

ROSI CRUCIAN
DIGEST

VOLUME 86 NUMBER 1 2008

THE ORPHIC MYSTERIES

Each issue of the *Rosicrucian Digest* provides members and all interested readers with a compendium of materials regarding the ongoing flow of the Rosicrucian Timeline. The articles, historical excerpts, art, and literature included in this *Digest* span the ages, and are not only interesting in themselves, but also seek to provide a lasting reference shelf to stimulate continuing study of all of those factors which make up Rosicrucian history and thought. Therefore, we present classical background, historical development, and modern reflections on each of our subjects, using the many forms of primary sources, reflective commentaries, the arts, creative fiction, and poetry.



This magazine is dedicated to all the women and men throughout the ages who have contributed to and perpetuated the wisdom of the Rosicrucian, Western esoteric, tradition.



May we ever be worthy of the light with which we have been entrusted.



In this issue, the Orphic Mysteries take center stage. Having completely changed the way that ancient Greek religion viewed the relations between humans and the Divine, Orpheus continues to weave his melodies across more than 2,600 years to transform our hearts, our minds, and our works.

ROSICRUCIAN DIGEST

No. 1 - 2008

Vol. 86 - No. 1

Official Magazine of the Worldwide Rosicrucian Order

Established in 1915 by the Supreme Grand Lodge of the English Language Jurisdiction, AMORC, Rosicrucian Park, San Jose, CA 95191.

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ROSICRUCIAN DIGEST (ISSN #0035-8339) is published bi-annually for \$12.00 per year, single copies \$6.00, by the Grand Lodge of the English Language Jurisdiction, AMORC, Inc., at 1342 Naglee Ave., San Jose, CA 95191. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to ROSICRUCIAN DIGEST at 1342 Naglee Ave., San Jose, CA 95191-0001.

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ORPHEUS AND EURYDICE FROM THE METAMORPHOSES

Ovid

Publius Ovidius Naso (43 BCE-17 CE) was a renowned and sometimes controversial poet whose work, along with that of Virgil and Horace, characterizes the “golden age” of Roman poetry. Even though he often infuriated the rather puritanical Emperor Augustus, his poetry proved to be the most prominent Roman mythological inheritance of the Medieval West. Medieval writers found a rich source for their own invention in his *Metamorphoses*, a mock epic with the theme of transformations. In this passage, he describes the tale of Eurydice and Orpheus, and is the ultimate source, together with Virgil’s account, of all subsequent telling of this archetypal tale.

The story begins just as Hymen, the God of Marriage and Weddings, has departed, after having attended the Nuptials of Orpheus and Eurydice.

Veiled in a saffron mantle, through the air
unmeasured, after the strange wedding,
Hymen
departed swiftly for Ciconian land;
regardless and not listening to the voice
of tuneful Orpheus. Truly Hymen there
was present during the festivities
of Orpheus and Eurydice, but gave
no happy omen, neither hallowed words
nor joyful glances; and the torch he held
would only sputter, fill the eyes with
smoke,
and cause no blaze while waving. The
result
of that sad wedding, proved more terrible
than such foreboding fates.

While through the grass
delighted Naiads wandered with the bride,
a serpent struck its venomous tooth in her
soft ankle—and she died. After the bard

of Rhodope had mourned, and filled the
highs
of heaven with the moans of his lament,
determined also the dark underworld
should recognize the misery of death,
he dared descend by the Taenarian gate
down to the gloomy Styx. And there
passed through
pale-glimmering phantoms, and the ghosts
escaped from sepulchres, until he found
Persephone and Pluto, master-king
of shadow realms below: and then began
to strike his tuneful lyre, to which he sang:
“O deities of this dark world beneath
the earth! this shadowy underworld, to
which
all mortals must descend! If it can be
called lawful, and if you will suffer speech
of strict truth (all the winding ways
of Falsity forbidden) I come not
down here because of curiosity
to see the glooms of Tartarus and have
no thought to bind or strangle the three
necks
of the Medusan Monster, vile with snakes.
But I have come, because my darling wife
stepped on a viper that sent through her
veins
death-poison, cutting off her coming years.
“If able, I would bear it, I do not
deny my effort—but the god of Love
has conquered me—a god so kindly
known
in all the upper world. We are not sure
he can be known so well in this deep
world,
but have good reason to conjecture he
is not unknown here, and if old report
almost forgotten, that you stole your wife

is not a fiction, Love united you
the same as others. By this Place of Fear
this huge void and these vast and silent
realms,
renew the life-thread of Eurydice.

“All things are due to you, and though on
earth
it happens we may tarry a short while,
slowly or swiftly we must go to one
abode; and it will be our final home.
Long and tenaciously you will possess
unquestioned mastery of the human race.
She also shall be yours to rule, when full
of age she shall have lived the days of her
allotted years. So I ask of you
possession of her few days as a boon.
But if the fates deny to me this prayer
for my true wife, my constant mind must
hold
me always so that I can not return—
and you may triumph in the death of
two!”

While he sang all his heart said to the
sound
of his sweet lyre, the bloodless ghosts
themselves
were weeping, and the anxious Tantalus
stopped clutching at return-flow of the
wave,
Ixion's twisting wheel stood wonder-
bound;
and Tityus's liver for a while escaped
the vultures, and the listening Belides
forgot their sieve-like bowls and even you,
O Sisyphus! sat idly on your rock!

Then Fame declared that conquered by
the song
of Orpheus, for the first and only time
the hard cheeks of the fierce Eumenides
were wet with tears: nor could the royal
queen,
nor he who rules the lower world deny
the prayer of Orpheus; so they called to
them

Eurydice, who still was held among
the new-arriving shades, and she obeyed
the call by walking to them with slow
steps,
yet halting from her wound. So Orpheus
then
received his wife; and Pluto told him he
might now ascend from these Avernian
vales
up to the light, with his Eurydice;
but, if he turned his eyes to look at her,
the gift of her delivery would be lost.

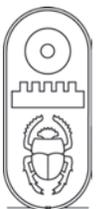
They picked their way in silence up a steep
and gloomy path of darkness. There
remained
but little more to climb till they would
touch
earth's surface, when in fear he might
again
lose her, and anxious for another look
at her, he turned his eyes so he could gaze
upon her. Instantly she slipped away.
He stretched out to her his despairing
arms,
eager to rescue her, or feel her form,
but could hold nothing save the yielding
air.

Dying the second time, she could not say
a word of censure of her husband's fault;
what had she to complain of—his great
love?

Her last word spoken was, “Farewell!”
which he
could barely hear, and with no further
sound
she fell from him again to Hades. Struck
quite senseless by this double death of his
dear wife, he was as fixed from motion as
the frightened one who saw the triple
necks
of Cerberus, that dog whose middle neck
was chained.¹

Endnote:

¹ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, translated by Brookes More (Boston: Cornhill Publishing Co., 1922). Available at <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?lookup=Ov.+Met.+1.1>.



THE THEOLOGY OF ORPHEUS

G.R.S. Mead

From *Orpheus* (1896)¹

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, long before the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi Library, George Robert Stowe Mead (1863-1933) used all of the existing materials available to him to provide one of the best pictures of ancient esoteric roots in his day. His interests and work included studies in Gnosticism, Hermetism, and great mystic figures of antiquity, such as Simon Magus, Apollonius of Tyana, and Orpheus. He served as Madame Blavatsky's private secretary from 1889 until her death in 1891. Combining the skills of scholar and esoteric practitioner, Mead brought vigor and illumination to all of the subjects he dealt with. In this introduction to the vast subject of Orpheus and Orphism, he reminds us that there is much in Orpheus beyond the tragic tale of his loss of Eurydice. Taking the sometimes complex and confusing fragments of the various Orphic Theogonies that have come down to us, he translates this evolution of the Gods and Goddesses into a form that is easier for the modern day person to understand.

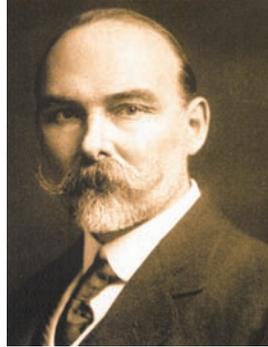
Who has not heard the romantic legend of Orpheus and Eurydice? The polished verse of Virgil, in his *Georgics* (4:452-527), has immortalized the story, told by "Caerulean Proteus." But few know the importance that mythical Orpheus plays in Grecian legends, nor the many arts and sciences attributed to him by fond posterity. Orpheus was the father of the pan-hellenic faith, the great theologian, the man who brought to Greece the sacred rites of secret worship and taught the mysteries of nature and of God.

To him the Greeks confessed they owed religion, the arts, the sciences both sacred and profane; and, therefore, in dealing with the subject I have proposed to myself in this essay, it will be necessary to treat of a theology "which was first mystically and symbolically promulgated by Orpheus, afterwards disseminated enigmatically through images by Pythagoras, and in the last place scientifically unfolded by Plato and his genuine disciples"²; or to use the words of Proclus, the last great master of Neoplatonism, "all the theology of the Greeks comes from Orphic mystagogy," that is to say, initiation into the mysteries.³ Not only did the learned of the Pagan world ascribe the sacred science to the same source, but also the instructed of the Christian fathers.⁴

The Science of Divine Things

It must not however, be supposed that Orpheus was regarded as the "inventor" of theology, but rather as the transmitter of the science of divine things to the Grecian world, or even as the reformer of an existing cult that, even in the early times before the legendary Trojan era, had already fallen into decay. The well-informed among the ancients recognized a common basis in the inner rites of the then existing religions, and even the least mystical of writers admit a "common bond of discipline," as, for instance, Lobeck, who demonstrates that the ideas of the Egyptians, Chaldaens, Orphics, and Pythagoreans were derived from a common source.⁵

[Thomas] Taylor says that the Grecian theology was first "mystically and symbolically" promulgated by Orpheus, and so at



G.R.S. Mead (1863-1933)
(Photo by Elliott & Fry, 1916).

once goes to the root of the whole matter. To understand that theology, therefore, we must treat it from the point of view of mysticism and symbolism, for no other method is capable of extracting its meaning. Moreover, in this we only follow the methods and opinions of its own adepts, for, as Proclus says: “The whole theology of the Greeks is the child of Orphic mystagogy; Pythagoras being first taught the ‘orgies’ of the gods [‘orgies’ signifying ‘burstings forth,’ or ‘emanations,’ from *orgao*] by Aglaophemus, and next Plato receiving the perfect science concerning such things from the Pythagorean and Orphic writings.”⁶

These symbolical Orphic fables have for ages baffled the intelligence of rationalistic literalists, and shocked the prudery of ecclesiastics who, erroneously regarding the Jewish myths as actual realities, have fallen into the same error with regard to the fables of Orpheus.

Nonnus states the simple fact in saying: “Orpheus describes the series of powers, and the modes, energizings and powers of being, by means of fabulous symbols; and these fables he composes not without shameful obscenity.”⁷ This “shameful obscenity,” refers to the stories of rape, incest, dismemberment, etc., of the Gods, so familiar to us in Grecian mythology; all of which things would be highly improper, if recited of men or anthropomorphic entities, but which are at once removed from such a gross interpretation, when understood as symbolical representations of the emanations of divine and lesser powers, and the interactions of occult natures. It is contrary to the most elementary ideas of justice to ascribe thoughts and intentions to the ancient makers of these myths, which only exist in the prurient minds and ignorant misconceptions of posterity.

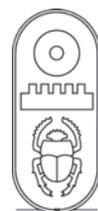
Thus we find Proclus writing, “the Orphic method aimed at revealing divine things by means of symbols, a method common to all writers of divine lore (*theomythias*)”⁸; and Plutarch, “formerly the

wisdom-lovers exposed their doctrines and teachings in poetical fictions, as, for example, Orpheus and Hesiod and Parmenides”⁹; and Julian, the so-called “apostate,” “many of the philosophers and theologians were myth-makers, as Orpheus,”¹⁰ etc. In the same Oration, he continues, “concerning the myths of the Mysteries which Orpheus handed down to us, in the very things which in these myths are most incongruous, he drew nearest the truth. For just in proportion as the enigma is more paradoxical and wonderful, so does he warn us to distrust the appearance, and seek for the hidden meaning.”¹¹

Philostratus also asserts that, in reading the disputes among the Gods in the Iliad, we must remember that the poet “was philosophizing in the Orphic manner”¹²; and Plutarch tells us that, the most ancient philosophers have covered up their teachings in a lattice-work of fables and symbols, especially instancing the Orphic writings and the Phrygian myths—“that ancient natural science both among the Greeks and foreigners was for the most part hidden in myths—an occult and mysterious theology containing an enigmatical and hidden meaning—is clear from the Orphic poems and the Egyptian and Phrygian treatises.”¹³

The Monadology of Orpheus

Another important point to bear in mind in studying the Orphic theology, is that the whole system is fundamentally a monadology, and if this is not clearly seized, much difficulty will be experienced in fitting the parts into the whole. The first writer who drew attention to this important tenet in modern times was Thomas Taylor, and so far as I know, no scholar has added to his researches. I shall therefore append here the most important passages in his books on this subject, advising my readers to carefully think out what he says, and this not in a material but in a mystic manner.



“Another and still more appropriate cause may be assigned of each of the celestial Gods being called by the appellation of so many other deities, which is this, that, according to the Orphic theology, each of the planets is fixed in a luminous ethereal sphere called a *holotes*, or *wholeness*.¹⁴

“In consequence of this analogy, each of these planetary spheres contains a multitude of Gods, who are the satellites of the leading divinity of the sphere, and subsist conformably to his characteristics.”¹⁵

These “wholenesses,” therefore, are something totally different from the physical planets, which are simply their symbols in the starry vault. Their hierarchies have each their appropriate dominant “colour,” and also their sub-colours contained in the dominant. The whole has to do with the “radiant egg” or “envelope” of the mystic universe, which has its correspondence in man. This is the basis of real astrology, the knowledge of which has been lost.

And again:

“In each of the celestial spheres, the whole sphere has the relation of a monad, but the cosmocrators (or planets) are the leaders of the multitude in each. For in each a number analogous to the choir of the fixed stars subsists with appropriate circulations.”¹⁶

Here we have the idea of every monad being a mirror of every other monad in the universe, and having the power of giving to and receiving from every other monad. The monad, as monad, is the “same,” or Self; the cosmocrators, or “planets,” in each are characterized as the “other.” The perfect number is *ten*. The triad contains the intellectual hypostases; the hebdomad the formative or demiurgic powers.

From this it follows that each of these “planets,” or “spheres,” contains its appropriate powers, which are the same in the various

spheres, and only differ from each other by having a predominance of the characteristic of any particular sphere.

