co.