

# ORPHEUS TODAY

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**T**he long line of Orphism extends from our Paleolithic past into the foreseeable future. Its chief characteristic features are encoded into the Roman fable of Orpheus and Eurydice, one of our oldest living legends. In this edition of an address originally delivered at the Carmel Bach Festival, Dr. Abraham considers the process of Mythogenesis in the Orphic tradition from its origins to the present.

My professional work in mathematics for thirty years or more has concerned mathematical models for chaos. Of course we didn't call it *chaos* until 1975. But as soon as the word *chaos* got attached to this branch of mathematics, it suddenly became quite popular. A book called *Chaos* by Jim Gleick became a best seller in 1987. After the popular recognition of this subject, people started calling me up, asking me about the origin of the word *chaos*—what it means, why it was attached to this subject, and whether or not mathematical models had anything to do with chaos in ordinary life.

So in response to these telephone calls from journalists, I began to look in books for the word *chaos*, and found that classical scholars actually know the complete history of this Greek word. It appeared for the first time in Hesiod's *Theogony*, one of the roots of Greek mythology and religion. It was the source text for Orphism, one of the most important religions of ancient Greece. And the word *chaos* was not just another word in Hesiod's *Theogony*, but was one of three basic principles—Chaos, Gaia, and Eros—out of which everything else was created, step by step, in the creation myth of Greek mythology.

I was surprised because the words *Gaia* and *Eros* had also suddenly become popular in the sciences, associated with certain

paradigm shifts or revolutionary movements in the sciences. I do not yet understand the reason why these three fundamental principles of a pagan religion of millenia past were suddenly cropping up spontaneously in the sciences. I am in the process of investigating this and writing a book about my results. That is how I got into Orphism, and today I would like to speak to you about Orphism and Bach, or Monteverdi.

Orphism survives from the time of Christ onward in the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. But in ancient Greece that was just a small component of this whole religion of Orphism, which had its roots in the Paleolithic past. This article is devoted to the long line of Orphism—including the origin of Orphism in the Paleolithic past, its representation in the religion of ancient Greece, and our heritage of that past in the form of the Orpheus myth, its relationship to opera, and its importance in the present day—25,000 years of history, or rather, pre-history—the archeology of the past, where people have dug up pottery shards with drawings, etc. There is a kind of verbal association that goes on with these prehistoric arts, from which we can conjecture the origin of Greek religion and our entire cultural basis.

## Mythogenesis

Mythography is one way of looking at the past, in which it is treated as already dead. Antiquarians from the Baroque to the present would look at mythology in this way. You take, for example, the Greek Corpus, the whole of Greek literature from Homer and Hesiod around 800 BC up to the last stroke of ancient Greece in 600 AD or so. And you read through this entire Corpus, which is not that big. Many things



*Orpheus in the Garden*, Raoul Dufy, from *The Bestiary, or the Funeral Procession of Orpheus* by Guillaume Apollinaire (1911).

are lost, but you read all the outstanding fragments, and whenever you come across what seems to be a name of an ancient god or goddess or mythical place like the River Styx, you write it down on an index card. When you get done, you sort these index cards into piles. There's a pile for Orpheus. There's a pile for Eurydice, there's a pile for Pluto, for Charon, and so on. And then you take each one of these piles and write a story about it.

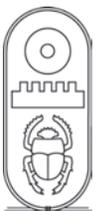
And then that is the myth of Orpheus, the myth of Eurydice and so on. A splendid book written in this style of mythography is *The Greek Myths*, by Robert Graves. This is a great one because all the piles are there and after every pile it tells the list of all the sources, every single Greek author, place, page and line where that word—Orpheus, Eurydice, or whichever—had appeared. Whence you could go check them out yourself and see if you agree with the story that Robert Graves wove around those isolated references. Now if you do that, you find it's quite difficult. It would take poetic license to weave a story around these things because they are totally inconsistent. They come from different times and places. The Greek Corpus had a beginning, a middle, and an end.

So more recently the style of *mythogenesis* began, most notably with Jane Ellen Harrison, a classical scholar at the turn of

the century in England. She wanted to follow an idea—the abstract idea manifest in Orpheus or Eurydice or whatever—through the whole of its history, even when it radically changed its name. Diodorus of Sicily gave an example of this, writing in Sicily in the Greek language in 50 BC. In his pioneering universal history, he gave us the history of all the gods and goddesses and kings and queens as if it was all on the same level of historical reality, from the Big Bang until his day. For example, he said that Orpheus was the Greek translation of the Egyptian Osiris. And the rituals of Osiris, Isis, and Horus came along with the myths. These merged with the earlier Eleusinian Mysteries, in which the Orphic religion was maintained, underground, as it were.