As Taylor says: “From this sublime theory it follows that every sphere contains a Jupiter, Neptune, Vulcan, Vesta, Minerva, Mars, Ceres, Juno, Diana, Mercury, Venus, Apollo, in short every deity, each sphere conferring on these Gods the peculiar characteristic of its nature; so that, for instance, in the Sun they all possess a solar property, in the Moon a lunar one, and so of the rest.”¹⁷

And so in his explanation of terms prefixed to his translation of Proclus *On the Theology of Plato*¹⁸ he defines the monad in divine natures as “that which contains *distinct*, but at the same time *profoundly-united* multitude, and which produces a multitude exquisitely united to itself. But in the sensible universe, the first monad is the world itself, which comprehends in itself all the multitude of which it is the cause (in conjunction with the cause of all). The second monad is the inerratic sphere. In the third place, the spheres of the planets succeed, each of which is also a monad, comprehending an appropriate multitude. And in the fourth and last place are the spheres of the elements, which are in a similar manner monads. All these monads likewise are denominated *wholenesses*, and have a perpetual subsistence.”

Taylor reproduces this passage from a note in his *Theoretic Arithmetic*,¹⁹ printed four years previously to his translation of Proclus on *The Theology of Plato*. He bases his definition principally on Proclus and Damascius. Seeing also that man is a mirror of the universe, man contains all these powers in himself potentially. If it were not so, the possibility of the attainment of wisdom and final union with the Divine would be an empty dream. What these “powers” are may be seen from the following outline of Orphic Theogony.

Orpheus

CHART OF THE ORPHIC THEOGONY



Unaging Time

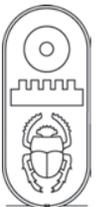
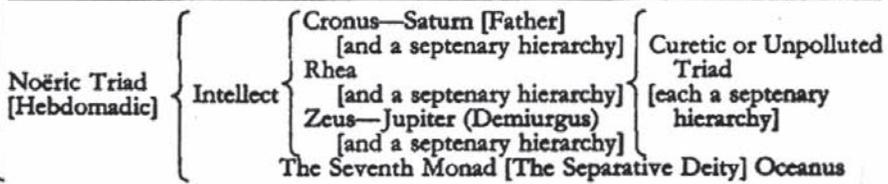
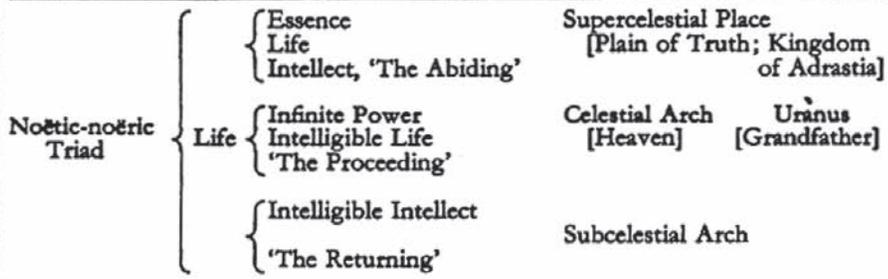
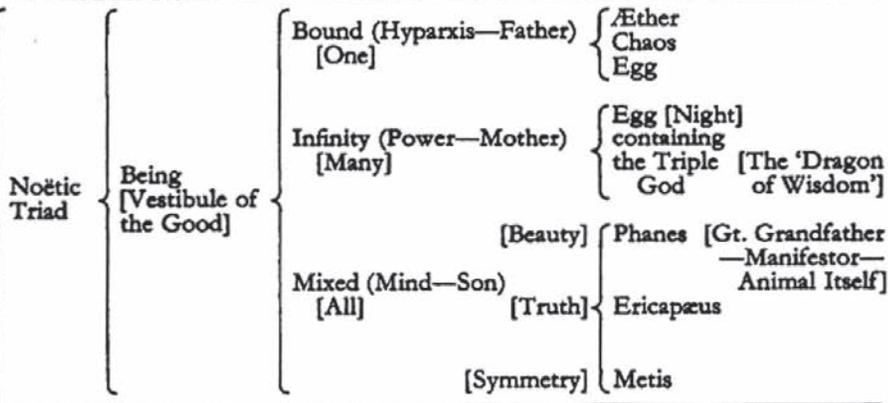
The
Primordial
Triad

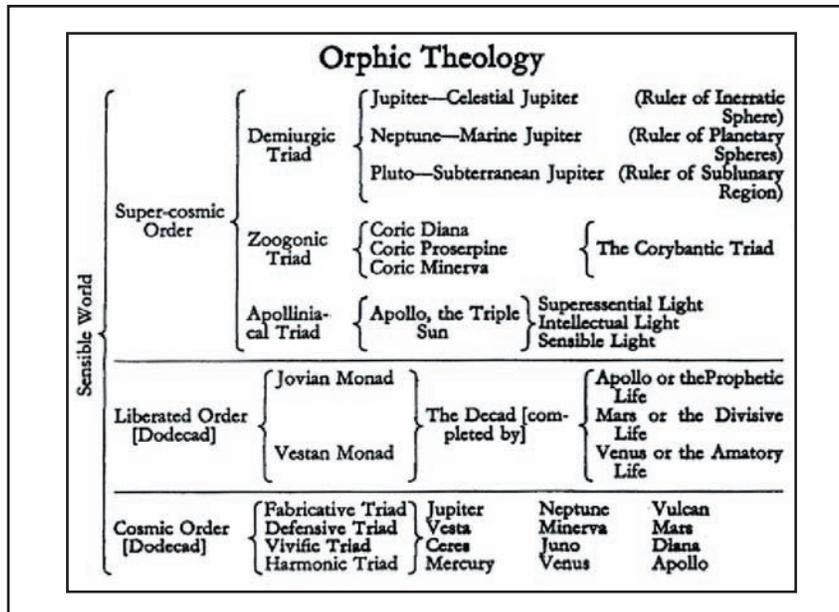
The
One-Many-
All



{ Universal Good
Universal Soul
Universal Mind

Super-sensible World





Endnotes

- ¹ G.R.S. Mead, *Orpheus* (London: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1896), 9-10, 55-60.
- ² Thomas Taylor's translation of Proclus's *On the Theology of Plato*, Introduction (London: Printed for the Author, 1816), l.
- ³ C.A. Lobeck, *Aglaophamus* (Regimontii Prussorum: Brothers Borntraeger, 1829), 723.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 466.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 946.
- ⁶ Quoted by Lobeck, 723, who unfortunately gives no reference, and so far I have not been able to discover the passage in Proclus. Ed. Note: The passage is in Proclus, *Theologia Platonica*, i, 6 (*Testamenta*, 250 in Otto Kern, ed., *Orphicorum Fragmenta* [Berlin: Weidmann, 1922 {1963}]).
- ⁷ Nonnus, *Exposition of a Second Inveictive*, 100:18, 526 (4th-5th centuries CE).
- ⁸ Proclus, *Theology of Plato*, 1:4, 9.
- ⁹ Plutarch, *On the Pythian Oracle*, 18.
- ¹⁰ Julian II, Emperor, *Oration*, 7, 215b.
- ¹¹ Julian II, 217.
- ¹² Philostratus, *Heroicus* 2, 693.
- ¹³ Plutarch, *On Daedalus*, Fragment 9, 1, 754.
- ¹⁴ Each of these spheres is called a *wholeness*, because it contains a multitude of *partial* "animals" co-ordinate with it, because it is a part with a total subsistence, and is analogous to the sphere of the fixed stars. cf. Cicero, *Somnium Scipionis*, with Macrobius's *Commentaries*.
- ¹⁵ Thomas Taylor, *The Hymns of Orpheus* (London: Printed for the Author, 1792), xxviii.
- ¹⁶ See Proclus, *On Timaeus*, 2, 270, where the theory is much further developed.
- ¹⁷ Taylor, *Hymns of Orpheus*, xxxii.
- ¹⁸ Taylor, *On the Theology of Plato*, 1xxx.
- ¹⁹ Thomas Taylor, *The Theoretic Arithmetic of the Pythagoreans* (London: Printed for the Author, 1816), 5.

AN ORPHIC TIMELINE

by the Staff and Friends of the
Rosicrucian Research Library

The figure of Orpheus and the Mysteries of Orphism originate in Greek Antiquity and have continued to influence the Western world to the present day. In this timeline, we trace major events and figures in the Orphic tradition, from its earliest mentions to the present day. The figure of Orpheus, in philosophy, spirituality, and the arts is perhaps one of the most enduring and pervasive in history, as the many Orpheum Theaters today attest.

GRECO-ROMAN ANTIQUITY

8th– 7th Centuries BCE and before

- Traditional Greek religion, as represented in Homer, Hesiod, and other sources viewed the relationship between humans and the Gods and Goddesses as problematic at best, and often adversarial. Humans are generally thought to be either without souls, or having insignificant essences that will only survive in a kind of grey half-life after death in the realm of Hades, like chittering bats (the origin of our phrase: “like a bat out of hell”). Only the great semi-divine heroes, such as Hercules, Jason, or Theseus would live a full after-death existence, in the Elysian Fields. The concept of a mortal



Archelaos of Priene, Apotheosis of Homer. Marble relief, probably from Alexandria, 225-205 BCE. British Museum. Photo by Marie-Lan Nguyen, Wikimedia Commons.

seeking union with the divine would have seemed to be hubris (overweening pride) in traditional Greek religion.¹

6th Century BCE—Origins of Orpheus and Orphism

- At the beginning of the 6th century BCE, we begin to find in Greek culture a number of semi-mythical figures (based on people who may have actually existed) who shared certain qualities that were radically different in Greece.

These include:

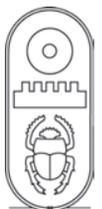
- Coming from the North
- Experts at fasting
- Ending plagues
- Predicting the future

All these qualities later show up even more strongly in Pythagoras. These figures taught the worship of a mysterious northern god—the Hyperborean Apollo (Apollo gave Orpheus his lyre)—and experienced soul travel and bi-location (being in two places at the same time). It was at this time that trade routes had opened up between Greece and lands to the north, including Ukraine and Bulgaria, where there was a deeply rooted shamanic culture. Orpheus’s experience of being dismembered is similar to what many shamans say they experience in their “dreams.” When Orpheus looks back, there are two possibilities: either he was a failed shaman or he did not really look back.²

- The earliest surviving mention of “Famous Orpheus” is by the poet Ibykos (530 BCE). He is known as a Thracian king, and a poet and singer of universal renown,



Orphic Egg sketch, from Jacob Bryant, *A New System* (London, 1775).



who can bend all nature, and even the gods to his will, with his music.

- In addition to the figure of Orpheus, evidence suggests that at about the sixth century BCE, an unknown philosopher/theologian, by legend Orpheus himself, began to rework the Greek mythic cycles surrounding the creation of the world (“theogonies”) and the myths of Dionysius in order to reform the Dionysian Mysteries into one which would emphasize personal transformation into Divinity through an ethical life and meditation on the Mysteries. Rather than overthrow the Dionysian Mysteries and other Greek myths, they were reinterpreted and transformed from within. This approach became known as Orphism and the Orphic Mysteries.
- This new approach marked a radical evolution of Greek Religion, one of divine union and purity: “To become a god was therefore incidentally as it were to attain immortality. But one of the beautiful things in Orphic religion was that the end completely overshadowed the means. Their great concern was to become divine now. That could only be attained by perfect purity. They did not so much seek purity that they might become divinely immortal; they needed immortality that they might become divinely pure. The choral songs of the Bacchae are charged with the passionate longing after purity, in the whole play there is not one



Dionysos, Ariadne, Satyrs and Maenads. Attic red-figure calyx-krater, ca. 400-375 BCE, From Thebes. Louvre Museum. Photo by Marie-Lan Nguyen, Wikimedia Commons.

word, not one hint, of the hope of immortality. Consecration, perfect purity issuing in divinity, is, it will be seen, the keynote of Orphic faith, the goal of Orphic ritual.”³

- The first of the Orphic Theogonies, the “Protogonos Theogony,” is composed ca. 500 BCE, named for the central role of the god Protogonos (later Phanes) in this cycle. His name means “first born.”
- The philosopher Eudemus also mentions another theogony “of Orpheus,” derived from the Mysteries of Bacchos and Kore.

5th Century BCE

- Bone tablets in Olbia (a Greek colony on the Black Sea) are carved with Orphic inscriptions: “Life. Death. Life. Truth. Dionysus. Orphics.”⁴
- Onomakritos (c. 530-480 BCE), an oracle compiler of Athens may have edited the existing Orphic texts. Pausanias later attributes to him the addition of the Titan’s murder of Dionysius into the mythic cycle.
- Characteristics of Orphism emerging:
 - Principle Deities include The Great Mother, Phanes, Dionysus (in several guises).
 - Humans are made of the flesh of the murderous Titans, and the Divine Spark of Dionysus. Therefore, human souls are Divine, but trapped in flesh, and caught in the cycle of Reincarnation.
 - An ascetical, ethical way of life (including vegetarianism) and Orphic Initiations will free the soul to reunite with the Divine.
 - Orphism connected to Death and Resurrection, through Dionysus, and also association with the Eleusinian Mysteries.
 - Similarities with Pythagoreanism; but whether one influenced the other, or independent development, is unclear.

4th Century BCE

- Gold leaves with Orphic funerary inscriptions placed in graves from Thurii, Hipponium, Thessaly, and Crete, with



Orphic Gold Tablet found at Cecelia Secundina



Orpheus Petitions before Hades, 1591, illustration for Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, from *Ovid Illustrated*.

aphorisms, prayers, and instructions for the departed such as: “I am a child of Earth and starry Sky, but my race is heavenly. You yourselves know this. I am parched with thirst and am dying; but quickly grant me cold water flowing from the Lake of Memory.”⁵

- Circa 340 BCE: During the reign of Philip II of Macedon, a Greek theologian writes a commentary on the Protoponos Theogony, showing very early evidence of textual analysis and sophisticated theological discussion, previously thought not to have existed before the Neoplatonists beginning in the third century CE. The papyrus scroll was burned as part of a funeral ritual, at Derveni in Macedonia, northern Greece.

3rd–1st Centuries BCE

- “Hieronyman Theogony” (third century) composed, harmonizing Orphic themes from the Protoponos Theogony with Stoicism and Hellenistic thought, showing Water to be the original element.
- The “Testament of Orpheus” (third-first centuries BCE), a Greek poem probably from the Jewish community in Alexandria,



Orpheus in a Roman Era Mosaic panel in Jerusalem.

makes Orpheus a disciple of Moses, who would eventually recant his paganism and adhere to the Mosaic God on his deathbed. This would be used by Jewish and Christian apologists in later years.

