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Brian O. Murdoch
University of Stirling, Scotland

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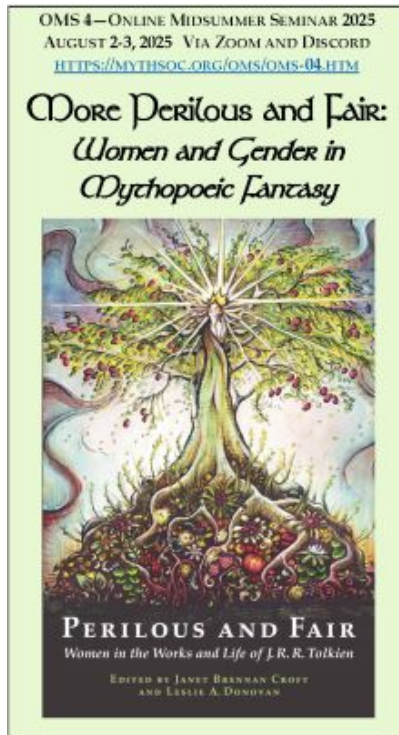
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Denial and Acceptance: A Core Myth of Orpheus and Eurydice in the Modern Lyric

Abstract

The story of Orpheus's failed attempt to bring Eurydice back from the dead is a frequently used theme in literature and in the modern lyric in particular, and it has been the subject of sometimes excessively complex critical attention. One core of the myth, however, is the need for the living to face and to accept the fact of the death of someone close to them. Modern lyrics in different European languages—the heirs to the classical myth—make clear how Orpheus's attempt to bring his wife back from Hades was always impossible, and that his reaction was thus a form of denial. Although many aspects of the broad Orphic complex are treated in the lyric, the poems selected demonstrate the core element of the myth, even when Eurydice is apparently given more prominence than Orpheus, the bereaved husband. It can also be related to C.S. Lewis's *A Grief Observed*.

Additional Keywords

Bereavement; denial; myth; Grief in fantasy literature and myth; Death in fantasy literature and myth; Myth in fantasy literature; Poetry, modern; Orpheus and Eurydice (myth); Lewis, C.S. *A Grief Observed*

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DENIAL AND ACCEPTANCE: A CORE MYTH OF ORPHEUS AND EURYDICE IN THE MODERN LYRIC

BRIAN O. MURDOCH

ONE CORE OF THE MYTH

THE MYTH OF ORPHEUS AND EURYDICE, the most familiar part of the broader tradition of tales around Orpheus, describes the attempt of the great singer to bring back his wife from Hades after she has been killed by the bite of a snake (Graves, *Greek Myths* I, 111–5; Henderson, “Ancient Myths and Modern Man” 134–46). Orpheus fails because he breaks the condition imposed upon him by the gods, Hades and Persephone: that Orpheus must not, when he leads Eurydice from the underworld, turn and look at her. He is given a chance, therefore, but this is associated with the human condition of free will, which contains the possibility of losing paradise by transgressing a not necessarily comprehensible, but completely inflexible externally imposed commandment. Much effort has been expended upon the definition of myth (Jung and Kerényi, *Essays* 1–24) and a pragmatic approach is called for in this case. What distinguishes a myth from superficially similar tales intended primarily as entertainment is that it also encapsulates basic human truths. The term ‘proto-philosophy’ has been used in the attempt towards a definition (Jolles, *Einfache Formen* 91), and the concept is useful: a narrative, then, which holds the attention, and which leads to a philosophical conclusion. Classical myths regularly involve the gods, but in this case, although Hades and Persephone purport to offer Orpheus a chance, whether it is ever in the power, or the will, of the gods in any myth actually to restore an earthly life is questionable.¹

The story of Orpheus and Eurydice has memorable narrative elements: his exceptional skills as a singer, the conditional chance he is given, and his descent into the infernal regions. There is also an implicit tension, even though the audience of the retold myth knows that Orpheus will in fact turn and look back. At the base of the myth is the fact that no human effort, not even the skills of a singer who can otherwise charm nature itself, can bring someone back from the dead. The quite literal turning point is the breaking of the prohibition.

¹ A Scots-language dramatic work by Sydney Goodsir Smith (*Orpheus and Eurydice*. 30), stresses the universality of the myth, in that every age “Will hae an Orpheus and his queyne / They are unmutabil, eterne.” However, we are also told that “Man neer can learn the sempil leid / Nane but the gods can conquer deid.” But can they?

Turning to look at Eurydice means that Orpheus must face the fact that his wife is dead. The moment of perception makes clear that what had gone before was a hopeless state of denial on his part. The myth is not a *memento mori*; that the death of every individual is inevitable hardly needs reinforcing. Rather it contextualizes that inevitability, pointing to the necessity for those still living in the world to come to terms with the loss of someone close, so that the theme is the acceptance of loss. While this particular narrative may also contain more obvious surface morals, that one should be steadfast, or should obey explicit rules, a deeper core message is the need for the survivor to accept the reality of that readily spoken declaration “till death us do part” (although the relationship implied need not only be that of lovers). In the broader terms of classical tragedy, even to try to defeat death might imply a hubris on the part of Orpheus, and the *peripeteia*, the turning point, is in this case realized, and it leads to the visual anagnorisis, the recognition that Eurydice is dead.

