

# THE ORPHIC MYSTERIES

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Joscelyn Godwin is one of the leading scholars of esotericism today. In Chapter 3 of his recent survey of the Western esoteric movement, *The Golden Thread*, he considers the primal figure of Orpheus and the Mysteries connected with his name and legend.

The distant figure of Hermes Trismegistus seems superhuman, without faults and equally without character, and the same goes for Zoroaster, at least until the late nineteenth century, when Nietzsche humanized and humorized him in *Also Sprach Zarathustra*. Imagining Orpheus is a different matter. Most people can recall two things about him: that he was a musician, and that he went down to the Underworld to fetch his wife Eurydice. His story is the archetypal myth of the power of music. With the lyre that was a gift from Apollo, Orpheus could move everything in creation, from stones, trees, and beasts, through humans, to daimonic and even divine beings (whom we might call angels and gods). Armed only with his songs, he charmed the denizens of Hades and persuaded Pluto and Persephone to let him take Eurydice back.

Orpheus was a prince of Thrace, the land to the north of Greece. His mother was Calliope, the Muse of epic poetry. Some say that his father was Apollo, and certainly Orpheus stands under the patronage of that god. Apollo also had northern connections, either coming from Hyperborea (the land beyond the North Wind), or else visiting that far northern land after his birth on the

island of Delos. Where was this Hyperborea? As it was said to contain a circular temple to the sun, some have identified it with Britain, and its temple with Stonehenge, a monument far older than any in Greece.

Stonehenge, and the people who constructed it, were Apollonian in the sense of being dedicated to the sun, to astronomy, mathematics, and music. A number of modern researchers have penetrated beyond the limitations of academic prehistory to reveal, through intuition, the bases of this ancient science. John Michell, the pioneer in this regard, has reconstructed the diagrams and dimensions that seem to lie at the basis of megalithic design.<sup>1</sup> Jean Richer has shown that there is an imaginary zodiac whose twelvefold symbolism links mythology with the geography of the Aegean area.<sup>2</sup>

Paul Broadhurst and Hamish Miller have traced a plethora of Apollonian sites in geometrical alignment, all the way from Ireland to Palestine.<sup>3</sup> Michell, in addition, has traced the myth of “perpetual choirs” maintained

at ancient sanctuaries for the purpose of what he calls “enchanting the landscape.”<sup>4</sup> If one is attentive to such findings, it is clear that there was a high and orderly civilization well established by the third millennium BCE, of which the archaeologists know almost nothing.

This enchantment of the landscape is exactly what Orpheus is reputed to have done with his music, casting a benign spell



The setting sun through one of the trilithons of Stonehenge. Photo by Resk, Wikimedia Commons.

over nature and bringing peace among men. As part of his mission, he reformed the cult of Dionysus (Bacchus) and tried to persuade its followers to give up their blood sacrifices. In place of the Dionysian orgies, Orpheus founded the first Mysteries of Greece. The purpose of these, as far as we can tell, was to transmit some kind of direct knowledge that was helpful in facing the prospect of death.

Orpheus's journey to the Underworld to fetch Eurydice should be understood in the context of the Mysteries.<sup>5</sup> In the earliest versions of the myth, he did succeed in restoring her to life. Only later was the episode embroidered by the poets<sup>6</sup> so that it ended tragically, as Orpheus at the last moment disobeyed the ban on looking at his wife before he reached the surface of the earth, and lost her again forever.

Orpheus was originally a psychopomp (leader of souls) who had the power to rescue souls from the gray, dreamlike condition that was believed in archaic times to be the inevitable fate of the dead. Initiates of the Mysteries received the assurance that this would not be their fate, and that like Eurydice they would be saved from Pluto's dismal realm. This was the first time that the immortality of the soul was taught on Greek soil, beginning a tradition that Pythagoras, Socrates, and Plato would each enhance in his own way. (See chapters 4 and 5 [Ed: of *The Golden Thread*].)

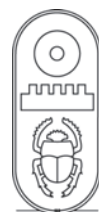
Most of what we know of Orphism derives from much later even than these philosophers. Under the Roman Empire, around the time of early Christianity, there was a strong resurgence of Orphism as a mystery religion. The Orphic Hymns, a set of magical incantations addressed to the various gods and daimons, date from this revival.<sup>7</sup> Far from discarding the worship of Dionysus, Orphism now made him the very core of its doctrine. One of the myths of Dionysus tells that as an infant he was captured by the Titans (the rivals of the gods), who dismembered and ate him. Fortunately Zeus was able to save his son's heart. He

swallowed it himself, and in due time gave Dionysus second birth. The Titans were vanquished, and out of their remains came human beings. Consequently, every human body contains a tiny fragment of Dionysus.