So the idea of the myth diffusing and evolving within a culture and leaping the boundaries from one culture to another, already present in Diodorus, has become a new way of looking at the history of myth. A myth is always changing. There is no myth of Eurydice. There is no myth of Orpheus. Rather, there is an evolving, never-ending tradition, with long roots which continue to this day, in consciousness or in unconsciousness. We should now consider the mythogenesis of Orpheus and Eurydice. The performance of Monteverdi's opera, *L'Orfeo*, in the Carmel Bach Festival of 1990 may be an important episode in this mythogenesis. From the perspective of general evolution theory, or mythogenesis, the entire myth complex constitutes an evolutionary sequence. The gods and goddesses all have interactions with each other extending over time. They get into fights, they don't speak to each other for a long time, there are rapes and family feuds.

We see, in the whole history of the mythological complex from Paleolithic times to the present, a gradual shift from the goddess to the god. From the partnership society—described so well in Riane Eisler's popular book, *The Chalice and the Blade*—to the patriarchy of 4000 BC, and to the



present. This bifurcation is represented in the transformations of this myth of Orpheus and Eurydice.

### The Greek Myth

For example, if you look up Eurydice in Graves, you find she is associated with serpents. She holds serpents in her hands. And Orpheus is known in modern mythography to be a principal figure in the mythology of Minoan Crete. Minoan Crete was the last stronghold of the goddess and partnership religions of the Paleolithic past. In Minoan Crete we have a true partnership of the genders, something which in all previous societies was associated with peace, with a successful society, living in harmony with its environment, whereas the patriarchal and matriarchal dominator societies are constantly at war with each other and with the environment. Orpheus and Eurydice actually represent two genders in Minoan Crete. The partnership of the genders is the loving relationship between Orpheus and Eurydice. And the three fundamental principles of Orphic religion—Chaos, Gaia, and Eros—are none other than Orpheus, Eurydice, and their relationship. The fundamental principles of Orphism are manifest in the story which is our heritage of Greek Orphism. Greek Orphism itself is kind of a mid-station on the path from the partnership society to the dominator society.

### The Roman Myth

Greek myths were popular in Rome, and around 42 BC, Virgil embellished the Orpheus legends into a romantic fable. It is found in Book Four of his *Georgics*. In this version, the father of Orpheus is Apollo. Now Apollo is one of the worst criminals in the patriarchal takeover. He is the one who actually displaced the goddess from the temple at Delphi. We have a kind of a syncretism in which the goddess is in the process of being replaced by the god. Apollo, when he was barely seven months old, got out his bow and arrows and slew

Python, the serpent of the goddess, the oracle at Delphi.

Virgil's story is the first of the Orpheus legends in which Eurydice appears. In it we have courtship and marriage, her death, the daring rescue attempt by Orpheus, and so on. The whole story is long, but Orpheus and Eurydice are only mentioned in a portion of about seventy-five lines. The rest is all about Aristeus, the brother of Orpheus. He is the devil personified. Like many Greek and Roman gods, he is a rapist, devoted to male domination. He is Apollo's older son, the true heir to the tradition of Apollo, which is to say, the destruction of the goddess. So he rapes Eurydice, and in trying to escape, she steps on the snake, which is an aspect of herself, of course, and is called back to her own place: the underground, the unconscious.

In Virgil you also find Orpheus's end, a violent end at the hands of the Maenads, priestesses of Dionysos. The Maenads tore him to pieces. The pieces floated down different rivers. Not only did they eliminate Orpheus, but also all their husbands, and this is among the oldest aspects of the Orpheus legend. What does this mean? There are different theories, but Virgil disposes of this question with a single line, where he says, more or less, that Orpheus lost his faith for a moment, perhaps he felt music wasn't good enough. He looked back; he just wanted to be sure that she was still there, that they weren't playing a trick on



*Orpheus and Eurydice Courting*, from Lydgate, *Fall of Princes*, ca. 1450.

him. His tremendous machismo, his courage and self-confidence, weakened. That is Virgil's message.

From **Ovid** we have the next version of the legend, after Virgil. Ovid was born about the same time that Virgil published his version. So more or less twenty-five years later, the young Ovid writes his version of the story. And in the book *Orpheus: The Metamorphoses of a Myth*, there is a line-by-line comparison of the versions of Virgil and Ovid. The one line of Virgil is replaced by a different theory in Ovid. And Ovid's theory occupies 650 lines, fully eight times the length of the entire poem of Virgil! In Ovid's version, a love song in praise of boys, there is an interesting kind of misogyny, in which the women are portrayed as being jealous. They are being ignored because men have found some way of doing without them. That is Ovid's theory on the act of the Maenads.