Orpheus is at the center of the myth. Eurydice herself, though a vital part of the narrative, is essentially passive, and it is interesting that in some early references, as in Plato’s *Symposium* (44), she is not even named. However greatly loved she may have been, the starting point is the fact that she is *now* dead, and the loss is that felt by the survivor, Orpheus. The myth may seem to immortalize Orpheus’s failure to bring his wife back from Hades, but it is actually about his realization that this is impossible, and that he has to be made to accept the loss of his love. It is a lesson for those who have to *go on* living, and in modern terms, it might show a man struggling to come to terms with the death of his much-loved wife. An intriguing parallel is provided by C.S. Lewis’s cathartic report in 1961 on the death of his wife, which he first published under a pseudonym: *A Grief Observed*. Although there are some theological distinctions, there are perhaps not as many as might be expected. Lewis refers at one point, incidentally, to Queen Victoria’s reaction to the death of Prince Albert, thus giving us a celebrated female example of the same kind of denial, and the apparent failure in her case to achieve any closure (45). Lewis, though, is always aware that the dead cannot be brought back. He concludes his little work in a surprising but highly significant defiance of the biblical story of Lazarus, with the significant comment: “How wicked it would be, if we could, to call the dead back!” Lewis ends, however, with a quotation which is effectively a positive counter to the Orpheus story, Dante’s acceptance, at the end of his more extensive otherworld journey, of his last sight of Beatrice in Paradise, as *she* turns away from *him* to the eternal fountain: “Poi si tornò all’ eterna fontana” (60).² It is, of course, more comfortable to accept a soul in Paradise than a ghost in Hades.

² Dante is cited by Lewis from *Paradiso*, Canto XXXI, 91-3: see *Dante, the Divine Comedy* 3. *Paradise*, translated by Sayers and Reynolds (329). Dante has of course already been

The retelling of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice seems to embody a paradox: Orpheus, immortalized in any case as the great singer, achieves a separate ‘immortality of song’ for what looks like his failure to overcome mortality. The Old Icelandic *Hávamál* 77 reminds us that although everyone dies, the one thing that *aldri deyr* “never dies” is the *dómr* of *daudan hvern*, the opinions about, or the reputation of the *dead* person” (Jónsson, *Saemundar-Edda*, 34). Within the context of this myth, however, Orpheus does not seek even this kind of immortality, either for himself or for Eurydice, merely restoration and continuation. Orpheus is not concerned with fame; he wants Eurydice back, and this was always impossible. Orpheus is not a hero like Achilles or Roland, concerned that the wrong songs should not be sung about their deeds after their deaths. Indeed, the repeated retelling of the myth might itself be considered as the wrong kind of song. Orpheus’s own songs about Eurydice have already been sung, or will be sung as laments, but even to see Eurydice as Orpheus’s muse is not really part of *this* myth. Reworkings of the narrative demonstrate how Eurydice *had been*—the tense is important—so much loved that Orpheus braved hell, wishing to get her back.³

The brevity of the basic narrative leaves questions open, allows for a variety of added explanations, and permits different elements to be the focus of attention. This is a situation familiar in the reception of most classical tales, myths and otherwise, such as the equally succinct story of Hero and Leander, which is essentially a romance with no universal message at its core, and which here offers a useful contrast. That tale has also undergone innumerable reworkings through the centuries,⁴ but if it were a myth, the message could not be much more than a warning about swimming in difficult waters. Although Leander might be seen as hubristic in assuming that his natatory skills are sufficient whatever the natural conditions, swimming the Hellespont is not, as Byron demonstrated, an act requiring divine aid, even if in some versions of the tale the

through Hell and Purgatory, guided by Virgil. Lewis also refers (*Grief* 34) to Lazarus as the real protomartyr. Writing this work presumably helped him to cope, as does Virgil’s Orpheus through songs, and, indeed, Goethe’s Tasso, who claims the ability to express his suffering as a divine gift. On warnings against recalling the dead (in this case a lost son), one thinks also of W.W. Jacobs’s celebrated tale “The Monkey’s Paw” (1902).

³ It is fair to note that a feminist interpretation has taken the myth as a representation of patriarchalism, with Orpheus attempting to reclaim Eurydice because she was his property; for this he is justly punished by the Maenads. It is a somewhat bleak reading of Orpheus’s motivation, but it reminds us, nevertheless, both of Orpheus’s central position, and that the myth leaves questions unanswered.

⁴ In *Legend of Hero and Leander* (3-5) I contrast that story with the tale of Orpheus. The term *legenda* is in fact more usually applied to saint’s lives (which have a different kind of message), so that a neutral term such as “romance” may be preferable even to “legend” for such tales.

gods do seem to take a hand in Leander's demise. No conditions are imposed except by nature, and Leander is a victim of the stormy Hellespont. Here, too, as in many similar tales of classical and later lovers, their love is at the center and when one of them dies, the suicide of the other follows as the end of the story. Eurydice's death is the starting point, and Orpheus does not commit suicide.