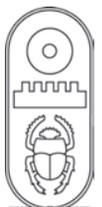
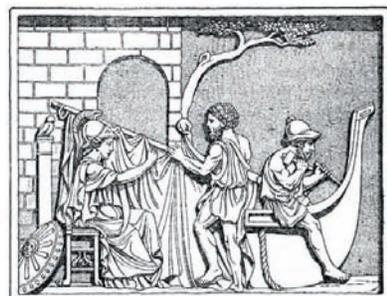
1st Century BCE–1st Century CE

- The classic version of the Myth of Orpheus and Eurydice was written by Virgil in his *Georgics* (29 BCE). In this now familiar story Eurydice is pursued by Aristeus, and is killed while fleeing him. Orpheus journeys to Hades to beg for her release. His art is so touching that permission is given, so long as he does not look back at her until they are out of Hades. At the last moment, he doubts, and turns to see her fade from his grasp.
- Ovid’s version of Orpheus and Eurydice is published in his *Metamorphoses* (8 CE).

2nd– 6th Centuries CE

- Pausanias (second century CE) says of Orpheus: “In my opinion Orpheus excelled his predecessors in the beauty of his verse, and reached a high degree of power because he was believed to have discovered mysteries, purification from sins, cures of diseases and means of averting divine wrath.”⁶

Building the Argo for the Voyage to the Golden Fleece. From the J. Hatzigeorgiou Collection.



- The *Orphic Hymns*, a cycle of eighty-seven short hymns were composed, probably in the late third century,⁷ and are the most complete Orphica that have survived to the modern day.
- An Orphic version of the story of Jason and the Argonauts was written by an unknown Neoplatonic author between the fourth and sixth centuries CE. Another version had been written by Apollonius of Rhodes in the third Century.⁸ It is Orpheus's music that saves the sailors from the Sirens, and the poem contains hints of the Orphic Theogonies.
- Neoplatonists continue to rework older Orphic themes, including the composition of the Rhapsodic Theogony from earlier materials, probably in the fifth century CE: "Zeus became first, Zeus of the bright lightening last. Zeus is head, Zeus middle, and from Zeus all things have their being. Zeus became male. Zeus was an immortal maiden. Zeus is foundation of earth and starry heaven. Zeus is king, and himself first Father of All."⁹
- Images of Orpheus appear in Christian burial art in tombs and catacombs, and even an image of Orpheus crucified survived from the third-fourth centuries CE. Orpheus and Christ symbolism blend during this period, as the good shepherd with a lyre, especially in amulets.
- Early Byzantine Psalters begin to conflate Orpheus and David the King.¹⁰
- Proclus, a fifth-century Neoplatonist, proclaims, "All the Greek's theology is the offspring of the Orphic mystical doctrine."¹¹



Sketch of "Bacchic Orpheus" Crucified (third-fourth centuries CE). Formerly in the Pergamum Museum (Berlin), lost or destroyed in World War II.

- Boethius (480-525 CE) uses Orpheus as a major example in his *Consolation of Philosophy*, as one who, on the path to Enlightenment, looks back, and loses all he has gained. This would prove to be an important interpretation of the myth carried into the Western Middle Ages: "These fables teach every one that would flee from the darkness of hell and come to the light of the True Goodness not to look towards old sins, so as again to commit them as fully they once did. For whosoever with entire will turneth the mind back to the sins left behind, and then doeth them and taketh full pleasure in them, and never after thinketh of forsaking them, that one shall lose all former goodness, unless there be repentance."¹² Humans are destined to the Stars (heaven), reminiscent of the admonitions of the fourth century BCE Funerary Gold Leaves.



Orpheus/David from an illustration for a homily "On the Sacred Light," by Bishop Gregory the Theologian (Nazianzen), fourth century CE.

Western Middle Ages

- Western Medieval commentators continue to work with the Orpheus Myth, including:
 - Remigius of Auxerre (tenth century);
 - Notker Labeo (eleventh century);
 - Arnulf of Orléans (twelfth century);
 - John of Garland (thirteenth century);
 - Giovanni del Virgilio (ca. 1325)
- William of Conches a superb scholar of the twelfth-century School of Chartres, where there was an upsurge of interest in Greek Philosophy at the time, studied all of the ancient accounts he could find of Orpheus, and concluded: ". . . the

Woodcut of Eurydice at the Gates of Hell, from *Ovide Moralisé* (thirteenth-fourteenth centuries).



Allegory of Orpheus . . . proves that as long as the attention is occupied with temporal things, one can neither know or delight in the highest good.”¹³ William’s use of myths as “integumentum” or a “covering” which points to higher levels of meaning, mirrors the Victorine school of scriptural interpretation.

- Nicholas Trivet (fourteenth century) concentrates on the reconciliation of Wisdom and Eloquence embodied in Orpheus.
- Peter of Paris, ca. 1309, begins the process of the movement away from the ancient sources and the transformation of the myth into a Medieval Romance.
- By the time of the anonymous Franciscan commentator in *Ovide Moralisé* (late thirteenth–early fourteenth centuries), the story is thoroughly Christianized in a moralistic bent, and a happy, spiritual ending is created.¹⁴
- Dante (1265-1321) uses the traditional four levels of meaning, echoing many medieval commentators on Ovid in his *Convivio* (1294-1307), in discussing Orpheus: “The second [sense] is called allegorical, and this is disguised under the cloak of . . . stories, and is a truth hidden under a beautiful fiction. Thus Ovid says that Orpheus with his lyre made beasts tame, and trees and stones move towards himself; that is to say, that the wise man by the instrument

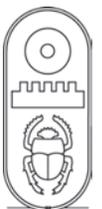
of his voice makes cruel hearts grow mild and humble, and those who have not the life of Science and of Art move to his will, while they who have no rational life are as it were like stones.”¹⁵

- Several late medieval courtly romances use the Orpheus story. These begin to give psychological depth to the characters, and draw on both the ancient texts and the medieval commentators, emphasizing the drama of the situation. Eurydice’s honor is reestablished. Only two full romances survive intact:

- *Sir Orfeo* (thirteenth–fourteenth centuries) Middle-English narrative poem blends the story of Orpheus with Celtic myth and folklore, having Orpheus’s wife abducted by the King of Faeries: “Sir Orfeo was a king of old / in England lordship high did hold; / valor he had and hardihood, / a courteous king whose gifts were good.”¹⁶
- Robert Henryson’s (1430-1506) *Orpheus and Eurydice*.

RENAISSANCE TO ENLIGHTENMENT

- **1423:** *Orphic Hymns* brought from Constantinople by Giovanni Aurispa. Giovanni Aurispa was an Italian historian who traveled to Constantinople in search of ancient Greek texts. In 1423, Aurispa arrived in Venice with 238 volumes saved from the warfare in Constantinople, including Plato, Sophocles, Aeschylus, Xenophon, and Plutarch. Scholars theorize that the *Orphic Hymns* were included in this collection. Forty years later Marsilio Ficino would translate them into Latin.¹⁷
- **1462:** Marsilio Ficino translates the *Orphic Hymns*. Ficino, nicknamed the “Second Orpheus,” translated the *Orphic Hymns* and performed them on a lyre as a form of spiritual healing (what we would call *music therapy* today). Much like Orpheus, Ficino was an inspired mystic, poet, musician, and theologian. He revived Neoplatonic philosophy and was the first to translate Plato and the *Corpus Hermeticum* into Latin,





The Platonic Academy of Florence: (L-r): Marsilio Ficino, Cristoforo Landino, Angelo Poliziano, Gentile de' Beccchi. Detail from a fresco *Zachariah in the Temple* 1486-1490, by Domenico Ghirlandaio, in Santa Maria Novella, Cappella Tornabuoni, Florence, Italy.

providing the philosophical and mystical foundation for the artistic and intellectual breakthroughs of the Renaissance.¹⁸

- **1474:** Poliziano's *Orfeo*, performed at Carnival with stage design by Leonardo da Vinci. Angelo Poliziano was an Italian humanist and poet in the middle of the fifteenth century. He spent most of his life in Florence, the center of Italian humanism, working for the Medici family. *Fabula di Orfeo*, one of the earliest operas, was written in several verse forms and was probably intended to be half-sung, and half-spoken. As architect and engineer, Leonardo da Vinci created elaborate stage sets and designs for plays and spectacles. One of the performances he designed was for Poliziano's rendition of *Orfeo* in Milan. The set included a mountain that opens to a cave and a contraption to allow Pluto to rise from under the stage. In addition to his many talents in the arts and science, Da Vinci was a musician and played the lyre. In Florence, he was exposed to the revival of Greek and Neoplatonic philosophy driven by Marsilio Ficino and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola.¹⁹

- **1600:** Jacopo Peri's opera *Euridice*. *Euridice* was performed at the wedding of Maria de Medici and Henry IV, and is the first opera whose music survives to this day. The name *Eurydice* means "wide-justice" or "wide-ruling," making her a suitable model for performance at the wedding of a future queen of France who was born in Florence.

Orpheus, the first great poet, is present at the birth of the new art form of opera and has inspired over sixty operatic works. In Peri's version, Eurydice and Orpheus are reunited.²⁰

- **1607:** Claudio Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo*. Considered the first popular opera, Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* is an enduring work and performed to this day. While its first performances were for small, elite crowds, *L'Orfeo* was soon performed outside of Mantua, making it the first opera to be performed in several cities. Never before had drama and music been performed on such a large scale. *L'Orfeo* set the standard for what audiences would expect in future operas: large instrumentation, emotional drama, and a large-scale production.²¹

- **1762:** Christoph Willibald Gluck's opera *Orfeo ed Euridice*. Gluck composed this opera for the emperor of Austria as courtly entertainment in Vienna. Court officials interpreted Gluck's happy ending as a good omen for the emperor's well being. It celebrates the power of love and virtue in honor of the ruler. Gluck sets a new direction for opera, avoiding the virtuosic vocal display of the day in favor of simple, affecting music that is striking in its natural emotion and Classical era elegance. Gluck's operatic reforms, beginning with *Orfeo ed Euridice*, have exercised significant influence throughout the history of opera and heavily influenced the popular works of Mozart, Wagner, and Weber. In both the Italian and French versions, Orfeo's lyre is represented by the harp, and it was this use of the instrument in 1774 that is usually thought of as introducing the harp to French orchestras. In Jean Cocteau's film *Orphée*, Gluck's music is broadcast over the radio in the car that transports Orpheus to the underworld.²²

19TH & 20TH CENTURIES

- **1858:** Jacques Offenbach's satiric operetta, *Orpheus in the Underworld*. Offenbach's operetta is an irreverent parody and satire that culminated in the risqué *galop infernal* that formed the model for what became the "can-can." It shocked some in the audience at its premiere. Other targets of satire, as

would become typical in Offenbach's burlesques, are the performances of classical drama and the scandals in society and politics of the French Second Empire.²³

- **1865:** Gustave Moreau's painting *Orpheus* and the beginnings of French Symbolist art. "How admirable is that art which, under a material envelope, mirror of physical beauty, reflects also the movements of the soul, of the spirit, of the heart, and the imagination, and responds to those divine necessities felt by humanity throughout the ages."²⁴

Moreau was an early representative of what came to be known as the Symbolist art movement, which encompassed painting, poetry, and literature. For the Symbolist, the inner vision of reality was the prime source of truth, beauty, and inspiration. While inspired by traditional classical subjects of Greek myth, including Orpheus, the Argonauts, and the Odyssey, artists such as Moreau transform them into strikingly original visions taken from the depths of their being. Moreau painted deeply personal retellings of the Orpheus myth, including the discovery of his singing; oracular head and lyre on the isle of Lesbos; his lamentation at the tomb of Eurydice; his death; and his gifts of art, poetry, and music.

One of his most fascinating works is a ten-panel polyptych in the Musée de Gustave Moreau in Paris, entitled *The Life of Humanity*, in which he integrates the three ages of humans (Golden/Silver/Iron) with



Orpheus,
Gustave Moreau, 1865.

Greek, Judaic, and Christian themes. The work can be viewed as an altar, with the first set of three paintings representing three phases each of the Golden Age of Adam/Paradise, the Silver Age of Orpheus, and the Iron Age of Cain. In *Against the Grain*, author Joris-Karl Huysmans described Moreau as ". . . the mystic, the Pagan, the man of genius who could live so remote from the outside world as to behold, here and now in Paris, the splendid, cruel visions, the magic apotheoses of other ages."²⁵

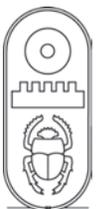
Moreau's work greatly inspired Joséphin Péladan, who invited him to participate in the first [Salons de la Rose+Croix](#) of Paris in 1892. Although Moreau declined, his students and followers submitted works that explored dreams, myth, lyricism, poetry, and mysticism. His work embodies the essence of the [Symbolist](#) movement that would embrace a diverse set of inward-seeking artists such as Odilon Redon, Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, Paul Gauguin, Gustav Klimt, and Edvard Munch, as well as poets and writers such as Paul Verlaine, Arthur Rimbaud, Stéphane Mallarmé, Edgar Allen Poe, and Paul Valéry.²⁶

"In this art, scenes from nature, human activities, and all other real world phenomena will not be described for their own sake; here, they are perceptible surfaces created to represent their esoteric affinities with the primordial Ideals."²⁷

- [Orpheum Theaters](#) open throughout North America—first as live theaters, and later as movie houses. Today, many continue to promote the arts in testimony to Orpheus's enduring power.

- **1911: Orphism Art Movement:** "This is the voice that came from light which Hermes Trismegistus cites in his *Pymander*."²⁸

Orphism as an art movement introduced a feeling of poetry, warmth, and abstraction to the serious and strict approach to cubism practiced by Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso. Orphism centered around a group of fin de siècle Parisian poets and artists, including Francis Picabia, Robert Delaunay, and



Marcel Duchamp, and influenced the Blue Rider group, including Paul Klee and Vasili Kandinski.

Guillaume Apollinaire, the lyrical poet who gave the movement its name and defined its spirit, strongly identified with Orpheus, seeing in him a symbol of purity, a spiritual voice of light, the artist with divine character, and a revealer of mystery in life. He described Orphism as a pure art expressing sublime meaning. The movement also aimed to express the ideals of Simultaneism—the existence of an infinitude of interrelated states of being which was expressed through innovative use of color.²⁹

Apollinaire published one of the finest twentieth century illustrated books, *The Bestiary: or the Parade of Orpheus*, a collection of whimsical poems accompanied by bold woodcut engravings in which Orpheus introduces the birds, insects, and fish of a curious bestiary. A cloaked Orpheus with lyre in hand opens the collection, shown with Egyptian obelisk and pyramid in the background. (See page 36.) Once again, Orpheus is present at the beginning of an influential art movement that would later inspire surrealist, dada, abstract, and modern art.