This might be a simple representation of a deeper truth, namely, that Orpheus was selling out on his partnership heritage. After his partnership with Eurydice was terminated by the serpent/goddess representing Eurydice's mother, Orpheus was naturally very disenchanted with the whole partnership idea. According to this myth as I would read it, Orpheus turned his back on partnership and began a cooperation with its successor paradigm, the dominator model. And the goddesses and their representatives, human priestesses in temples therefore came to regard him more as a menace than a partner in terms of the future of society. Well, this is a fantasy about the Orpheus and Eurydice story up through Virgil and Ovid—in other words Roman times—based on this partnership theory of social evolution due to Maria Gimbutas and Riane Eisler.

### Christian Suppression

So now we have some idea of the long line of Orphism with the Paleolithic past, the goddess, the partnership, and so on. Classical Greece is a mid-station on this long line of Orphism, a turning point in

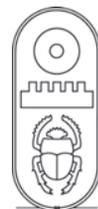
the transformation from gender partnership to male domination. The Roman Orpheus fable is a representation of this transformation, in a simple myth for ordinary people by Virgil and Ovid, as Orphism submerged, and the Roman Empire, and its atheistic approach, took over. The essence of the story was packaged for posterity—and for us—by these possibly unconscious servants of the muses, Virgil and Ovid.

In Alexandria, different groups lived side by side: the Egyptian community, the Greek community, a large ghetto of Jews, a very small group of early Christians, and so on. Into this melting pot went all these pagan elements. And out came Christianity, after a transmutation you could follow step by step. All the elements of Orphism were injected into the early church in Alexandria. And then, Orphism disappeared, as Christianity exploded.

The Christian suppression of Orphism is a key factor in the development of European culture. Besides the general intolerance of the church—and Orphism is pagan—the Trinitarian aspect was most unacceptable to the early fathers. The trinity, the heart of the long line of Orphism from earliest Paleolithic times, stabilized the early history of human consciousness. The Paleolithic Trivia—the triple-headed goddess, the trinity of three female principles—transmigrated into the divine triads of Sumer, Babylon, Egypt, Crete, Mycenae, Greece, and Rome. Gradually the gender changed, and the male gods got older and more aggressive. In Babylonia you had the takeover of Chaos by Order, when Marduk killed Tiamat, the Goddess of Chaos. This transformation culminates in Judaism and Christianity, with the cult of Yahwey, and the total suppression of Orphism. The myth of Orpheus and Eurydice was forgotten until the Renaissance.

### The Renaissance

Then this second miracle took place in the revival of classical paganism—the entire





*The Childhood of Bacchus*, Nicholas Poussin, (17th century). From the Collection of the Musée Condé, Chantilly.

myth complex—in rebellion from Christianity. This started around 1430 in Florence, with the financial support of Cosimo de Medici, with his fortune made by dealing in armed conflict. He commissioned the collection of the classic works, and their translation into Latin. Then people started portraying these classic mythical tales in all the arts, in paintings, in music, and in poetry, in new garb, with the same names, with different names, in every possible way, taking any license with the stories.

So the mythogenesis continued. And the basic ideas of Orphism were successfully packaged in the myth. So merely to read the poem, to act the play, to play the piece of music, and so on, reinvoked anew these principles of the trinity, of chaos, order, and the artistic bridge in between, exemplified by the power of Orpheus's lute, for going back and forth between the conscious and the unconscious, the overground and the underground, and so on. All of this was revived, as if sprinkling water on seeds.

## Opera

Within this revival of pagan art, ritual, and myth, opera was born as a conscious imitation of Greek tragedy. And the beginning of opera is synonymous with Orpheus. One of the earliest recorded operas, by Peri in 1600, is *Orpheus and Eurydice*. The second opera, by Caccini in 1602, is *Orpheus and Eurydice*. The third opera, by Monteverdi in 1607, is *Orpheus and Eurydice*. There are at least twenty-six

operas in the 1600s about Orpheus, and twenty-nine in the 1700s, including classics by Telemann, Gluck, Handel, and Haydn. And not only operas but operettas. Perhaps the first operetta is *Orpheus in the Underworld*, by Offenbach in 1858. Similarly, with musical theater and film, Orpheus is a traditional theme to this day. The morphogenesis goes on.