Elements left open in the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice include the questions of why he turns, and of how he will react after being forced to acknowledge that Eurydice is dead. Although he may wish to die, it is part of the process of coming to terms that he should *not* do so, even though he considers suicide in some versions and is condemned by Phaedrus for *not* committing suicide in Plato's *Symposium*, where he is presented in Hades with a mere ghost and not his wife. This is another important contrast with those romances in which the surviving lover specifically chooses to join the other in death on the optimistic assumption that they will then be together forever. Furthermore, Orpheus's descent into hell and return to the world can only to a limited extent be seen as a rebirth, as in other versions of that particular topos, and whether he achieves any form of what would now be called closure is not made explicit. He may of course lament Eurydice in his songs, which Virgil tells us in the *Georgics*, IV, 452-558 are his attempts to find solace (*Georgics*, trans. Wilkinson 130-43), and Orpheus sings his laments for seven months, but this point is not always made. In the broader Orphic complex, an unconnected later conflict with Dionysus causes Orpheus to be torn to pieces by the Maenads (the mythographers provide different reasons for this), and his head floats, still singing, down to the sea, but this goes far beyond the specific myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, even if it is occasionally alluded to in that context. We may leave aside the assumption that the lovers are somehow together again after the death of Orpheus. Doomed lovers—Hero and Leander, Pyramus and Thisbe, Tristan and Isolde—are indeed often reunited post-mortem, either in the Elysian Fields, or by being metamorphosed into natural features or plants, so that their story can then become an etiological myth at least. Although their ghosts are reunited in the Elysian Fields after the subsequent death of Orpheus in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* XI, 1-66, there is no hint within the original myth that this will happen, and it is rare in reworkings (*Metamorphoses*, trans. Innes 246). The core theme, of having to cope with the death of a partner, admits neither of suicide, nor of the comforting assumption of a shared afterlife.

What Eurydice feels about her proposed resurrection or about Orpheus's failure is a further, but secondary and probably hypothetical question, if indeed she is still capable of feeling anything at all. Would she want to come back to earth, if this were possible? It is the problem of Lazarus once again, with the implicit answer that no-one would really want to die twice. Although this question about Eurydice is addressed in literary reworkings, the

narrative as we have it focuses upon Orpheus, or in more general terms, upon the *surviving* partner in a relationship after one of them has died. That Eurydice would wish to return to life is assumed in the basic version *by Orpheus himself*, but it is not stated of Eurydice, and it is not even strictly relevant, since it was always impossible. Although the two names are customarily bracketed together, this myth both links and separates the protagonists, and whether Eurydice actually has a role rather than a function, is debatable; we may recall that she is not named in the earliest texts. While Eurydice is understandably foregrounded in the later reception of the story, some modern poets do so to permit Eurydice herself to make the point that she is dead and cannot or will not return. She may gain a voice, but it is to explain the essence of the myth to Orpheus and to the audience of the poems.

In a medieval version of the story, the Middle English *Sir Orfeo*, in which it is in fact adapted almost beyond recognition, retaining little more than the names, and with a happy ending which effectively negates the central element, the anonymous poet still manages (or perhaps felt the need) to bring in the core message. In this case it is the distraught steward of Orpheus's kingdom who despairs when he thinks, wrongly, that his beloved lord has died. He has to be told that this is how "þys werlde geth / —'Ther is no bote of manys deth'" (how things are in this world: there is no remedy for man's death)⁵ and that he must cope with the supposed death of Orpheus. Otherwise, the anonymous medieval poet provides an ending in which both Orpheus and Eurydice survive, and there is a similar outcome in one of the most famous musical versions, Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice* (1762-1774). This version addresses two of the open questions: that of Eurydice's view of the situation, and why precisely Orpheus turns. Eurydice, who appears content to be resurrected, does not, however, understand why Orpheus will not look at her, and angrily misinterprets his attitude. It is because of this that he turns, and she is lost. This gives occasion for the opera's best-known aria "Che farò senza Euridice?" Orpheus does indeed think of suicide; the usual English version begins with a despairing "What is life without thee?" This well-known expression of realized loss and its despairing appeal to the gods is often sung independently of the opera, and it does express the essence of the myth, even though Calzabigi's libretto calls for the later intervention of Amore, love personified, to save the day and restore both to the world. In spite of their different but radical

⁵ The manuscripts differ, and the work is cited here from the text in MS Ashmole 61, vv. 544-5 (*Sir Orfeo*, ed. Bliss 47). Tolkien translates the line fairly freely as "for death of man no man can mend" (Tolkien l.552) In the poem, Eurydice does not die, but is carried off by magic and then rescued; there is no prohibition, and they are reunited.

adaptations, the writers of *Sir Orfeo* and of the eighteenth-century opera remained nevertheless aware of the real point.

VARIATIONS IN APPROACH

The story of Orpheus and Eurydice has remained one of the most frequently used classical themes in modern European writing,⁶ but the assumption of familiarity is particularly important when it is used in a lyric poem with little or no expository space. Its use in modern poetry has been a regular object of literary-critical analysis, and in 2020 there appeared a detailed and extensive dissertation for the University of Zurich by Julie Dekens with the title *Ecouter le chant d'Orphée (Listening to the Song of Orpheus)*. Dekens gives a history of versions of the story, discusses the innumerable definitions of myth, and considers various adaptations, even comic ones, such as that by Offenbach, although her principal aim is to examine the theme in modern lyric poems in French, German, and Swedish. The important study offers a very wide-ranging historical and literary analysis, but the aim of the present investigation is deliberately far more restricted: to demonstrate in a small selection of single modern poems in various European languages, the shared heirs of the classical tradition, how the denial and the eventual recognition by Orpheus of the death of Eurydice is preserved. Even with an increased focus upon Eurydice, it may still be made clear that the myth is about Orpheus's loss. The selection of lyrics examined must, of course, be both limited, and, given the amount of available material, to an extent fortuitous.