• **1922:** Rainer Maria Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus*. "Although we miss him, let the rose bloom every year for him. He's Orpheus, and his metamorphosis is everywhere Once and for all, it's Orpheus when there's song."³⁰

In this collection of fifty-five sonnets, Rilke searches, remembers, and accepts Orpheus as the source of spiritual guidance and revealer of the transcendent natural divinity present in all things. Profoundly touched by the death of a young girl attracted to dance



Orpheum Theater, Sioux Falls, SD. built in 1913. Photo © Sioux Falls Arena-Orpheum Theater.

and music, Rilke composed the first book of twenty-six sonnets in a single flash of inspiration without changing a single word. In the sonnets, themes of grief, death, art, and transcendence are encountered through meta-physical poetry.

In a separate work, *Requiem for a Friend*, Rilke offers a fresh interpretation of the Orpheus myth in which his return-
ing gaze on Eurydice is

seen as an act of salvation that frees Eurydice to return to the underworld where she can bring spring to eternity. Rilke was a restless traveler, ever devoted to his art. In his travels he visited Egypt, Russia, Switzerland, and Paris. While in Rome, Rilke composed three narrative poems, one of which was titled "Orpheus, Eurydice, and Hermes":

"Be ahead of all leaving as though it were behind you Know conditions of nonbeing, the endless ground of your vibration down in you: one day you'll be fully fulfilled."³¹

• **1950:** Jean Cocteau's film *Orphée*. Cocteau was one of the most versatile twentieth century artists who embodied the spirit of Orpheus in his films, plays, novels, poetry, drawings, ballets, and many artistic endeavors. In his play and film,



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

Orphée (part of his [Orphic Trilogy](#)), Cocteau presents Orpheus as a French poet who falls in love with Death/Persephone of the Underworld in his quest for artistic transcendence. The film updates the Orpheus myth in many witty and surreal ways, using clever cinematic techniques and dreamlike special effects. Orpheus receives his inspired poetry over the radio of a car that transports him between earth and the underworld. Mirrors represent the doorway between worlds. In one fascinating scene, Orpheus passes his hand through a mirror that turned to liquid, allowing him to pass through it. In reality, filming a gloved hand dipping into a vat of mercury created the effect.

“The closer you get to a mystery, the more important it is to be realistic. Radios in cars, coded messages, shortwave signals and power cuts are all familiar to everybody and allow me to keep my feet on the ground.”³²

For Cocteau, the artist seeks to transcend life and death through art, and will pay any price to gain it. In a striking variation from the traditional myth, Orpheus abandons Eurydice in favor of his artistic muse who reigns in the underworld. In Cocteau’s own words, the key theme of *Orphée* concerns “The successive deaths through which a poet must pass before he becomes, in that admirable line from Mallarmé, ‘changed into himself at last by eternity.’” For Cocteau, poetry was a quality essential to every act of creativity, indeed without it, no such acts could truly be called Art. Throughout his life he elevated and exalted this basic ideal until it became an esoteric and spiritual entity in itself.

- **1957:** Tennessee Williams’s play, *Orpheus Descending*, also translated to film in *The Fugitive Kind*, starring Marlon Brando and directed by Sidney Lumet.

The play is a modern Southern Gothic retelling of

the ancient Greek Orpheus legend and deals with the power of passion, art, and imagination to revitalize and give new meaning to life. The story is set in a dry goods store in a small Southern town marked by conformity. Into this scene steps Val, a young man with a guitar, a snakeskin jacket, and a questionable past. He gets a job in the dry goods store run by a middle-aged woman named Lady, whose elderly husband is dying. She finds herself attracted to Val and to the possibility of new life he seems to offer. Val, representing Orpheus, symbolizes the forces of energy and eros, which have the power to create life anew. Val goes by the nickname “Snakeskin,” from the snakeskin jacket he wears.

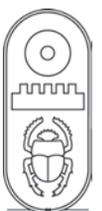
“He played so good that he broke the stone-cold heart of a Texas governor and won himself a pardon out of jail. His name is written in the stars.”³³

- **1959:** Marcel Camus’ film, *Black Orpheus*, retells the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice in a context of 1950s Rio de Janeiro during Carnival, and features the first appearance of Bossa Nova classics from Antonio Carlos Jobim.³⁴ Carnival dancing and music tell the story in a warm, personal, manner filled with both tragedy and humor. It is an interesting coincidence that one of the meanings of the word *Carnival* is “farewell to meat,” and precedes the period of time during which many Christians fast and give up eating meat, echoing the vegetarian practice of ancient Orphics.

Some [highlights of the film](#) include Orpheus singing to the children and animals. [It is Orpheus’s song that makes the sun rise each day.](#) His guitar is inscribed, “Orpheus is its master,” and is given to each new Orpheus when the previous one dies. The film’s portrayal of his meeting and falling in love with Eurydice



Civic Statue of Jean Cocteau in Villefranche-sur-Mer. Photo by Berthold Werner, Wikimedia Commons.



is one of the most moving additions to the story. A number of striking images are presented in the final scenes, including Death chasing Eurydice through train tunnels of glowing red light, and the presence of shamanic tradition shown in the underworld. In *Black Orpheus*, Orpheus is engaged to another woman named Mira (a Maenad) and must hide his love of Eurydice. In the end she kills Orpheus in anger by throwing a stone at him that knocks him over a cliff.

• **1962:** *The Derveni Papyrus* from ca. 340 BCE is discovered at a tomb near Thessloniki: it is the oldest Greek literary papyrus yet found. The Derveni Papyrus, found in Derveni, Macedonia, in 1962, contains a philosophical treatise that is an allegorical commentary on an Orphic poem in hexameters, a theogony concerning the birth of the gods. It was burned on the Macedonian noble's pyre during the reign of Philip II, making it Europe's oldest surviving manuscript deciphered to date.³⁵

Endnotes

¹ For example, see Jane Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903), 476: "Before passing to these it may be well to emphasize one point—the salient contrast that this new religious principle, this belief in the possibility of attaining divine life, presented to the orthodox Greek faith. The old orthodox anthropomorphic religion of Greece made the gods in man's image, but, having made them, kept them aloof, distinct. It never stated in doctrine, it never implied in ritual, that man could become god. Nay more, against any such aspiration it raised again and again a passionate protest. To seek to become even like the gods was to the Greek the sin most certain to call down divine vengeance, it was 'Insolence.'"

² David Ulansey, Ph.D. (professor in the Philosophy, Cosmology, and Consciousness Program at California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS), San Francisco), in discussion with Julie Scott, 2003, in Greece. For the reference to Orpheus not looking back, see Ralph Abraham, "Orpheus Today," *Rosicrucian Digest* Vol. 87, No. 1 (2008), 42-47.

³ Jane Harrison, *Prolegomena*, 477.

⁴ Alexander Fol, *The Thracian Dionysos: Invocation and Faith* (Sophia: New Bulgarian University, 2002), 200 ff.

⁵ Gold Tablet (2:6-9) from Petelia (Strongoli), in Fritz Graf and Sarah Iles Johnston, *Ritual Texts for the Afterlife* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 7.

⁶ Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 9. 39. 1-7, W.H.S Jones, trans., (London: W. Heinemann; New York: G. P. Putnam's sons, 1918-35).

⁷ Apostolos Athanassakis, *The Orphic Hymns* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1977), viii. Thomas Taylor version (1792) available at <http://www.sacred-texts.com/cl/hool/index.htm>.

⁸ Apollonius Rhodius, *The Argonautica*, translated by R.C. Seaton (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1912): <http://ia331324.us.archive.org/2/items/theargonautica00830gut/1argn10.txt>.

⁹ Excerpt 168 from the *Fragments of the Rhapsodic Theogony* (from Porphyry and others), translated and edited by W.K.C. Guthrie, *Orpheus and Greek Religion* (London: Methuen & Company, 1934), 140.

¹⁰ John Block Friedman, *Orpheus in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), 147.

¹¹ Proclus, *Theologia Platonica*, i, 6 (Testamenta. 250 in Otto Kern, ed., *Orphicorum Fragmenta* [Berlin: Weidmann, 1922 (1963)]).

¹² Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy* Book 3 Meter 12 in *King Alfred's Version of the Consolations of Boethius*, Walter John Sedgfield, trans., (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1900), http://oll.libertyfund.org/index.php?option=com_staticxt&staticfile=show.php%3Ftitle=1178&layout=html#chapter_78802.

¹³ William of Conches, *Commentary on the Consolation of Philosophy*. Cited and translated in Friedman, *Orpheus in the Middle Ages*, 105.

¹⁴ Discussion in this section indebted to Friedman, *Orpheus in the Middle Ages*, 86-145.

¹⁵ Dante, *Convivio II*, 1, William W. Jackson, trans., Dante's *Convivio* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1909), 73. Cited in Friedman, *Orpheus in the Middle Ages*, 88.

¹⁶ Sir Orfeo l. 25-28, J.R.R. Tolkien, trans., *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl, and Sir Orfeo* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1980), 170.

¹⁷ D.P. Walker, "Orpheus the Theologian and Renaissance Platonists" in *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, Vol. 16, No. 1/2. (1953):100-120.

¹⁸ Angela Voss, "Marsilio Ficino, the Second Orpheus" in *Music as Medicine: the History of Music Therapy since Antiquity*, edited by Peregrine Horden (Vermont: Ashgate, 1988).

¹⁹ F.W. Sternfield, *The Birth of Opera* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Gustave Moreau, cited in Genevieve Lacambre, *Gustave Moreau: Magic and Symbols* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1999).

²⁵ Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against the Grain* (New York: Dover Publications, 1969).

²⁶ Jean Moréas, "Le Manifeste du Symbolisme," *Le Figaro*, Sept 18, 1886, cited in Edward Lucie-Smith, *Symbolist Art* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 1972).

²⁷ F.W. Sternfield, *The Birth of Opera*.

²⁸ Guillaume Apollinaire, *Le Bestiaire ou Cortège D'Orphée* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1977).

²⁹ Judith E. Bernstock, *Under the Spell of Orpheus: The Persistence of a Myth in Twentieth-Century Art* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991).

³⁰ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Sonnets to Orpheus*, Translated by Willis Barnstone (Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 2004).

³¹ Ibid.

³² Francis Steegmuller, *Cocteau* (Boston: David R. Godine, 1986).

³³ *The Fugitive Kind*, MGM, 1959.

³⁴ *Black Orpheus*, Criterion Collection, 1959.

³⁵ Gabor Betegh, *The Derveni Papyrus: Cosmology, Theology and Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

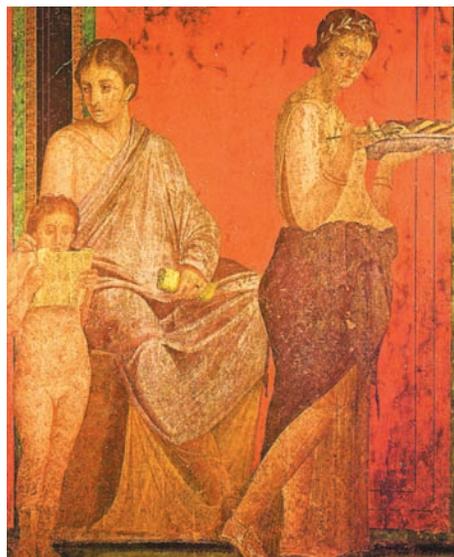
THE MYSTIC PHILOSOPHY OF ORPHEUS

Imperator Ralph M. Lewis, F.R.C.

This article is adapted from the series "The Mystic Philosophy of Plotinus," by Ralph M. Lewis, originally published in the Rosicrucian Digest in 1949. This particular piece was excerpted from Part 2 of that series, entitled "Early Roots of Current Truths," published in the June 1949 issue, pages 180-183. Former Imperator Lewis discusses the importance of the doctrines associated with Orpheus, and traces the enormous influence of Orphic philosophy from ancient Greece to third century CE Alexandria and Christianity.

The most influential of all the mystery schools at this period was the Orphic. Its peregrine initiators were the first missionaries in the pre-Christian world. They journeyed from island to island, community to community, in the Hellenic world, extolling the advantages of initiation into the Orphic mysteries and initiating candidates. Wherever they went, they established branches of the ever-expanding school. It is related that the founder of the Orphic mysteries was Orpheus, a partly legendary and partly historical character. It is said that he lived, before the Trojan War, in Thrace. Thrace was that section of ancient Greece that now corresponds to Northeast Macedonia.

Orpheus was a priest of the Dionysiac mysteries, also one of the early mystery schools of Greece. He was held to be a magician and a theologian, the latter in the sense of an exponent of the life of the gods. Most of all, he was famed as a great musician. It is said that he charmed everyone with the music of his lyre. There is a report that he journeyed into Hades. Hades was not necessarily hell, as we think of it today, but rather another world, another plane of existence, in which humans dwelt, sometimes in torment and at other times in a state of paradise. Orpheus went to Hades in search of his sweetheart and while in Hades his beautiful music, we are told, won for him her release.

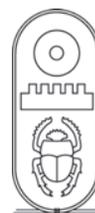


The Dionysiac Mysteries: Dionysus at the side of his mother Semele, attended by a woman with sacred cakes. [Villa of the Mysteries, Pompeii.](#)

Orpheus's adventures in Hades became the basis of the Orphic doctrines. Each of his experiences was interpreted from a mystical point of view. The Orphic doctrines contended that the human soul is of divine origin, that it lives for thousands of years in the body and forever out of the body. Thus the Orphic doctrines expounded immortality. The soul, however, is of a mixed nature. Aside from its divine content, there clings to it an evil aspect. The main object of human existence, therefore, is to rid the soul of its evil contamination. The body is the prison, the tomb of the soul, and the soul is imprisoned within it.

Purity of Living

Only purity of living cleanses humans of sin and begins the lessening of that evil aspect of the soul. In fact, only purification will finally release the soul from its imprisonment in the mortal body. This final release cannot be accomplished in just one lifetime. There must be several incarnations until the soul is eventually free from sin. After any one exemplary life, the soul enters Hades. There it resides for a thousand years of joy



and then it resurrects to once again enter a mortal body.