## A Theory

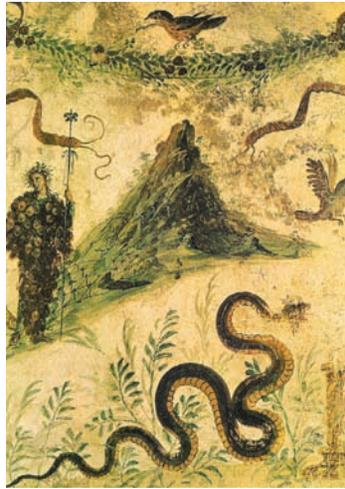
But what is this popular theme? I think it has to do, ultimately, with the nostalgia for the Garden of Eden, the partnership society, a world of peace and plenty, and harmony with the environment. There is a longing to re-attain a world which exists only in the unconscious, in a racial memory not really accessible, in spite of the fact we have poetic representations from Sumer until now.

So partnership is the theme, and Orpheus and Eurydice are the representation. Even Plato criticized this story. He said that if Orpheus were a true hero, he would have killed himself just to follow his lover to the underworld and be with her. What is this about going and getting her back? That's like some kind of sellout. And the fact is that Orpheus came back. He failed. He comes back without her. And then here he is on earth without her, and it's just no good. That is the model of the patriarchal dominator society. Women don't really exist in this society. They don't get paid enough, they can't speak and be listened to and write things, and so on. Society is basically unworthy. Orpheus just wants out. So up he goes, saved by his parents in heaven, and he does achieve god status and a kind of life forever in this myth that won't ever die. The meaning could be interpreted in terms of this partnership and dominator dichotomy of social structure.

## Our Future

Meanwhile, mythogenesis goes on. Prehistoric society had myth as oral history instead of history. Greek society can be understood from its myth, as well as by

its history. And we have oral history, myth, as well as history. The myth complex of a society is its cultural cognitive map, its collective self-representation, and its view of itself. And the evolution of this myth is the evolution of the self-representation of society. And the self-representation or image of ourselves is our guide to our behavior today and our creation of tomorrow. If we can reflect upon our myth, see it as it is, criticize it as in literary criticism, and give impetus to the change of our living myth, we can participate in the creation of the future.



Myths continue to be reworked and recombined: Roman portrait of Bacchus and Mount Vesuvius, Pompeii, House of the Centenary, showing Bacchus covered with grapes. National Archaeological Museum, Naples.

For example, Monteverdi and his librettist sat down and they said, “We don’t want the Maenads, because that part of the story is misogynistic. Well, we don’t want Aristeus, either, he is a racist and male supremacist, let’s get rid of him.” In the reinterpretation of a fable in each new presentation, different choices may be made. That might be our greatest leverage in the creation of the future, the most sensitive point having to do with our future evolution, in which we can insert our hands, our will, our understanding, and actually do something. We change the myth, and the change of history follows the myth.

That is the hope of the mythogenetic point of view. Because we hope that we can have a future. We now have big problems. Every historical period had big problems, but now they’re bigger. The mere numerical strength of our species overpowers the planet. Our society is on a death track. We know we need a turn to the left or right. We don’t know exactly which way to turn. But it could be that just our self-consciousness on the mythic level—traditionally represented by the artist—is all that’s needed to find the right turn, and to

have a future. That’s how we got from then to now. Now we have to get from now to tomorrow.

We might think of film, for example, as potentially our greatest art, where we have music, libretto, visual representation. We have animation, paintings that move. We have coordination between the speech, the music, and the visual music. And we have the greatest power of illusion. John Cocteau made the first film on the Orpheus legend,

*The Testament of Orpheus*, in

1939. In a preface called *The Film-maker as Hypnotist*, he wrote,

“I have often thought that it would be not only economical but admirable if a fakir were to hypnotize an entire auditorium. He could make his audience see a marvelous show, and moreover could order them not to forget it on waking. This, in a way, is the role of the screen—to practice a kind of hypnotism on the public and enable a large number of people to dream the same dream together.”

And so he envisioned doing something in this direction of creating the future, as was done with Greek tragedy in ancient Greek times, with Roman plays in Roman times, and in the Renaissance. We sense an opportunity to create a truly glorious future, adding to the sacred arts and rituals of the church a new wealth of secular art, like opera in the Renaissance, which incorporated pagan elements which would not be allowed in church. And thus, we may intentionally begin a renewal of the sacred, the long line of Orphism, the partnership paradigm, recovering Chaos, Gaia, and Eros, our creative heritage.