Concentration upon this core interpretation of the myth means that many poems, even by well-known writers, must be set aside if they are concerned principally with other aspects of the Orphic complex, or are briefly allusive, or are tangential even within the basic myth. Examples might include Gottfried Benn's demanding poem "Orpheus' Tod" (the death of Orpheus), which uses several classical allusions and is concerned with the singing after his death (*Statische Gedichte* [poems from 1937-47] 13-15). Other modern lyrics offer radical divergences from the myth, such as Anne Beresford's "Orpheus Arrives

⁶ Modern adaptations or reflections of the story in other genres are very numerous. Marguerite Yourcenar's novel *La Nouvelle Eurydice* (1931) and Jean Cocteau's film *Orphée* (1950) are celebrated examples, and the narrative is transposed to Brazil in Marcel Camus's film *Orfeu negro* (1959). An allusive example is provided by Max Frisch's novel *Homo Faber* (1957). More recently, Sarah Ruhl's play *Eurydice*, written in 2003, was turned into an opera by Matthew Aucoin premiered in 2020; Anaïs Mitchell's *Hadestown* originated in 2006 and has developed to become an internationally successful musical; Edward Eaton's verse drama *Orpheus and Eurydice* appeared in 2012. The varied and sometimes more hopeful approaches in these retellings are important. See also Ann Wroe (*Orpheus. The Song of Life*).

in a New World" (*Songs a Thracian Taught Me* 26).⁷ An untitled brief English piece by Frances Horovitz beginning "this Eurydice made it" goes beyond the original narrative, too, to show Eurydice forcing her way out between the rocks, a new, if unattended birth, into a barren field, but hearing only others lamenting, and the shadow of Orpheus present overall. Horovitz's opening designation, that this is one of many possible Eurydices, betokens, however, a conscious awareness of the myth as myth, hence of the multiplicity of possible readings (*The High Tower* 12), and this is a feature of other poems. The position of Eurydice as a variable factor is also underlined in Adrian Wright's "Orpheus," in which the titular figure is forever looking back as "another / Eurydice slips / away (*The Shrinking Map* 44-5), and indeed, modern poets regularly handle the theme with a conscious acceptance of its status as myth. This is true of several of the French poets examined by Dekens, notably Pierre Emmanuel and especially Muriel Stuckel, whose 2011 collection *Eurydice désormais* (Eurydice from now on) with illustrations by Pierre-Marie Bresson is a large-scale interaction with the myth, concentrating, as the title implies, upon Eurydice.⁸ The same conscious awareness is indicated by the Austrian poet Karl Wawra (*Der Stufenbrunnen* 63), whose three poems on the theme are aware of the growth of "so viele Legenden" (so many legends). Elizabeth Jennings's "Orpheus" also poses some of the questions left open in the myth, wondering if Orpheus forgot the promise and turned, "seeing only darkness" (*Growing-Points* 52).

A poet may, of course, concentrate upon any aspect of the narrative. In a case which illustrates also the range of material, Christine Furnival considers in the title poem of *The Animals to Orpheus*, a cyclostyled and unpaginated collection printed at the National Poetry Centre in London in 1977 the regret felt by the animals, Orpheus's one-time audience, that they have been cut out of the myth as such. Very different, an allegorization by Alastair Mackie in a Scots poem with the title "Orpheus and Eurydike" (*Clytack* 13) transforms the plunge into Hades into an image of lovemaking, although the song is still present, and the song is love itself. Orpheus cannot see Eurydice in the dark, though she "cryit his name" and "ower and ower the sang," a song "o three wirds—I loo ye." As another and more extensive allegorization, too, we may cite the Orpheus-sequence of six poems by Günter Kunert, written in the political context of the former German Democratic Republic, the opening piece of which applies the myth to all poets: "Nicht umdrehen. / Der Sänger drehe sich besser nicht um. / [...] Hinter der Kunst kommt / die Zukunft voran. / Der Sänger drehe

⁷ Another poem in Beresford's significantly titled collection considers the plight of a woman survivor ("The Great Man is Dead . . ." *Songs* 14).