There must be *triple* good lives here and on the other side before final release of the soul, so the Orphic doctrines expound. Each life must purge the soul of its titan or evil aspect. When the three lives of purity here and in Hades have been lived, then the soul resides in eternal happiness, in a state of paradise. The initiatory rite, to which candidates were obliged to submit, set forth the obligations that they must take. It also defined the kind of life they must live on earth. It admonished candidates, for example, not to eat meat, to thereafter clothe themselves in white garments and be chaste in their conduct. These initiations, sometimes held in grottoes, sometimes out in the open when the moon was full, dramatically depict for the tyro the journey into Hades and what he or she must expect. Candidates must display courage; they must display temperance.

The guidance of the neophyte's life was outlined for her or him. This guidance was given in allegorical terms by one preceptor. Another preceptor would explain the often-ambiguous terms, giving their full and rich esoteric meaning. The allegorical terms were meaningless to the outer, profane world, sounding like so much gibberish. Whenever the tyros, the neophytes, after their initiation, were asked about the wisdom, they would truthfully relate that they had been told thus and thus, and they would give just the allegorical terms, which were meaningless to others, but to which they, the candidates, possessed the inner key.

Pythagoras, it has been held, was the greatest of the converts to the Orphic mysteries. In his writings, he gives us some of this allegorical guidance. A few of the sayings we shall set forth, and likewise give the esoteric interpretations of them.

Esoteric Interpretations of Allegorical Guidance:

- “Pass not over a balance” refers to justice and equality.

- “Wear not a ring” is an admonishment not to bind one's soul about with a chain of ignorance, as the finger is bound with a ring.
- “Lay not hold of everyone readily with the right hand,” you will understand to mean: try and prove everyone before you admit him or her to your society as a friend and companion.
- “Eat not the heart,” you will construe as: rend not asunder the social bond that unites your society, by unnecessary disputes and useless differences.
- “Sleep not at noon” is an admonishment to shut not your eyes against the Light of Knowledge at a time when its hidden stores are more clearly displayed before you.

Soul Is Immortal

The Orphic doctrines won an immortal place in philosophy beginning with Socrates. According to Socrates, as related to us in the *Dialogues of Plato*, the soul is immortal. It has descended into humans from its high estate, but in the mortal it is transient. Eventually, it returns to its infinite source, nature. In nature the soul is akin to the first wisdom of nature. Therefore, the soul has innate wisdom or the wisdom of nature. The soul is the high good and its knowledge is the only true knowledge. The knowledge of the world of sensation, the knowledge received through our senses, is illusory and false. It becomes incumbent on us to awaken the knowledge of the soul, to recollect that which is within us. All humans are thus made equal, because the wisdom of the soul is alike in all mortals, regardless of their station in life or their birth.

In the *Phaedo*, Socrates tells Simmias that the purification is necessary for the separation of the soul from the body. This, of course, is a direct example of the Orphic doctrines. Socrates expounds that every philosopher seeks death instead of fearing it, but it is not the death that the average person knows about. It is the release of the

soul, it is the allowing of the soul to aspire to higher things, it is the liberation of the soul from those physical joys and pains that nail it to the body.

Plato enlarged upon the concepts of his master. To him the conscious life is the ordeal which the soul must experience before it can be released from its confinement in mortal form. He expounded that the soul is the only reality and is unchanging. Furthermore, the knowledge of the soul is the only true knowledge. The soul has inherent within it certain universals, certain fundamental ideas which all humans share alike, regardless of their station in life. Such ideas are the ideas of beauty, of love, of justice. The things of the world have no true reality; they do not actually have form until they come to participate in these universals or these ideas of the soul. In other words, things of the world must bind themselves to the soul, must find

a relationship to those inherent ideas that we have or else they are just illusory.

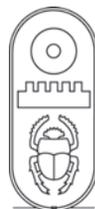
If something of the world appears to be beautiful, then that is a real form, because it is participating in that universal idea of beauty that is of the soul. In seeking the beautiful, humans are, therefore, realizing the content of the soul. They are trying to give objectification to their subjective and divine impulses. Art, music, poetry, these cause each of us to know the perfection of our soul. When we pursue these things, our consciousness is actually dwelling upon the nature of our soul. Our divine self is motivating us.

If these doctrines that we have just related seem familiar to you, it is because you have read, for example, the *Dialogues* of Plato or else you have experienced the perpetuation of some of these Orphic concepts in contemporary religion.

Θεὸς ἐγένου ἐξ ἀνθρώπου.

Through being a Mortal,
You have become God.

—Orphic Gold Tablet from Lucania



THE MYTHOLOGY OF ORPHEUS AND THE MYSTERIES

Maria E. Daniels, M.I.L., S.R.C.

Excerpted from the article “Mythology,” by Maria E. Daniels, this essay was originally published in the Rosicrucian Digest, Dec. 1969, 459-460. Adapted for contemporary readers, the article demonstrates vividly how the ancient myth of Orpheus and Eurydice was connected to the Mysteries at Eleusis, and is still very much alive with meaning for our spiritual journey today.

In order to understand the history of all people, of all great religions, of all the great cultures, it is both interesting and necessary to study their myths with their veiled meaning and the principles that inspired them. Mythology, like music, is to be felt and not to be explained. If it were possible, music would be explained and not created. But how are we to explain the unexplainable?

Nowadays, humanity tries to guess at what its distant origins have been, attempting to relive all that it has forgotten of its past. Up to this day, strange stories of this past still survive in the collective consciousness of people. They are what we call myths, or legends. Suddenly, however, an archeological discovery, the unearthing of a historic



Orpheus and His Lyre in Hades, Virgil Solis (1563), illustration for Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, from *Ovid Illustrated*.

object, or the deciphering of an old inscription, confirm the story that was thought to be but a fable. The legend, then, takes on a new meaning and is narrated in history books as an incident in the early history of humanity. This is why there is so much interest in the world today concerning the study of mythology.

The Myth of Orpheus

In order to grasp what mythology is, let us turn to the myth of Orpheus. The legend tells us that Orpheus married Eurydice—the symbol of Light and Truth. Thus, Orpheus did not marry a woman made of flesh and bones, but rather a mystical ideal. One day, while Eurydice was walking on the banks of the river Peneus, near Tempe, the hunter Aristaeus saw her. The hunter, in all mythology, symbolizes confusion, the one who kills.

Thus, where confusion reigns, there is no understanding, there is no love, for whoever kills cannot love. Aristaeus pursues Eurydice, trying to force his attentions upon her, but she escapes, and treads on a snake that kills her with its sting. Orpheus cannot become accustomed to the idea of living without his Eurydice, or without Truth, as



Satyrs and Women of the Dionysiac Mysteries, Villa of the Mysteries, Pompeii.

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it were, and he resolves to fetch her from the World of the Dead.

With his beautiful singing, Orpheus persuades Charon, the boatman, to let him cross the river, from the Bank of the Living, to the Bank of the Dead. He thus begins his weird and unearthly journey into the unknown world. The beauty of his singing enchants the Great Dogs, symbols of loyalty and vigilance, which guard the door to the World of the Dead, and thus let him through. Still singing, Orpheus reaches the Goddess of the Dead. Charmed by his singing, she promises to return Eurydice to him under one condition: that he shall return to the World of the Living without once looking back, and Eurydice will follow him.

Orphic and Eleusinian Mysteries

In the mysterious science of the initiations of Dionysus, the Eleusinian Mysteries, and the Hermetic ceremonies, the various directions were associated with destinies, the functions of the human actions in time. Ahead, lay the Future, Revelation. Behind, were the Past, Sin, and Doubt. To return, or to look back, meant that the candidate was irresistible to Evil, and the renouncement to the higher powers of the spirit. The initiate who turned back was unworthy of Truth and would be restored to his or her former spiritual state; such an initiate was incapable of “knowing” and, therefore, had no right to approach Knowledge.

This was the meaning of the initiations at Eleusis. To look back was to return to the Past. It destroyed the bond of good thoughts that, unbeknownst to the candidate, were

bestowed upon the initiate. If the initiate into the mysteries of Dionysus or Eleusis lost everything by merely looking back, it was because this act signified that he or she was spiritually unable to achieve a definite conquest of Knowledge.

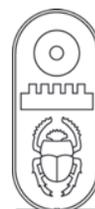
Orpheus, therefore, promises not to look back, and begins his return journey. He crosses, once again, the dark passages and forests and the gigantic mountains of the World of the Dead. Having received all that he desired, Orpheus returns in silence, because he does not feel the need to sing. In silence, however, he notices how gloomy and frightening those landscapes are, and he begins to doubt: had he not been duped? Was Eurydice really following him? He tries not to think and to will himself into believing that Eurydice is, in fact, walking behind him, and continues his return journey, for how long, no one knows, as it is always night in the World of the Dead.

Doubt grows in his mind . . . and suddenly he turns around to check whether Eurydice is, in fact, walking behind him. And lo! There she is! For one quick moment confusion prevails, and Eurydice disappears. Orpheus was not prepared to see the Light in the World of the Dead, and therefore lost her forever.

For each one of us, in life, there comes a moment when we feel the doubt of Orpheus. How often have we not thought: “How do I know that all this is worth it? Is there something afterwards? Will it not be in vain?” But we should not allow doubt to impair our judgment, for we would also lose faith in ourselves.



Members of the 1969 Rosicrucian Tour at Eleusis.



SHEDDING LIGHT ON SOME ORPHIC GODS

Stefanie Goodart, S.R.C.

Beyond the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, so well known today, is a much more complex theology of emanated deities and a detailed cosmology, which Orphism reinterpreted for the Greek world.

“Everything comes to be out of One and is resolved into One.” (Musaeus, student of Orpheus¹)

The subject of the Orphic Mysteries has consumed the majority of my research in recent years, and I have already written several articles on the subject. For this particular article I have decided against writing a general overview of the Orphic beliefs and practices and instead intend to focus on two intriguing deities who are mentioned in the Orphic myths, namely Phanes and Zagreus. These two figures are unique in that they are not typically mentioned in popular Greek mythology.² I also chose these two deities because they both belong to the line of succession that ends with Dionysos. Some scholars interpret them as previous generations in Dionysos’s family tree, while others, more familiar with metaphysical thinking, view them all as different incarnations of the same deity.

In this particular article I intend to first give readers a basic outline of the section of the Orphic theogony that involves Phanes. From there, his attributes and functions will be discussed, using numerous ancient authors as source material. We shall then move our attention to Zagreus in much the same manner: first there will be a brief retelling of the appropriate section of the myth. Following this, commentary from ancient as well as modern sources will be provided. In the final section of the article I will synthesize the information given thus far, and offer an interpretation that brings in ideas of spirituality, philosophy, and universality.



Bas-relief of Phanes (2nd Century CE),
Modena Museum, Italy.

Phanes

The Myth of Phanes:³ In the beginning, all was dark, and nothing existed but two winged serpents.⁴ They mated and produced a brilliant egg.⁵ One serpent wrapped himself around the egg and squeezed it until it broke open. Emerging from within was the winged hermaphroditic deity Phanes. Light radiated from his body that was so bright no one could see him. He had four eyes, horns, and the heads of a bull, ram, a lion, and a serpent. From the top half of the shell he created the heavens and from the bottom portion he created the earth. He mated with himself and gave birth to the goddess Nyx. He also mated with Nyx and she gave birth to Gaia and Ouranos. Phanes then began to create the physical world by assigning a place for the sun, moon, and stars.

The basic myth is believed to date from at least the end of the archaic period. Aristophanes makes reference to it in his comedy *The Birds*,⁶ first performed in 414 BCE. Although in the play the myth is altered slightly, the figure of Phanes is still clearly identifiable by his glittering golden wings and the fact that he is born from an egg.⁷

The name *Phanes* comes from the Greek *phainein* “to bring light” and *phainesthai* “to

shine.” In ancient times, some Orphics thought his name should be translated in the active voice as “the bringer of light,” while others believed it should be taken in the middle voice as “the Glittering One.”⁸ The *Rhapsodies* describes him thus: “And all the others marveled when they saw the unlooked-for light in the *aither*; so richly gleamed the body of immortal Phanes.”⁹

Phanes can be described physically as Light and metaphysically as Intellect.¹⁰ Generally, the Platonists view Phanes as representing the Sun of the Intelligible world.¹¹ Proclus says Phanes is “the first intelligible intellect,” and “unfold[s] himself into the light.”¹² Hermeas calls him the “boundary of the intelligible,” who “illuminates the intellectual Gods with intelligible light.”¹³ Phanes brings light into the darkness and order out of chaos.¹⁴ His birth is the first step taken by the Divine who is unformed and without qualities.

Phanes as a hermaphroditic being represents his role as the definitive creator god.¹⁵ He has within him “the seed of all the gods.”¹⁶ His wings and numerous heads can be simply explained as representing an extremely powerful and mind-boggling deity. It is likely that the imagery is influenced, even borrowed, from mythological figures from other ancient Mediterranean cultures.¹⁷

Phanes has many heads and eyes, but does not have a body. This symbolizes that the lower physical world has not yet been made manifest.¹⁸ Hermeas suggests that his four eyes represent that he unites the original monad with the issuing triad.¹⁹ Pythagoras believed the monad was the source of all other numbers. Three represented completeness because it had a beginning, middle, and end. The number four symbolized perfection, and its corresponding shape was the square.²⁰ Regardless of the particular interpretation, Phanes certainly is the anthropomorphic representation of the solution to the One-Many problem that so troubled the early Orphics and pre-Socratic philosophers.

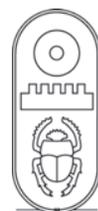
Zagreus

The Myth of Zagreus:²¹ Zeus had decided to pass his kingdom onto his son, Zagreus, even though he was just a young child. This inspired jealousy in some of the other gods, and the Titans plotted revenge against the boy. They disguised themselves by whitening their faces and brought several gifts to Zagreus: a mirror, apples, a ball, knucklebones, a pinecone, a bull-roarer, wool, puppets, and a narthex.²² They used these gifts to lure Zagreus far away from the other gods, and once out of sight, they attacked him. First they dismembered him, cutting him up into seven pieces. The pieces were boiled, then roasted.²³ Then they feasted. However, Athena came upon them and was able to save one piece, the heart, which was still beating. She quickly brought it to Zeus, who was furious at the Titans. In his anger, Zeus hurled his thunderbolts at the Titans, which immediately destroyed them. Zeus then took the heart of Zagreus and used it to restore him to life. From the soot left from the Titans, Zeus fashioned human beings, animals, and birds.

The name *Zagreus*, often translated as “great hunter,” seems to be a contraction of *za-* “very” and *-agreus* “hunter.” *Zagre*, an Ioian word, means “a pit for capturing animals.”²⁴ Perhaps the name refers to some myth of this god that has unfortunately been lost to us. It is rather ironic that here Zagreus seems to be the hunted and not the hunter!