It is easy to recognize in this myth the doctrine, familiar now but by no means common then, that each person is not just a compound of body and soul, but also possesses a spark of absolute divinity. Religions that hold this doctrine are aimed at retrieving, reviving, and eventually realizing that spark, either in life or after death. To realize it—to “make it real”—is to become oneself a god, and henceforth immortal. That is the ultimate promise of the Mysteries. For the uninitiated, there is only the prospect of Hades, a place not of torment except for the very wicked, but not of pleasure, either, even for the best of men. Eventually the soul there withers and dies, releasing the divine spark to reincarnate in another body and soul.

This touches once again on the matter of conditional immortality (see chapter 2 [Ed: of *The Golden Thread*].), which is a constant concern of esoteric teaching and practice. The distinction is implicit as early as Homer's *Odyssey*, though the relevant passage is probably an interpolation from classical times. When Odysseus sees the heroes in Hades, even the greatest of them is stuck there without hope of ascent, redemption, or rebirth. A single exception is made for Hercules. Odysseus, it is said, saw only his image in Hades, while Hercules “himself” is among the eternal gods.<sup>8</sup>

Hercules here represents the initiate, who is supposedly freed from this wheel of birth and death and is able to proceed to a more glorious destiny among the gods. As a reminder, the Orphic initiates were not buried with pots of food and furniture, but cremated and buried with gold leaves inscribed in Greek.<sup>9</sup> These carry prayers and instructions about what they should say and do upon awakening after death. They must avoid at all costs drinking from the Lake of Lethe (forgetfulness),



but instead turn to the right, to the Lake of Mnemosyne (memory), and address its guardians in these beautiful words: "I am the child of earth and of starry Heaven. This you yourselves also know. I am dry with thirst and am perishing. Come, give me at once cold water flowing forth from the Lake of Memory." Or, on meeting the rulers of Hades, they should say: "I come pure from the pure, Queen of the Underworld, Eucles, Eubouleus, and all other gods! For I too claim to be of your race."

By the Roman period, as we read in Ovid's version of his story,<sup>10</sup> the figure of Orpheus had become a tragic one. Not only did he lose Eurydice for the second time, but he himself suffered a cruel death. It is said that he returned to his native Thrace to try to reform the inhabitants, but fell afoul of the Maenads, women followers of the unregenerate rites of Dionysus. Screaming to silence his magical songs, they tore him limb from limb. But his head floated to the sea and lodged in a rock on the isle of Lesbos, where it continued to sing. He himself was taken up by his father Apollo, and his lyre was raised to the stars as the constellation Lyra.

With this version of his myth, Orpheus took his place among the other suffering saviors whose cults were popular in cosmopolitan Rome: Dionysus, Attis, Adonis, Hercules, Osiris, and Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>11</sup> These divine beings offered a personal relationship with their worshipers that many people found more satisfying than the distant Olympian gods. The implication was that as the gods had suffered, died, and returned to their native heaven, so would their followers.

Some of the early Christians regarded Orpheus as a kind of pagan saint, even confusing his image with that of Jesus. Both saviors were demigods of royal descent who sought to refashion an existing religion in the interests of humanitarianism. Both descended into Hades to rescue loved ones from eternal death. (Jesus' descent into Hades to deliver the souls of the Old

Testament fathers is not biblical, but has been standard doctrine since the second century).<sup>12</sup> Their religions taught the potential immortality of the soul, depending on one's actions in life. Both suffered tragic deaths as sacrifices to the religions they had tried to reform: Orpheus, as the dismembered victim of the Dionysian orgy; Jesus, in the image of the Lamb slain for the Passover supper. Their relations with their parent religions were highly ambiguous. Jesus, while acknowledging the Jewish god Yahweh as his heavenly father, treated the Mosaic Law with disdain, and supposedly died on the cross to appease his father's anger with humanity. Orpheus was killed by the sectaries of Dionysus, imitating the latter's death at the hands of the Titans.

The importance placed on the next life encouraged Orphics and Christians alike to defer their pleasures in this one. Both groups sought to live a life of chastity and abstinence (the Orphics were vegetarians) that was incongruous with the society around them. It was also cause for surprise that both practiced friendship to strangers, not merely to people of their own race and creed, as the Greeks and Jews tended to do. But this was a natural conclusion from the principle that each person was in essence divine. Consequently Orphism was the first religion in Europe, and perhaps the first anywhere, to preach what we think of as "Christian" virtues, to promise an afterlife whose quality depended on their practice, and to institute mysteries as a foretaste of the soul's future destiny.