⁸ The same applies to the extended "Canto de Euridice" by the Argentine poet Graciela Maturo of 1966 and her 1996 collection *Cantos de Orfeo y Euridice* in 1996, discussed in the informative and perceptive article by Victor Gustavo Zonana ("El mito de Orfeo").

sich besser nicht um. ("Don't turn round. The singer should really not turn round [...] behind art comes the future. The singer should really not turn round" (*Warnung* 31-6).⁹

THREE EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY POEMS

The expression in the modern lyric of the theme of denial and acceptance is clear, however, in three more or less contemporary pieces from the period just before the First World War. All of them pay attention to Eurydice and even give her a voice, albeit a single word in one case, but all maintain the central message. Rilke's much discussed "Orpheus. Eurydike. Hermes" (1904) from the first part of his *Neue Gedichte*, presents the story as narrative, beginning with Orpheus's journey, but using the situation of Eurydice within the myth as a focus in itself, but also to emphasize the central point, with Orpheus taught the necessary lesson in a very hard way (*Gesammelte Gedichte* 298-301).¹⁰ Orpheus is shown already making his way back to the world along the pathway through the veined rocks of the underworld; he is silent, his lyre fused to his left hand. He hurries, followed at a distance by Hermes, the psychopomp with his caduceus, leading Eurydice with his left hand. Eurydice is the "*So-geliebte*," the so-greatly-loved, for whom Orpheus's lyre has already produced so many laments, a world of mourning, "*eine Welt aus Klage*," without, presumably, providing for him the closure intimated in Virgil's version. Once the focus shifts, however, to Eurydice (there is a significant *aber*, but, signaling that change) we grasp at once that the whole enterprise was doomed from the start. She walks patiently in her graveclothes beside the god, but while the living Orpheus is still obsessed with her, she no longer thinks of him. She is in a new state, a new virginity, removed completely from the marriage which Orpheus is seeking to continue, and even the light touch of the god is too much of a familiarity for her. Orpheus may have gained permission to enter Hades, but Eurydice is no longer what she was:

Sie war schon nicht mehr diese blonde Frau
die in den Dichters Liedern manchmal anklang
(She was now no longer that blonde woman [wife] who
often echoed in the poet's songs)

⁹ The poems have regularly been examined in their political and historical context; see Hofacker, Kahn.

¹⁰ Translations from non-English texts in this essay are mine unless otherwise indicated, but there are many published translations of Rilke's poem (by Robert Lowell, J.B. Leishman, Peter Joseph Balfiore and others). The sound-plays in the poem are extraordinarily difficult to convey, as when Hermes stops "*plötzlich jäh*," 'abruptly, hard', in three harsh-sounding syllables. It may seem artificial, too, to leave aside Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus*, but the fifty-five pieces in that collection constitute a different kind of work.

She has dissolved, has become a root in the ground. The death is hers, but the grief of the living is Orpheus's. We do not see Orpheus turn, but when, with harsh suddenness the god says to Eurydice and to us that he has done so, her response underlines the tragedy of Orpheus's situation. Eurydice, failing to understand Hermes's words, "*sagte leise: Wer?*" (said softly: *Who?*) The dreadful weight of that tiny question *Wer?* (italicized in the original) makes the point of the myth, and Eurydice needs to utter only a single syllable. Eurydice's death has separated her completely and, again in a literal sense, irrevocably from Orpheus. Orpheus's laments have already filled a world, and although Rilke's poem is in one sense a celebration of Eurydice's death, it is also, ironically, a lament for Orpheus.

Almost exactly contemporary with Rilke's poem are two comparable pieces, one in Russian and one in English: Valery Bryusov's Орфей и Эвридика (Orpheus and Eurydice), dated 10/11 June 1904,¹¹ also gives a voice to Eurydice in that the piece is a dialogue between the two in alternating quatrains. Orpheus opens with the declaration that he can hear her soft steps behind him, and she replies that she will follow him, but only because she is impelled to do so: "Я должна идти, должна . . ." ("I have to walk, I have to . . .") Nevertheless, her eyes are covered with the blackness of death, and she is only a shadow (тень). Orpheus tries to encourage her, but it is too late, she has forgotten his music in the land of pure silence, the country of asphodels. Where Rilke's Eurydice had no idea who Orpheus was, Bryusov's is more specific. She is unable to understand him and quite specifically her heart is dead—Сердце—мертво. Orpheus now realizes that she has forgotten, while he can remember everything, and this antepenultimate quatrain, which encapsulates the core of the myth, leads to the catastrophe. Eurydice agrees that she has some memory of happiness but repeats that in the dark she cannot see him. It is this which causes him to turn and call her name, but there is nothing there but that shadow, the last word of the poem.

Where Rilke and Bryusov both accept the myth-narrative at face value and present it as immediate reality, later writers can and do place the whole into a dream from which Orpheus awakes to a recognition of the facts. This narrative strategy does not deviate too greatly from the original. Dreams also present an apparent sequence of actual events in realistic, if unreal, terms, and the act of dreaming is real. Treating the central element in this way underlines further the message that Orpheus's attempt to regain Eurydice was always a forlorn hope, unreal in any case, always a dream, and the English poet Alfred Noyes adopts

¹¹Bryusov's poem is available online with a translation by Maurice Bowra and the date given there (1906) is that of publication. Markov and Sparks (*Modern Russian Poetry* 38-43, text cited here) provide the date of writing.

the strategy in a complex poem in which Eurydice has a place, but in this case never really a voice.