As for his physical appearance, Zagreus has horns.²⁵ This serves to further connect Zagreus with Phanes, who you will recall is also said to have horns.²⁶

The Titans cut Zagreus up into seven pieces. Each of the seven pieces represent the seven heavenly bodies, and the heart, which we think of as the seat of the soul of the individual, represents the intellect of the World-Soul.²⁷ This World-Soul, of course, cannot be divided. Zagreus, who may be thought of as another incarnation of the earlier Phanes, is also an





Titanic Underworld, Victoria Franck-Wetsch, S.R.C.

anthropomorphic representation of the One-Many problem. He begins as one being who is then separated into many pieces, boiled, roasted, and ingested. However, from the heart, the one piece that is saved, Zeus is able to restore the body of Zagreus, thus completing the cycle from one to many back to one again. Because of this teaching, Harrison writes that Zagreus is “especially an Orphic name. Zagreus is the god of the mysteries, and his full content can only be understood in relation to Orphic rites.”²⁸

Discussion

Within the egg, Phanes represents the union (perfection) of opposites.²⁹ When the egg splits, the upper portion becomes the heavens, and the lower the earth. Some ancient writers commented that the heavenly portion was made from gold, while the earthly portion was made from silver.³⁰ These pairs of opposites associated with Phanes are continued; he himself is light, while his consort/daughter is Nyx (Night). Furthermore, together they produce two children, Gaia (Earth) and Uranus (Heaven). They represent phenomenon and noumenon respectively.³¹

The figure of Zagreus does not so much represent a unification of opposites as Phanes does, but his myth results in the synthesis of opposites. The mirror in the myth represents a false counterpart to our reality; quite literally a mirror image is the opposite of what is reflected in the mirror. Zagreus is distracted by his image,³² which here symbolizes the physical world as a reflection of the spiritual realm. Olympiodorus explained that the essence of Zagreus was assumed into all of creation by virtue of looking into the mirror and pursuing his image.³³ As Mead wrote, the myth “is a dramatic history of the wanderings of the ‘Pilgrim-Soul’.”³⁴ He must pass through “the trial of separation and fragmentation through the process of differentiation.”³⁵ This is another common theme in world mythology, and is similar to many of the later Alchemical texts. It is only through being seemingly destroyed that we come full circle to be whole. Thus we have the cycle of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis in an evolving form in the Zagreus myth.

Phanes is the source of light and intelligence for the cosmos, and Zagreus provides the soul by which to spiritualize all of creation.³⁶ Phanes begins the cycle of creation, and Zagreus puts it into eternal motion. The myth emphasizes that One becomes many and becomes One again by virtue of the divine link between the Universe, the Divine, and human beings through this eternal cycle.

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During Phanes' reign the world is created in its spiritual state. Zeus gains power a few generations later and makes the world manifest in its physical form. Zagreus, who is *handed* the throne by Zeus, is meant to achieve the synthesis of these two apparent states during his reign. However, he is unable to fulfill his duties and thus the responsibilities fall to his successors, which according to the myth, is the race of human beings.

“The souls of men, seeing their images in the mirror of Dionysus as it were, have entered into that realm in a leap downward from the Supreme: yet even they are not cut off from their origin, from the divine Intellect; it is not that they have come bringing the Intellectual Principle down in their fall; it is that though they have descended even to earth, yet their higher part holds for ever above the heavens” (Plotinus).³⁷

Endnotes

¹ As quoted in [Diogenes Laertius, *proem.* 3](#)

² In fact, one may even use the presence of the name “Phanes” or “Zagreus” as one indicator for classifying a text, etc., as “Orphic.”

³ All details taken from the *Rhapsodies* unless otherwise noted.

⁴ *Argonautica* 12 ff.

⁵ The “Cosmic Egg” is a common theme in comparative mythology. A few examples are the Chinese yin and yang emerging from an egg with the help of a creator god, and the Egyptian myth in which the bird-god Benu lays an egg on a mound, and from the egg the sun god is born. The Judeo-Christian creation myth in *Genesis* is very similar; first there is light and the heavens are separated from the earth. However, an actual egg is not present. Furthermore, the “Big Bang” theory may also be thought of as a creation myth with an egg-like “object” containing the stuff of all creation.

⁶ 690 ff. (= *Orphicorum Fragmenta*, fr. 1)

⁷ There were, of course, many different versions of this myth in ancient times, just as was commonplace for any myth popular among people who for the most part passed stories on by oral tradition.

⁸ Walter Wili, “The Orphic Mysteries and the Greek Spirit,” *The Mysteries: Papers from the Eranos Yearbooks* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 71.

⁹ As quoted in W.K.C. Guthrie, *Orpheus and Greek Religion: A Study of the Orphic Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), 95.

¹⁰ Isaac Preston Cory, *Metaphysical Inquiry into the Method, Objects, and Result of Ancient and Modern Philosophy* (London: William Pickering, 1833), 30.

¹¹ William Smith, William Wayte, and G.E. Marindin, eds., *A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities* (London: John Murray, 1891), 301.

¹² Thomas Taylor, trans., *The Commentaries of Proclus on the Timaeus of Plato, in Five Books; Containing a Treasury of Pythagoric and Platonic Physiology, Vol. 1* (London: by the author, 1820), 361.

¹³ As quoted in Thomas Taylor, *The Mystical Hymns of Orpheus* (London: Bertram Dobell, 1896), 14-15.

¹⁴ Michael Jordan, *Encyclopedia of Gods* (New York: Facts on File, 1993), 204.

¹⁵ This hermaphroditic quality is later echoed in popular Greek mythology in epithets of Dionysos such as Androgynos (“androgynous”), Arsenothelys (“man-womanly”), Enorches (“betesticled”), Gynnis (“womanly”), and Pseudanor (“false man”).

¹⁶ Damascius, as quoted in Andrew Lang, *Myth, Ritual, and Religion* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1899), 299.

¹⁷ Two interesting articles on this topic are: M.L. West, “Graeco-Oriental Orphism in the 3rd cent. BC,” *Assimilation et résistance à la culture Gréco-romaine dans le monde ancien: Travaux du VIth*

Congrès International d'Etudes Classiques (Paris, 1976), 221-226; and M.J. Edwards, “Gnostic Eros and Orphic Themes,” *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 88 (1991): 25-40.

¹⁸ Manly P. Hall, *Lectures on Ancient Philosophy and Introduction to the Study and Application of Rational Procedure* (Los Angeles: Hall, 1929), 203.

¹⁹ As cited in George Stanley Faber, *The Origin of Pagan Idolatry Ascertained from Historical Testimony and Circumstantial Evidence*. Vol. 1 (London: F. and C. Rivingtons, 1816), 262.

²⁰ David Livingstone, *The Dying God: The Hidden History of Western Civilization*. (Lincoln: iUniverse, 2002), 135.

²¹ All details taken from the *Rhapsodies* unless otherwise noted.

²² Proclus on Hesiod's *Works and Days*, 52.

²³ This is the opposite of how meat was cooked during a religious sacrifice in ancient Greece. The myth intends to highlight the perversion of the Titans' actions.

²⁴ Carl Kerényi, *Dionysos: Archetypal Image of Indestructible Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 82.

²⁵ Nonnus. *Dionysiaca* 6.155 ff: Dionysos's traditional “totem” animal in popular Greek mythology is the bull or goat. Nonnus said that Zagreus changed himself into many forms in order to escape the Titans, including a bull. See James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1971), 451.

²⁶ Furthermore, Persephone, who is the mother of Zagreus in the *Rhapsodies*, also has horns, two faces, and four eyes.

²⁷ Plotinus, as summarized in Luc Brisson, *How Philosophers Saved Myths: Allegorical Interpretation and Classical Mythology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 77.

²⁸ Jane Ellen Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903), 481.

²⁹ Christopher Bamford et al., *Homage to Pythagoras: Rediscovering Sacred Science* (New York: Steiner Books, 1994), 22.

³⁰ Hall, *Lectures on Ancient Philosophy*, 203.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 204.

³² Narcissus is similarly distracted by his reflection in the pond, refusing to leave the site, and is changed into the flower.

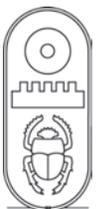
³³ Olympiodorus's commentary on the *Phaedo* of Plato, as quoted in Henry Cornelius Agrippa, *Three Books of Occult Philosophy* (St. Paul: Llewellyn 1993), 428.

³⁴ G.R.S. Mead, *The Orphic Pantheon* (Edmonds: The Alexandrian Press, 1984), 22.

³⁵ Marcel Detienne, *The Writing of Orpheus: Greek Myth in Cultural Context* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 157.

³⁶ Edwin O. James, *Creation and Cosmology: A Historical and Comparative Inquiry* (Leiden: Brill, 1969), 75. tt

³⁷ Plotinus, *The Enneads*, 4:3, 12.



ORPHEUS REMEMBERED: THE REDISCOVERY OF ORPHEUS DURING THE RENAISSANCE

Alexander J. Broquet, F.R.C.

The character of Orpheus continues to inspire spirituality and the arts throughout Western history. In his essay, *Frater Broquet* introduces us to ways in which the Orphic tradition was transmuted from its ancient origins to the fifteenth-century Renaissance.

“The genuine poet is always a priest”

—Novalis

During the period of Western history known as the Renaissance, philosophers, poets, musicians, and intellectuals brought back to life the traditions of ancient Greece. This period of intellectual and artistic rebirth was enriched by the wealth of ancient texts that resurfaced after the collapse of Constantinople in 1453. Greek texts that were lost or fragmentary were rediscovered and translated, being made available to Europe for the first time in nearly a thousand years. The impact of these texts on the West resounds deeply to this day.

The rediscovery of the mythic figure of Orpheus during the Renaissance is a vivid example of how the intellectual and artistic

archaeology of this time gave birth to new forms of expression in the arts, new insights into the teachings of ancient philosophers, and new approaches for integrating ancient wisdom with the religions of the time.

Orpheus Born: Ancient Greece

The ancient Greek sources of the myth focus on Orpheus as a mystic singer and theologian who told of the origins of the universe and the gods through hymns and music. Along with Homer, Hesiod, and Pindar, he was venerated as the greatest of Greek poets. As a theologian, he was said to have been initiated into the mystery schools of ancient Egypt and brought these sacred traditions to Greece. The Pythagorean discoveries of the sacredness of number, the foundation of the musical scale, and practices such as vegetarianism were said to have been brought by Orpheus to Greece, where they were adopted and enriched by Pythagoras and his followers.

According to the Neoplatonist Proclus, Orpheus provided the source for all Greek religion—“All the Greeks’ theology is the offspring of the Orphic mystical doctrine.” In Greek religion and philosophy, music was intimately associated with the creation of the cosmos as well as the essence of the soul. This is best illustrated in the Platonic dialog *Timaeus*, which may have had Pythagorean and Orphic origins. In the *Timaeus*, Plato says, “. . . all audible musical sound is given us for the sake of harmony, which has motions akin to the orbits in our soul, and which, as anyone who makes intelligent use of the arts knows, is not to be used . . . to give irrational pleasure, but as a heaven-sent ally in reducing to order and harmony any disharmony in the revolutions within us.”



Alabaster Orphic Bowl (second-third centuries CE), symbolizing the Orphic Serpent/Egg at the center of all, emanating the cosmos, and the rebirth to that pristine state that an Orphic initiate could obtain.

Music has the power to harmonize the individual soul with the world soul as the human microcosm contained the same elements as the macrocosm of the world. Playing certain types of music could lead to harmonization with the divine. Other types of music could incite violence, anguish, or lethargy. Music exercised control over the elements, human beings, and animals. For these reasons, Plato urged great care in the use of music, and specific recommendations were made regarding which musical modes to employ to achieve the highest good. Similar stories are told of how Pythagoras healed people and created social harmony through music.

As the greatest musician and singer of the ancient world, Orpheus commanded incredible powers over nature and the soul. He was renowned for charming wild animals, civilizing wild peoples, and even moving trees and stones through the power of his music. His lyre was given to him by Apollo, the god of music and harmony, and so contained special powers. As an instrument of harmony, with seven sympathetic strings, the lyre also represents the harmony of the cosmos. The sympathetic resonance created by plucking the strings of the lyre provided the ancient Greeks with a powerful metaphor for mediating cosmic spirit with human soul. This concept would be expanded greatly by later Renaissance philosophers such as Marsilio Ficino, who played an Orphic lyre for just such a purpose.

Orpheus Lives: Early Myths

An early telling of the Orpheus myth comes from the *Argonautica*, a 4th century CE poem relating the adventures of Jason and the Argonauts in their quest for the

Golden Fleece. Orpheus the singer protects the Argonauts from the danger of hearing the siren's song by playing his lyre and singing. It also contains cosmogonic hymns and mentions his travels to Egypt.

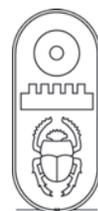
The myth of Orpheus with which we are most familiar was told by the Roman poets, Ovid, Virgil, and Horace. In both Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (8 CE) and Virgil's *Georgics* (23 BCE), Orpheus, the greatest living player of the lyre, descends into the underworld to retrieve his love, Eurydice, from the realm of Hades after he loses her to death by a snakebite on their wedding day. He must journey through the gates of Hades, past the three-headed beast Cerberus, and across the river Styx, guarded by Charon the boatman. Hope guides him, and his singing and playing cause the guardians of the underworld to sleep so that he may gain entry where no human is allowed.

Orpheus pleads with Pluto and Persephone, the rulers of the underworld, to allow him to bring Eurydice back to the land of the living. His sweet singing persuades them to grant this request, however, there is a catch: he must not look back at her while ascending from the underworld. Orpheus agrees and leads Eurydice out of the underworld. In a moment of doubt, he hears a noise and turns to see her, bringing about her tragic loss a second time.

Upon returning, Orpheus falls into great despair. He finds solace in music and sings to the wild men of Thrace of the origin of the cosmos and the gods. Orpheus is brutally torn and dismembered by the Maenads—the wild, frenzied worshippers of Dionysus. Some accounts say this is because he did not allow them to be initiated into the Orphic mysteries; other accounts claim this was in response to him wooing



Orpheus with the lyre and surrounded by beasts, Museum of Christian Byzantine Art, Athens. Photo by Ricardo André Frantz, Wikimedia Commons.



away their men. His dismembered head and lyre float down a river to land at the isle of Lesbos, where his head continued to sing and gave oracles. So great was his power that even Apollo became jealous. His lyre, a source of great magical power, was suspended in the temple of Apollo.

In Horace's *Ars Poetica*, Orpheus is also portrayed as the civilizer of humans. He is the first poet to "soften the hearts of the 'stony and beastly people' and set them on the path to civilization." As John Warden points out, the effect of Orpheus's song is to lead humans to love. As stated in the Orphic Hymn to Venus, "Love is very ancient, perfect in itself, and very wise."