The Orphics had been the first philosophers of Greece and the spiritual ancestors of the Pythagorean and Platonic schools, renowned for asceticism and for belief in the immortality of the soul. Now, in the Orphic revival, they stamped their principles on the new religion. Through numerical coding of key words and phrases in the Greek (New) Testament, Christianity was linked with the Pythagorean tradition, in which music and number were the first principles of the universe.<sup>13</sup>

But this knowledge was not for general consumption. In two respects, Orphism was the first known esoteric religion. First, it imposed the seal of the Mysteries, so that the teachings given in initiation were not revealed to outsiders. Second, it gave a profounder, symbolic interpretation to existing myths such as the Theogony (the genealogy of the Greco-Roman gods). Mysteries and the knowledge of hidden meanings in the scriptures have since been two of the chief marks of esotericism.

The Orphic impulse survives to this day, not in religion so much as in the arts, of which Apollo is the traditional patron and the Muses the inspirers. These “arts” were originally disciplines that were closer in some ways to what we call sciences: they included history and astronomy, along with dance, music, poetry, and drama.<sup>14</sup> Their effects were calculated, even in the literal sense of being governed by mathematics. This is obvious in the cases of astronomy and music. But poetry, too, is speech controlled by rhythmic number; dance is rhythmic and geometrical movement; drama and history control the unruly memories and rumors of earthly and divine events and turn them into moral and philosophical lessons.

Whatever the status of the arts today, the Muses were originally not in the business of entertaining people but of civilizing them, using deliberate and highly developed techniques based, for the most part, on number. This brings us back to the elaborate mathematics of Stonehenge and other prehistoric monuments, and to John Michell’s vision of a civilization held in a state of grace by the tireless chanting of a mantic song, its music ruled by number and proportion.<sup>15</sup>

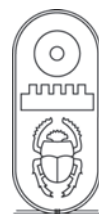
Orpheus, singing to Apollo’s lyre, is said to have had the power to move every kind of body and soul. He could force apart the Clashing Rocks so that the ship of the Argonauts could pass safely between them; he succeeded in touching the hearts of the chthonic gods. Stones that have been “moved” and set in geometrical order are the substance both of Stonehenge and of the Greek temples,

monuments that even in their ruin command awe and respect and convey a sense of sublime harmony. Music, too, though it may consist of nothing more than air vibrating according to mathematical laws, has always had an unaccountable power to touch the heart and exalt the spirit. In a well-ordered civilization, the two arts of architecture and music work in consort: the first, to provide harmonious surroundings for the body and to delight the eye; the second to delight the ear and to bring about harmony in the soul. Recent researches by Paul Devereux, Robert Jahn, and others, suggest that this link of stone buildings with music goes back to the Stone Age.<sup>16</sup>

The Orphic and Apollonian ideal manifests in all those works of art that we call “classic.” They are not exclusive to Greece by any means. In ancient China, for example, a hieratic music, along with religious ceremonies, was recognized as the best means of procuring peace in the empire and the good government of its citizens.<sup>17</sup> Mexico also has a version of Apollonian classicism in the architecture of the Mayas and their predecessors, which, like the European stone circles, was geometrically planned and cosmically oriented.<sup>18</sup> The West has had classic phases in all the arts whenever the peak of a certain style is reached, and with it an image of harmonious diversity as reassuring as the regular passage of the sun through the seasons.

In Western music, the seven strings of Apollo’s lyre are sounded as the diatonic scale (the white notes of the piano). Their most “classic” manifestation is not in Bach or Mozart but in plainsong, which served the Christian Church for fifteen hundred years or more before it was pushed aside by more glamorous types of music, then discarded altogether. The calming, healing, and uplifting power of unaccompanied chant is intuitively felt by the soul, just as it was in the time of Orpheus. The fact that it was employed for a time in Christian worship and given Latin words is a secondary matter.

Do music and the arts directly affect the quality of a civilization? No one can say for certain whether this Orphic premise is cor-





rect, because it has not been put into practice in modern times. Totalitarian governments have made a mockery of the idea. The Nazis banned atonal music because it was incomprehensible to their cultural pundits, and jazz because it was African-American in origin. The Russian Communists banned atonal music for the same reason, and rock 'n' roll because it was associated with protest and Western influence. These were hardly the proper motives for controlling a people's music. But the rulers in question were not philosopher-kings,<sup>19</sup> who alone might be expected to have their subjects' spiritual interests at heart, and to have the knowledge of how to further them.