Noyes was a prolific poet, but although he is now perhaps remembered only for one or two anthology pieces, much of his work merits reassessment. Noyes's "Orpheus and Eurydice," which first appeared in a collection called *Forty Singing Seamen* in 1907, is in seven sections with two different verse-forms, one of expansive long-lines, the other more concise (*Collected Poems* L.291-301). The first section, in long lines, is a lyrical expression of the love between the two, but with a hint already in the repeated use of the adjective "dreaming." The contrasting second section, in the short-line meter, strikes a new note, but continues the idea of the dream, criticizing Orpheus for dreaming, when his singing could have achieved great things and could, indeed, "slay / All evil dreams." Apollo had given him the gift to "enthrall/ The soul of man to heaven." But he neglects his singing for idle dreams: "in his new desire / He dreamed away the hours; / His lyre / Lay buried in the flowers." These words appear in the strophe which opens the section, and are repeated later, with slight changes, set in italics. Apollo is angry, and the price is the awakening of the Pythian snake, a punishment aimed at Orpheus by way of Eurydice. In the third and fourth sections, again in the long-line form, the lovers are asleep and the snake strikes "in the print of the last of the kisses that still glowed red from the sweet long pressure." Worse, it strikes Eurydice "over the glittering lyre." Orpheus wakes, and "in the terrible storm of his grief" takes his lyre and "smote out the cry that his white-lipped sorrow denied." This "great consummation of song" transcends the earth and allows him to enter the underworld. In this (fourth) section, however, a striking passage, again set in italics, has the dead mocking him. Their lips were soft once, but now the grey skulls warn him that "Our lovers would loathe [us] if we ever returned to their sight." Nevertheless, in the fifth section, still in the long-line form, Eurydice ("White as the Huntress") rises from the grave and follows him, and he might, "Had he been steadfast only a little," have won her back. But of course he stops, "to look on his love a moment." The penultimate section returns to the short lines of the second, to show Orpheus in anguish by the fiery river of Phlegethon. Significantly, he ceases playing, and

Out of his hand the lyre
Suddenly slipped and fell,
The fire
Acclaimed it into hell.

The "earth-dawn" breaks and Eurydice flees like a wraith. With a parallel suddenness it is now made clear that all this was a dream, and the narrative is

turned in upon itself as we are taken back to the end of the third section, when the snake had attacked Eurydice, sleeping beside Orpheus:

He woke on earth: the day
Shone coldly; at his side
There lay
The body of his bride.

The final (long-line) strophe steps outside the already intricate narrative completely to observe the myth as a myth, though with a double summary. It is, we are told, a story of Orpheus's lack of steadfastness, of his inevitable failure, and eventually the separate and eternal wanderings of "two pale and thwarted lovers." The poet admits, however, that it can also be remembered for the love of Orpheus and Eurydice, and the final (italicized) strophe returns us literally to the idyllic beginning, repeating that part of the first section in which Eurydice had come from "the dreaming distance, down to the heart of her lover." What this means, though, is that the narrative will begin again, she will die, and Orpheus's dream will again reveal the impossibility of changing this.

There are various unusual aspects in Noyes's treatment: the shifts between narrative and dream, and the conscious consideration of the myth which at the last directs the reader back into it. The role of Apollo and the punishment is an additional element; an imputation of blame for the death upon the bereaved survivor does fit into the pattern of grieving, which can involve self-reproach and feelings of guilt. An insistence by the recipient of the myth exclusively upon the love of the two is indeed a possible, even a normal reaction, but the circularity of the ever-repeated tale will always take the reader back to Orpheus's experience of death and loss. It is not labored that death is permanent, because we and Orpheus know this, and to retrieve Eurydice from hell could only ever have been a dream. When at the end of the sixth section we realize that Orpheus has dreamt by the body of the dead Eurydice, even the temporality of the narrative is distorted. However, it is still Orpheus's dream, and the couple are thwarted shades, never reunited.

A SIMILAR CORE THEME IN SEVERAL LATER POEMS

A similar approach to the narrative is used later in a shorter piece by Edwin Muir with the indicative title "Orpheus's Dream" which interprets the myth more broadly (*Selected Poems* 78).¹² The immutability of death is linked

¹² The poem appeared in the collection *One Foot in Eden* in 1956, but Muir's manuscripts indicate much work on and changes to the text (McCulloch, *Scottish and International Themes in the Work of Edwin Muir* 144-6).

with the awareness that bringing back what has gone can only ever be a dream. The euphoria in the opening words of the first strophe assumes detailed knowledge of the myth on the part of the reader: "And she was there." However, she will be revealed in the third and final strophe as a "poor ghost." This revelation is, however, is not just made to Orpheus. The poem is expanded to involve every reader, as the central strophe turns the myth into an all-inclusive simile. It is "as if we had left earth's frontier wood" in search not of Eurydice, but of everything else that has been lost, "the lost original of the soul," the state of innocence, where all choices were good, and we could find forgiveness, atonement and truth. But even if we turn, what we would see is only

The poor ghost of Eurydice
Still sitting in her silver chair,
Alone in Hades' empty hall.¹³

The desolation implied for Orpheus is extended to all humanity. Orpheus cannot bring back the dead, nor can we retrieve all the lost choices. The need for acceptance is concentrated in the forceful final image, intended this time to force us to understand, as Orpheus presumably has already done. Orpheus's attempt was a dream (in the sense of an unrealized hope), but the myth is the challenge to us to accept the facts, if "we could dare / At last to turn our heads" and see Eurydice as a poor ghost in that empty hall.