Orpheus Lost: The Middle Ages

The Roman myths of Ovid and Virgil are powerful and remain with us to this day. Before the Roman retellings of the Orpheus myth, however, there existed a sacred tradition with deep roots in Greek religion. The myth of Orpheus became absorbed into the emerging Christian tradition as seen in Roman funerary art and theological comparisons of Orpheus with David and Moses. In the early Christian tradition, Orpheus was re-envisioned as a pagan prophet who prefigured the arrival of Christ.

As Augustine later wrote, Orpheus was said to have "predicted or spoken truth of the Son of God or the Father." What Orpheus began, Christ completed. Later in the Middle Ages, the myth of Orpheus would be re-told in the form of moral allegories. During this period, written knowledge of the sacred, mystical, and theological teachings of the Orphic tradition was lost.

During the third to sixth centuries, Orphic motifs blended with depictions of Christ in funerary art as seen in the Roman catacombs. Funerary artists looking for established models to serve the new Christian faith's need for images of Christ as a leader of souls through the underworld could use the figure of Orpheus. In these



During the formative years of Christianity, Orphic and Mithraic symbolism sometimes combined with Christian, as in this bas-relief with all three elements: the Phrygian cap of Mithras, the Lyre of Orpheus, and the Christian Good Shepherd.

early Christian catacomb frescoes, Orpheus, the peaceful tamer of wild animals, is depicted as a symbol of Christ. Over time, the image of Orpheus, the tamer of animals, and Christ, the Good Shepherd, would merge into each other.

John Block Friedman notes similarities between depictions of Christ and Orpheus in early Christian funerary art: ". . . Orpheus, because of his peaceful nature, his power of composing discord through music and eloquence, and his tragic death at the hands of his followers, was perhaps the most appropriate and certainly the most long-lived of the pagan figures for Christ to be used in funerary art." In these tomb images, Christ is represented with a lyre and Phrygian cap surrounded by animals—in these cases the variety of animals is typically simplified to show sheep or other Christian iconic animals such as doves and eagles.

Christian writers who explicitly compare Christ and Orpheus include Clement of Alexandria and Eusebius. Clement compares the power of Christ's new song which tames the wildest of beasts—

humans—with Orpheus’s use of music to charm animals and move oak trees. “Writers compared the actions of Orpheus and Christ in the underworld, showing that what Orpheus had begun, Christ had finished, fulfilling prophecies inherent in pagan myth.” This interpretation continues today as Umberto Utro, head of the Vatican Museum’s Department of Early Christian Art, explains: “Many Christian sarcophagi contain pagan elements and references to Greek and Roman gods and goddesses In the Gospel, Jesus said ‘I am the Good Shepherd who will lay down my life for the sheep.’ The early Christians easily recognized Christ in (the pagan shepherd) image and invested it with new meaning. Artists also saw Christ in Orpheus, the son of the god of music, Apollo. Just as Orpheus tamed wild beasts with his music, his image became the image of Christ who, with his words, transformed the lives of sinners.”

A fascinating example of the merging of Orpheus and Christ is represented on an amulet that depicts Christ crucified under a moon and seven stars with the text “Orpheus Bacchus” [Ed: See “An Orphic Timeline” in this issue of the Digest]. Amulets such as this one were produced in Alexandria, where Jewish, Christian, and Greek religious beliefs co-existed and blended, and may illustrate a believer’s appeal for protection from multiple divinities. All three figures—Orpheus, Bacchus/Dionysus, and Christ—lead the soul through the underworld and could be appealed to for protection and guidance of the soul in its journey after bodily death.

Orpheus was also compared to figures from the Hebrew Scriptures, such as David and Moses. Orpheus and David both healed through music and were known as singers of sacred hymns and string players. David healed the madness of King Saul through his playing and singing. Early Greek leaders of the Church such as Clement of Alexandria, Eusebius, and

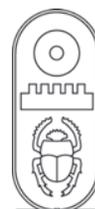
Proclus, refer to Orpheus in order to illustrate that the Greek religious tradition was borrowed from Moses in Egypt, showing that its source of divine inspiration was the same as in the Judeo-Christian tradition. To these writers, Orpheus’s teachings represent an early form of monotheism borrowed from Judaic sources.

After the 5th century, explicit linkages of Christ and Orpheus begin to recede. In the early Middle Ages, the myth of Orpheus is told as an allegory, and Orpheus himself is seen in negative light in which his paganism, musical ability, and moral pursuits are linked. In works such as the *Ovide Moralisé*, classical myths are recast as moral allegories to reconcile them with Christian doctrine.

In the later Middle Ages, Orpheus was transformed into a handsome knight or prince who sings songs of romantic love, brings Eurydice back to life, and always earns a happy ending. In the 11th century, Orpheus is presented as romantic lover in three different poems. The 14th century produced two long poems in English with



Christians had no difficulty depicting Orpheus in the bas-reliefs on this Pyx (vessel to contain the consecrated bread from the Eucharistic celebration), which by legend was a gift of Pope Gregory the Great to Columba at Bobbio, in the fifth century.



Orpheus as a princely hero: Henryson's *Orpheus and Eurydice*, and the anonymous *Sir Orfeo*. Orpheus is presented as the most loyal of lovers, a minstrel, and possessing the magical and astrological powers of a wizard. These medieval romantic writers tell of Orpheus bringing Eurydice back to life through spells or through the power of love.

For instance, the romantic poem, *Sir Orfeo*, includes elements of Celtic other-world mythology, fairies, and jeweled castles. It bears slight resemblance to the Orpheus of Ovid and Virgil and conforms closely to the medieval romantic genre of the time. It contains a blending of classic mythology, secular romance, Christian morals, and Celtic fairy tales. A modern translation of *Sir Orfeo* was completed by J. R. R. Tolkien and published posthumously in the book *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl, and Sir Orfeo*.

Orpheus Recovered: The Renaissance

Many of the original ancient Greek spiritual traditions associated with Orpheus were lost during the Middle Ages as pagan religious traditions were suppressed and eliminated by the Christian Church. The Renaissance brought a rediscovery of the original classical myths and earlier sources, leading to a deep appreciation of Orpheus as he appeared before merging with Christian tradition. The rediscovery of classic sources, was spearheaded by Cosimo de Medici, a fifteenth-century Florentine ruler who sponsored the translation of a great number of classical works of antiquity from Greek into Latin, thus making a number of original sources available to the West for the first time in over a thousand years.

Through Cosimo de Medici, the Platonic Academy was refounded in Florence. He appointed Marsilio Ficino as its leader. Ficino translated the complete known works of Plato, the *Corpus Hermeticum*, and the works of Neoplatonic philosophers such as Porphyry, Plotinus, and Iamblichus. Ficino's goal was to reconcile Platonism

with Christianity through his translations, commentaries, and writings such as *Platonica Theologia de immortalitate animorum* (Platonic Theology on the Immortality of Souls) and *De vita libri tres* (Three Books of Life). Through his revival of Platonic thought, Ficino became one of the leading founders of the spiritual and cultural rebirth of the Renaissance.

We know that Ficino shared a deep affinity with Orpheus and shared many of his attributes: he sang the Orphic Hymns, played an Orphic lyre with an image of Orpheus painted on it, was eloquently compared to Orpheus by those who knew him, and practiced what we would now call *music therapy* as a method for psychological healing and spiritual integration. Ficino's biographer, Corsi, says, "He set forth the hymns of Orpheus and sang them to the lyre in the ancient manner with incredible sweetness, so people say." Johannes Pannonius says, "You restored to the light the ancient sound of the lyre and the style of singing and the Orphic songs which had previously been consigned to oblivion."

Marsilio Ficino: Orpheus Returned

Lorenzo de Medici in his poem *Altercazione* says of Ficino: "I thought that Orpheus had returned to the world." Another writer says of him: "He soothes the unyielding oaks with his lyre and softens once more the hearts of wild beasts." The Florentine scholar Angelo Poliziano compares Ficino's achievements with Orpheus's retrieval of Eurydice from the underworld: "His lyre . . . far more successful than the lyre of Thracian Orpheus, has brought back from the underworld what is, if I am not mistaken, the true Eurydice, that is Platonic wisdom with its broad judgment."

Sources that inspired Ficino include Plato, Hermes Trismegistus, and Neoplatonists such as Proclus and Plotinus, as well as the early Renaissance syncretist, Gemistus Pletho. Like Proclus, Ficino zealously sung

and studied the Orphic hymns. He also practiced vegetarianism, which was one of the key spiritual practices of the Orphic and Pythagorean mystery schools. Gemistus Pletho provided inspiration that would help to form the Platonic Academy and may have also played a significant role in inspiring Ficino in the use of hymns. Pletho and Proclus both provided a conception of a perennial philosophic tradition predating Plato, which includes Orpheus, Pythagoras, and the Chaldean oracles. Renaissance philosophers advanced this notion, including divinely inspired theologians such as Abraham, Zoroaster, Hermes, Moses, Orpheus, Pythagoras, and Plato as members of the *prisci theologi*, ancient sages who predated the arrival of Christ. Orpheus is typically the oldest Greek source in this lineage.

His visiting Egypt provides a common source for Pythagoras, Plato, and others. Monotheism and the trinity were two religious truths mentioned as being found in the *prisci theologi*, and Orpheus in particular. Proclus and Plotinus provided Ficino with a basis for interpreting the gods of Greek mythology as metaphysical principles that would help Ficino develop his ideas on natural magic and bridge the seemingly irreconcilable pagan and Christian traditions. Orpheus, with his associations to Greek, Egyptian, and possibly Hebrew religion offers a uniquely powerful symbol of universal sacred tradition that would appeal greatly to Renaissance scholars and philosophers intent on reconciling pagan and Christian traditions.

The first work that Ficino chose to translate was the *Hymns of Orpheus*. The Orphic Hymns are believed to have been composed by Neoplatonic writers in the second or third century CE, and may be based on older sources. They are divine hymns to the Greek gods such as Apollo, Venus, Hermes, as well as the Muses, Fates, and Furies. They contain instructions on which incense should be offered, along with epithets singing praise of the god or goddess

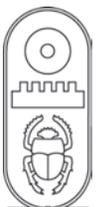
being invoked. Ficino viewed the gods and goddesses of the hymns as metaphysical, natural, archetypal principles contained within the divinity of the one God and cautioned against considering thinking of them in an idolatrous manner.

Although translated in 1462, these works were not made available until much later, perhaps out of concern that they would be interpreted as being too overtly pagan. D. P. Walker hypothesizes that the earliest Renaissance-era manuscript of the Orphic Hymns was brought from Constantinople by Giovanni Aurispa in 1424.

Ficino gives great importance to these hymns, listing their revival among the great achievements of fifteenth-century Florence saying “This age, like a golden age, has brought back to the light those liberal disciplines that were practically extinguished: grammar, poetry, oratory, painting, sculpture, architecture, music, and the ancient singing of songs to the Orphic lyre.”

Ficino recommended singing of the hymns as a method for aligning the human soul with the cosmic soul, thus bringing about good health and relief from melancholy and other afflictions of the spirit. “Our spiritus is in conformity with the rays of the heavenly spiritus, which penetrates everything either secretly or obviously. It shows a far greater kinship . . . if we make use of song and light and the perfume appropriate to the deity like the hymns that Orpheus consecrated to the cosmic deities . . . Music was given to us by God to subdue the body, temper the mind, and render [God] praise.

“I know that David and Pythagoras taught this above all else and I believe they put it into practice.” In another letter, he explains “I do it also to banish the vexations of both soul and body, and to raise the mind to the highest considerations and to God as much as I may.” Although we have no record of his music, we know his performances were striking and profoundly inspirational. In an



eyewitness account of Ficino's performance, a bishop says, ". . . then his eyes burn, then he leaps to his feet, and he discovers music which he never learnt by rote."

Ficino saw music, medicine, and theology as intimately linked and worthy of study and practice. In one of his letters he says "You ask, Canigiani, why I so often combine the study of medicine with that of music . . . Orpheus, in his book of hymns, asserts that Apollo, by his vital rays, bestows health and life on all and drives away disease. Furthermore, by the sounding strings, that is, their vibrations and power, he regulates everything; by the hypate, the lowest string, winter; by the neate, the highest string, summer; and by the dorian, that is the middle strings, he brings in spring and autumn. So, since the patron of music and discoverer of medicine are one and the same god, it is hardly surprising that both arts are often practiced by the same man. In addition, the soul and body are in harmony with each other by a natural proportion, as are the parts of the soul and the parts of the body."

Ficino gives another explanation of the power of music to create harmony in the body by working through the imagination and emotion of the artist, citing similar examples of Pythagoras, Empedocles, Plato, Aristotle, Orpheus, and Amphion: "Plato and Aristotle taught, as we have often found

from our own experience, that serious music maintains and restores this harmony to the parts of the soul, while medicine restores harmony to the parts of the body And Pythagoras, Empedocles, and the physician Asclepiades proved this in practice. Nor is this any wonder. For sound and song arise from consideration in the mind, the impulse of fantasy and the desire of the heart, and in disturbing the air and lending measure to it they vibrate the airy spirit of the listener, which is the link between body and soul. Thus sound and song easily arouse the fantasy, affect the heart, and reach the innermost recesses of the mind This indeed was shown by . . . the miracles of Pythagoras and Empedocles who could quickly quell lust, anger, or madness by serious music. Then again, using different modes, they used to stimulate lazy minds. And there are the stories of Orpheus, Arion, and Amphion."

Music and sound are related to the soul by the nature of air and vibration. This is traced through Orpheus back to the original sources in Egypt: "The body is indeed healed by the remedies of medicine; but spirit which is the airy vapor of our blood and the link between body and soul, is tempered and nourished by airy smells, by sounds, and by song. Finally, the soul as it is divine is purified by the divine mysteries of theology. In nature, a union is made from soul, body, and spirit. To the Egyptian priests medicine, music, and the mysteries were one and the same. Would that we could master this natural and Egyptian art as successfully as we tenaciously and wholeheartedly apply ourselves to it!"

We know that Ficino saw himself as being afflicted with melancholy, which he attributed to the influence of Saturn in his astrological horoscope. Playing the lyre and the Orphic hymns were used as a method of aligning his spirit to specific celestial and divine metaphysical principles, which could be used to restore physical, psychological, and spiritual balance.



Orpheus-Christus from the Catacombs, Cemetery of the Two Laurels. It depicts Orpheus with his lyre in the imperial pose of Christ, with Christian souls as doves, ca. fourth century.