Even if depravity in the arts is not the cause of moral decay, it unfortunately mirrors many people's spiritual state. The art critic Suzi Gablik, once a prominent mouthpiece for modernism, writes of how she emerged into this realization after an "acute crisis of credibility about the core truths of modernity—secularism, individualism, bureaucracy, and pluralism—by which the numinous, the mythic, and the sacramental have been, in our society, reduced to rags."<sup>20</sup> When the arts

are profane and purposeless, and dwell on ugliness and vice, one can be sure that the collective soul is not in good health. If the Orphics are right, this is as serious a matter as the malnutrition of our nation's poor. The outlook is bleak for those souls nourished only by the junk food and poisonous additives of popular culture. How will it be for them to enter the soul's domain with no songs to sing, no poetry to charm Pluto and Persephone?

The Orphic, and the Christian, solution is not to force people but to gently persuade them toward a better way. One can see this in the actions of the founders, as they tried to reform the Dionysian and Mosaic traditions. One can also see it in America's founders, who absorbed Orphic principles through Freemasonry, and deliberately chose freedom, not rigor, as the school for their citizens.<sup>21</sup> With an optimism that, on good days, we may still share, they allowed each person to regulate his or her own religious, aesthetic, and private life. In chapter 5 [Ed: of *The Golden Thread*], when we come to Plato's prescriptions, we will consider the contrary policy.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See John F. Michell, *The New View Over Atlantis* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1987).

<sup>2</sup> Jean Richer, *Sacred Geometry of the Ancient Greeks: Astrological Symbolism in Art, Architecture, and Landscape*, trans. Christine Rhone (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> Paul Broadhurst and Hamish Miller, *The Dance of the Dragon: An Odyssey into Earth Energies and Ancient Religion* (Launceston, UK: Pendragon Press, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> John Michell and Christine Rhone, *Twelve-Tribe Nations and the Science of Enchanting the Landscape* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1991).

<sup>5</sup> See *The Ancient Mysteries: A Sourcebook: Sacred Texts of the Mystery Religions of the Ancient Mediterranean World*, ed. M. W. Meyer (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987); Walter Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987).

<sup>6</sup> Notably in Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, book 11.

<sup>7</sup> Scholarly, bilingual edition by Apostolos N. Athanassakis, *The Orphic Hymns: Text, Translation and Notes* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1977). For a poetic rendering, see *The Hymns of Orpheus: Mutations* by R.C. Hogart (Grand Rapids, MI: Phanes Press, 1993).

<sup>8</sup> Homer, *Odyssey*, 11:601-4.

<sup>9</sup> For the texts, see Kathleen Freeman, *Ancilla to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957), 5-7. A recent study: Hans Dieter Betz, "'Der Erde Kind bin ich und des gestirnten Himmels': Zur Lehre vom Menschen in den orphischen Goldplättchen," in *Ansichten griechischer Rituale für Walter Burkert* (Stuttgart: B. G. Teubner, 1998), 399-419.

<sup>10</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 11:1-85.

<sup>11</sup> For an overview, see J. Godwin, *Mystery Religions in the Ancient World* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1981).

<sup>12</sup> Friedrich Loofs, "Descent to Hades (Christ's)," in *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. J. Hastings, (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1911), 4:654-63.

<sup>13</sup> See William Stirling, *The Canon: An Exposition of the Pagan Mystery Perpetuated in the Cabala as the Rule of All the Arts* (first ed., 1897, reprinted London: Garnstone Press, 1974); John Michell, *The Dimensions of Paradise: The Proportions and Symbolic Numbers of Ancient Cosmology* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1988); David Fideler, *Jesus Christ, Sun of God* (Wheaton, IL: Quest, 1993).

<sup>14</sup> The nine Muses first appear in Hesiod, *Theogony*, 77-79. Their attributes and subjects appear in later sources and vary, but are usually: Calliope, epic song; Clio, history; Euterpe, lyric song; Thalia, comedy; Melpomene, tragedy; Terpsichore, dance; Erato, erotic poetry (or geometry); Polyhymnia, sacred song; Urania, astronomy.

<sup>15</sup> See Michell and Rhone, *Twelve-Tribe Nations*.

<sup>16</sup> See P. Devereux, *Stone Age Soundtracks: The Acoustic Archaeology of Ancient Sites* (London: Vega, 2001).

<sup>17</sup> See the *Yueh Chi* or *Record of Music*, part of the *Li Chi: Book of Rites* (New Hyde Park, NY: University Books, 1967), 2:92-131.

<sup>18</sup> See Anthony Aveni, "Astronomy in Ancient Mesoamerica," in *In Search of Ancient Astronomies*, ed. E. C. Krupp, (New York: Doubleday, 1978), 165-202.

<sup>19</sup> In Plato, *Republic* 5, 473d.

<sup>20</sup> Suzi Gablik, "The Unmaking of a Modernist," *Lapis* 8 (1999), 25-27; here 26.

<sup>21</sup> See Stephan A. Hoeller, *Freedom: Alchemy for a Voluntary Society* (Wheaton, IL: Quest, 1992), 168-76.