The core idea is expressed through a fuller expansion of the role of Eurydice in another much-discussed poem by the Swedish writer Ebba Lindqvist.¹⁴ Lindqvist's "Monolog I Hades. Eurydike till Orfeus" ("Monologue in Hades. Eurydice to Orpheus") is from her collection *Lökar I November* (Bulbs in November), which appeared in 1963; here it is cited from its reprinting in in *Kvinnors dikt om kärlek: En antologi* (132-3). Where Rilke has Eurydice reacting passively, or more properly not reacting to Orpheus at all because she is absorbed in her own death, Lindqvist makes the same point by addressing more fully the question of what Eurydice herself felt about the situation. Lindqvist's poem opens with an ironic counter-question: "Vem hade sagt, att jag ville följa dig, Orfeus?" ("who said I wanted to follow you, Orpheus?"). Indeed, he has actually forced (*tvång*) her back. Eurydice does not deny that their love on earth was beautiful, and this is repeated with emphasis in the poem: "Skön var vår kärlek en gang, och aldrig skall den förnekas" ("Our love was beautiful once,

¹³ C.S. Lewis's children's novel *The Silver Chair*, which appeared in 1953, has a character imprisoned below the earth in the same way (and the context is Platonic). Lewis's use of the silver chair has been linked with that of Proserpine (Persephone) in Spenser's *Faery Queen* (Ward, *Planet Narnia* 131).

¹⁴ See Dekens, "Rester aux Enfers" and Guerellos, "Autoria feminina."

and shall never be denied”), but life attracts her no more, there is a cold shadow, and even when she was on the earth she had heard “skallet från Hades’ hundar” (“the barking of the hounds of Hades”). The importance of Orpheus’s turn towards her is relativized in her comments, just as it is in Rilke’s; in both cases the narrative has deliberately and inevitably moved away from that of a love story. In Lindqvist’s poem, Orpheus is for Eurydice only a presence in the past, and she complains that Orpheus had life in his songs, but she had no song, “ingen sång för mig” (“no song for me”), and so she chose the snake. This changes the nature of the myth, but not its essence. Eurydice’s rejection of Orpheus still leaves Orpheus in the world.

The idea of singing is repeated anaphorically in the last part of the poem, but it is not Orpheus’s song, because it also encompasses things that are beyond love and death. The song of life is greater than all that: “Sången förmer än sången” (“The song is more than the song”). Eurydice repeats that she does not want to follow Orpheus: “jag längtar aldrig tillbaka” (“I never want to return”). Death is welcomed—we recall that she *chose* the snake—but in a gnomic statement that almost echoes the *Hávamál*, she will recall the song: “allt skall jag glömma, men aldrig sången” (“I shall forget it all but never the song”). And yet this too is part of a song about Orpheus.

Even detailed focus upon Eurydice, then, allowing her to express her feelings about the proposed resurrection, may still in the last analysis underline the central idea that the myth, as far as the world of the living is concerned, the world in which it is actually being retold, is about how Orpheus has to accept the loss of Eurydice and that his denial is pointless. The poem “Orpheus (1)” in Margaret Atwood’s cycle of poems on the theme is linked very closely to Lindqvist’s (and back to that by Rilke) in expressing again the core of the myth through Eurydice (*Selected Poems II* 106). Atwood has her declare that the return “was not my choice,” and that “It was this hope of yours that kept me following. / I was your hallucination.” She did not wish for resurrection and the idea that it was even possible was always unreal, however it might have seemed to Orpheus.

The direct narrative of myth is well suited to the ballad, and a modern example is provided by Maurice Lindsay in a piece from his *Selected Poems 1942-72*, “A Ballad of Orpheus.” When Orpheus enters Hell, he grabs Eurydice roughly by the hand but cannot speak. Lindsay reinterprets the prohibition a little, but, as in Glück’s opera, Eurydice (“being woman”) cannot understand

that love in action needs no drag of speech
and pled with him to turn round once and kiss
her. (Lindsay 131)

This, however, is the condition imposed by the gods that he cannot disobey. However, as they travel on, this time Orpheus himself realizes that “the only absolute good was what he’d dreamed / of her,” so that he turns deliberately, and she of course begins to disappear. Orpheus has this time himself understood the point of the myth (and the nature of dream), and he has come to terms with it very fully indeed:

How could he have stood the test
of constant loving, always with the fear

of his first loss ahead of him again. (131)

Lindsay permits Orpheus to understand the message of loss, but he takes it a little further, allowing Orpheus to make acceptance into a survival strategy. Orpheus, moving beyond pure loss to the notion that happiness “ends in boredom or pain,” returns to “compose himself in the world of men.” The use of the verb is interesting. Signaling now a conscious awareness of the myth as myth, as Noyes had done, Lindsay adds a conclusion which draws upon the separate narrative of the conflict with Dionysus, describing it as a “sequel to this traveller’s tale,” in which the Thracian women, the Maenads, tear Orpheus’s manhood apart “to purge / his unfulfillment of the sexual urge” (131). The final quatrain steps even further away, dismissing the legendary floods where his body-parts are scattered (not, however, still singing), to offer a warning to young men in love not to dissemble.

Lindsay’s ballad appears to treat the myth apparently realistically, as might be expected in a narrative verse-form, and it does address the essential notion of loss and acceptance (or realization). Orpheus is still the center, but his reason for turning, one of the original open questions, is a new one; not Eurydice’s pleading, but his own fear of *repeated* loss is the stimulus, and it is Orpheus’s alone. There is, for example, no link between Eurydice and Lazarus and the pain of having to die a second time. The concluding awareness that this is myth underlines (again as did Noyes’s poem) that it is susceptible of different meanings, and the last part is even separated from the discrete myth of Orpheus and Eurydice by being designated a *sequel* to Orpheus’s story (he, after all, is the traveler, and he stands alone in the title). The final quatrain goes even further, to offer a deliberately ordinary moral, appropriate to the traditional ballad (“come all you young fellows”) about being straightforward with women.

CONCLUSION

The myth demands acknowledgement and acceptance on the part of Orpheus that Eurydice is dead. However, any achievement of closure for him is difficult to determine. As a poet he could achieve that closure through his songs,

but retellings of the myth rarely make this clear; on the other hand, his enduring afterlife in the myth itself may of course offer an exemplary closure to others. In the modern lyric only Lindsay's Orpheus makes a deliberate decision to accept. It stretches things somewhat if closure is linked with his subsequent savage death at the hands of the Maenads, although that link is sometimes made. Tom Scott, for example, does show us Orpheus broken to pieces and only then finally "cleansed o the auld despair." But this is also a rebirth, enabling Orpheus to sing a new and nobler song "aye [forever] in the great haa [hall] o the world" (*Collected Shorter Poems* 15). Perhaps closer to an Orpheus who has found closure in life and come to terms fully is the central figure in a sonnet by Werner Kraft, whose poem, like that by Scott, has the single-name title "Orpheus" (*Das Gedicht: Jahrbuch* 17). This Orpheus can ask: "Sah ich mich um? Ich weiß es nicht. Ich sehe." ("Did I look round? I don't know. I can see").

Lyrics from the start of the twentieth century onward can make clear one central message of the myth: that love ends in loss and that this has to be accepted rather than denied, and indeed that one cannot and should not try to revive the dead. It is interesting that the point can be made with a focus upon either of the protagonists, albeit in different ways, because one point central to the myth lies in their separation. It is another paradox that Orpheus and Eurydice are always named together as lovers, when from the start they are a couple no longer. The myth does not present a love story in the manner of other celebrated couples, however star-crossed. If Pyramus and Thisbe are metamorphosed, Hero and Leander joined in the Elysian Fields, and Romeo and Juliet celebrated with a dramatization of their love, Orpheus and Eurydice in this myth are apart, and stay that way. Whether our attention is directed towards the living Orpheus or to the dead Eurydice, loss remains at the forefront.¹⁵ The Polish poet Kazimierz Wierzyński, provides a summary which underlines and indeed extends and generalizes the theme, and at the same time acknowledges the nature and ongoing poetic power of the myth itself in his "A Word to Orphists."¹⁶ ("Słowo do Orfeistów," translated by Czesław Miłosz,

¹⁵ As indicated, the loss need not just be of a lover. An important recent study by Pavan Mano ("Ways of Mourning" 46) explores Derrida's discussion of the immanence of grief and the awareness of finitude in friendship in *The Work of Mourning*. Mano focuses upon the friendship between Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman and their collaborative work *Good Omens*, and it is of interest that in an introduction to the recent collection of Pratchett's early stories (*Stroke of the Pen* xi), Gaiman comments on the way the perception of his late friend, in contrast with own memories, has now become "semi-mythical."

¹⁶ The original, "Słowo do Orfeistów," appeared in his *Tkanka ziemi* (*The Tissue of the Earth*) in 1960. Wierzyński's interest in the Orpheus story as a whole is reflected in various poems, and in one of them, "Rozmowa z Orfeuszem" ("Conversation with Orpheus") he interrogates the myth (Osiński, "Głosa do orfeistów").

Post-War Polish Poetry 28-9). The poetic voice realizes “the true fate of Orpheus, / That love is a constant terror of loss.”

With such a familiar narrative as that of Orpheus and Eurydice, it is clear that interpretations will vary when the tale is retold and that there is no absolute and exclusive meaning. There are, however, significant illustrations in the modern European lyric of one core interpretation: that the failure of Orpheus to bring Eurydice back out of hell may be seen as a representation of an entirely understandable denial on the part of the bereaved, the refusal to accept the fact that the beloved partner is dead until they are literally faced with it, and that, however much a restoration might be wished for, bringing back the dead is an impossibility. The prospect of bringing Eurydice out of hell and back to earth can never be more than an illusion.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

BRIAN O. MURDOCH is Professor Emeritus of German at the University of Stirling in Scotland and has held visiting fellowships and lectureships in Oxford and Cambridge. He has published monographs, articles and encyclopedia entries, editions, and edited collections on medieval literature (German, Celtic, English, Slavic, comparative), including literary histories, several books on the biblical and apocryphal Adam and Eve story, and studies of the Gregorius-legend and of the tale of Hero and Leander. He has also written extensively on modern literature, especially that of the World Wars. A collection of his essays in this field, and a monograph on Everyman in German war-plays appeared recently. He has published articles and reviews on C.S. Lewis and the Inklings.