In one of his letters to his friend Sebastiano Foresi, Ficino says, “I rose to my feet, and hastened to take up the lyre. I began to sing at length from the hymns of Orpheus.” And “we play the lyre precisely to avoid becoming unstrung . . . may the well-tempered lyre always be our salvation when we apply ourselves to it rightly.” This natural magic is used to heal the body. As Angela Voss states in her article “Marsilio Ficino, the Second Orpheus”: “If one has inner eyes to see them, the natural things of the changeable world perceived by the senses are signs or ‘divine lures’ which provide an unending reminder of enduring reality. In this sense the act of living itself can be seen as a magical rite . . .”

In “Fitting One’s Life to the Heavens,” Ficino gives us rules for composing and improvising celestial music. Music is drawn down through the celestial spheres through seven steps corresponding to the planets and associated with stones, metals, and elements. One should choose tones that correspond to the heavenly spheres that one wishes to emulate. These should then be harmonized and arranged in a way that reflects the harmony of the spheres. The practitioner must pay attention to the energies they are primarily susceptible to and employ tones of celestial bodies that increase or decrease those energies depending on the balance desired.

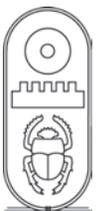
Ficino also developed the concept of the four *furors*, or frenzies: poetic, religious, prophetic, and amorous. Music was associated with the first poetic furor and inspired harmonization of the discord of the soul caused by its painful incarnation in the material world. Orpheus was interpreted as a “divinely inspired poetic teacher, possessed by Platonic furor who reformed and civilized his barbarous contemporaries.” Orpheus played a special role in Ficino’s philosophy, as he was inspired by all four of the divine frenzies. In all four frenzies “it is the power of love which Orpheus brings to the world.”

In Orpheus, Ficino found the embodiment of his philosophical mission—he rediscovered the founder of the mysteries who used music and hymns to mediate between the heavens and the earth, bringing civilization, the arts, culture, health, love, and peace to humanity. “. . . you, yourself, will be greater than the heavens as soon as you resolve upon the task. For these celestial bodies are not to be sought by us outside in some other place; for the heavens in their entirety are within us, in whom the light of life and the origin of heaven dwell.” To Ficino, Orpheus is more than myth. He is a living presence to be revived through spiritual practice and song.

Orpheus Sings On

After Ficino, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola also rediscovered the magical and theurgic use of the Orphic Hymns saying, “Nothing is more effective in natural magic than the hymns of Orpheus, if the correct music, the intent of the soul, and other circumstances known to the wise were to be applied.” Ficino’s music-spirit theory would be expanded and continued by sixteenth-century scholars such as Robert Fludd (England), Guillaume Du Bartas (France), Robert Burton (England), and Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa (Germany).

The revival of the classical myth of Orpheus by Ficino and other Renaissance scholars gave inspiration to artists who used Orpheus as a model for new forms of artistic expression in music, sculpture, and painting. In particular, we see Orpheus present at the birth of opera, which began as a conscious imitation of Greek tragedy. Orpheus was the most popular subject among the early operas. Angelo Poliziano, a Florentine poet, humanist, and collaborator with Ficino, created an early precursor of opera based on the Orphic myth entitled *La Favola di Orfeo* in 1474. Ficino’s very own Orphic lyre was used during one of the performances in Mantua by the singer Baccio Ugolino. Although the music for this work is lost to us, we know that it was





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

based on Virgil's retelling of the myth and emphasizes Orpheus as the pastoral shepherd in love with Eurydice. The work was performed during Carnival festivities in Mantua, and was intended to honor the Cardinal Francesco Gonzaga. Leonardo da Vinci is known to have designed the stage set for this work, and drawings of it exist in his notebooks.

The earliest recorded opera is *Orpheus and Euridice* composed by Jacopo Peri in 1600. Peri's *Euridice* was first performed for the wedding of Maria de Medici and Henry IV (thought to be Hermes), and is

considered the first opera. In Peri's version, Euridice and Orpheus are reunited after the underworld journey. Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo*, composed in 1607, is considered the first popular opera. While its first performances were for small, elite crowds, *L'Orfeo* was soon performed outside of Mantua, making it the first opera to be successfully performed in several cities. It is a popular work still performed to this day. As Professor Ralph Abraham points out, "There are at least twenty-six operas in the 1600s concerning Orpheus, and twenty-nine in the 1700s, including classics by Telemann, Gluck, Handel, and Haydn."

Conclusion

The myth of Orpheus resonates throughout time as a powerful archetype because it shows how art, poetry, and music can be used to bridge multiple realms of existence: mundane and celestial, living and dead, conscious and unconscious, chaotic and harmonious, masculine and feminine, and personal and cosmic. The bridge is created by resonances shared between these realms through air, emotion, and imagination. Thanks to the work of Renaissance philosophers, artists, poets, and musicians, this bridge has been recovered and preserved for future generations to rediscover for themselves.

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SONNETS TO ORPHEUS

Rainer Maria Rilke

The German poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926) had been so completely devastated by his experiences in World War I that he was not able to write. While living at the thirteenth-century Château de Muzot in Switzerland, he was deeply moved by the untimely death of his daughter Ruth's childhood friend, Vera Ouckama Knoop. Inspired once again to write, Rilke dedicated the [Sonnets to Orpheus](#) as a Grab-Mal (Grave Marker) for young Vera, and the poetry flowed from him in torrents. He composed twenty-six of the fifty-five sonnets of the Orpheus cycle in the space of three days, February 2-5, 1922, without editing. The rest of these, and his [Duino Elegies](#), he completed during the remainder of that February.



Orpheus with Lyre and Animals, Virgil Solis (1563), illustration for Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, from *Ovid Illustrated*.

Sonnet 1

There rose a tree. Oh growth so great!¹
Oh Orpheus sings! Oh tree, I hear you
now!²
And all is silent, but even in the silence
new beginning, sign and change arose.
Out of the silence animals came from
bed and nest
in the forest, clear and calm;
and it happened that it was neither ruse
nor fear, per se,
that caused them to be silent,
but listening, yelling, screaming, roaring
seemed small in their hearts and where
there was no shelter to receive this,
no refuge of darkest desire
with an entrance with posts that shiver,
you created temples in their ear.

Sonnet 5

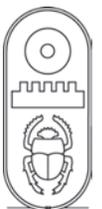
Don't build a monument. Let only the
rose
bloom every year in his honor.
For it is Orpheus, his metamorphosis
in this and that. We should not trouble
about other names. Once and always
it is Orpheus, when he sings. He comes
and goes.
Isn't it enough, when he outlasts³ the
bowl of
roses by a day or two?
Oh, that he must leave, so you can
understand!
Though he worries about leaving.
Because his word is mightier than his
presence,
he is already where you cannot follow.
His hands not tied by the lyre's grid.
And he obeys by crossing the line.

(Original translation of Sonnets by Eberhard Ehrich, F.R.C.)

¹ Literal translation: so excessive.

² Literal translation: so tall in our ear.

³ Literal translation: over stays.



ORPHEUS

Jean Cocteau

(Excerpted from *The Art of Cinema* © 1992. Reprinted by permission of Marion Boyars Publishers, New York, London.)

The visionary author, film maker, and poet Jean Cocteau, a mentor and friend of Rosicrucian singer Edith Piaf, drew a great deal of inspiration for his art from the classical myths, including those of Cupid and Psyche (*Beauty and the Beast*), Sisyphus (*The Infernal Machine*), and Orpheus (*The Orphic Trilogy*). In this essay, he discusses aspects of the middle film of his Orphic Trilogy, *Orphée* (1950).

I wanted to deal with the problem of what is decreed in advance and what is not decreed in advance—in short, with free will.

When I make a film, it is a sleep in which I am dreaming. Only the people and places of the dream matter. I have difficulty making contact with others, as one does when half-asleep. If a person is asleep and someone else comes into the sleeper's room, this other person does not exist. He or she exists only if introduced into the events of the dream. Sunday is not a real day of rest for me, I try to go back to sleep as quickly as possible.

Death in my film is not Death represented symbolically by an elegant young woman, but the Death of Orphée. Each of us has our own which takes charge of us from the moment of birth. So Orphée's Death, exceeding her authority, becomes Cégeste's, and Cégeste says to her—when she asks: "Do you know who I am?"—"You are my Death," and not: "You are Death."

Realism in unreality is a constant pit-fall. People can always tell me that this is possible, or that is impossible; but do we understand anything about the workings of fate? This is the mysterious mechanism that I have tried to make tangible. Why is Orphée's Death dressed in this way, or that?

Why does she travel in a Rolls, and why does Heurtebise appear and disappear at will in some circumstances, but submit to human laws in others? This is the eternal *why* that obsesses thinkers, from Pascal to the least of poets.

Any unexpected phenomenon in nature disturbs us and confronts us with puzzles that we are sometimes unable to solve. No one has yet fathomed the true secret of an ants' nest or a beehive. The mimicry and spots of animals surely prove that some species have thought for a long time about becoming invisible; but we know nothing more than that.

Myth, Mysteries, and the Supernatural

I wanted to touch lightly on the most serious problems, without idle theorizing. So the film is a thriller which draws on myth from one side and the supernatural from the other.

I have always liked the no man's land of twilight where mysteries thrive. I have thought, too, that cinematography is superbly adapted to it, provided it takes



Filming *Orphée*, with Jean Cocteau (center) and Marie Déa (standing, right). Photo © Marion Boyars Publishers.

the least possible advantage of what people call *the supernatural*. The closer you get to a mystery, the more important it is to be realistic. Radios in cars, coded messages, shortwave signals and power cuts are all familiar to everybody and allow me to keep my feet on the ground.

Nobody can believe in a famous poet whose name has been invented by a writer. I had to find a mythical bard, the bard of bards, the Bard of Thrace. And his story is so enchanting that it would be crazy to look for another. It provides the background on which I embroider. I do nothing more than to follow the cadence of all fables which are modified in the long run according to who tells the story. Racine and Molière did better. They copied antiquity. I always advise people to copy a model. It is by the impossibility of doing the same thing twice and by the new blood that is infused into the old frame that the poet is judged.

Orphée's Death and Heurtebise reproach Orphée for asking questions. Wanting to understand is a peculiar obsession of mankind.

There is nothing more vulgar than works that set out to prove something. *Orphée*, naturally, avoids even the appearance of trying to prove anything. "What were you trying to say?" This is a fashionable question. I was trying to say what I said.

All arts can and must wait. They may even wait to live until after the artist is dead. Only the ridiculous costs of cinematography force it to instant success, so it is satisfied with being mere entertainment. With *Orphée*, I decided to take the risk of making a film as if cinematography could permit itself the luxury of waiting—as if it was the art which it ought to be.

Beauty hates ideas. It is sufficient to itself Our age is becoming dried out with ideas. It is the child of the Encyclopaedists. But having an idea is not enough: the idea must have us, haunt us, obsess us, become unbearable to us.

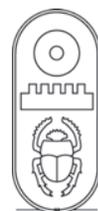
Le Sang d'un Poète was based on the poet's need to go through a series of deaths and to be reborn in a shape closer to his real being. There, the theme was played with one finger, and inevitably so, because I had to invent a craft that I did not know. In *Orphée*, I have orchestrated the theme, and this is why the two films are related, twenty years apart.

My film could not stand the slightest degree of fantasy, which would have seemed to me like breaking my own rules, so, as I was inventing the rules, I had to make them comply with numbers that were governed by nothing outside their relationships to one another. If I made Heurtebise disappear, once by using the mirror and once on the spot, this was because I thought it important to preserve the degree of latitude that intrigues entomologists, although its laws escape them.

I have often been asked about the figure of the glass vendor: he was the only one able to illustrate the saying that there is nothing so hard to break as the habit of one's job; since, although he died very young, he still persists in crying his wares in a region where windowpanes are meaningless. Once the machinery had been set in motion, everyone had to go with it, so that in the scene when he returns to the house, Marais succeeded in being comical without going beyond the limits of taste and with no break between lyricism and operetta.

The same is true of François Périer, whose mockery never becomes unkind or makes him seem to be taking advantage of his supernatural powers. Nothing was more demanding than the role of Orphée, grappling with the injustices of the youth of literature. He does not seem to me to have secrets which he divines and which deceive him. He proves his greatness only through that of the actor. Here again, Marais illuminates the film for me with his soul.

Among the misconceptions which have been written about *Orphée*, I still see



Heurtebise described as an angel and the Princess as Death. In the film, there is no Death and no angel. There can be none. Heurtebise is a young Death serving in one of the numerous sub-orders of Death, and the Princess is no more Death than an air hostess is an angel.

I never touch on dogmas. The region that I depict is a border on life, a no man's land where one hovers between life and death. The tribunal bears the same relationship to the supreme tribunal as the investigating magistrate to the trial. The Princess says: "Here, you go from one tribunal to the next."

Critics describe as *longueurs*, the waves between the knots, the passages of relaxation between moments of intense activity. Shakespeare is all longs and shorts: this is what makes him worthy of attention. The English do not notice the *longueurs* in Shakespeare because they know they are coming and respect them.

When Marais is praised for his acting in *Orphée*, he replies: "The film plays my parts for me."

Themes in *Orphée*

The three basic themes of *Orphée* are:

1. The successive deaths through which a poet must pass before he becomes, in that admirable line from Mallarmé, *tel qu'en lui-même enfin l'éternité le change*—changed into himself at last by eternity.

2. The theme of immortality: the person who represents Orphée's Death sacrifices herself and abolishes herself to make the poet immortal.

3. Mirrors: we watch ourselves grow old in mirrors. They bring us closer to death.

The other themes are a mixture of Orphic and modern myth: for example, cars that talk (the radio receivers in cars).

I should point out that the scene of the return to the house is comic. To paraphrase, when a Frenchman has fallen out of love with a woman, and can't stand the sight of her, what he says, literally, is:



Scene from Cocteau's *Orphée*—(from left to right) Jean Marais, Marie Déa, and François Périer. Photo © Marion Boyars Publishers.

"I can't see her any more." (*Cinémonde*, No. 842, September 25, 1950).

A poet's film is like a huge print run of one of his books. It is quite natural for many people not to accept this book, but its huge circulation multiplies our chances of touching some minds, the few people that, at one time, a poet would only reach in the long term, or after his death. Moreover, the experience of *Orphée* shows that these few people are countless. Just as ten francs become a thousand, it seems that some rate of exchange is operating with the audience. People who like the film and write to me (I count them among the countless few) all complain about the rest of the audience in the Parisian cinema, which they consider a lifeless mass. They forget that without the cinema they could not have seen the film.

Orphée is a realistic film; or, to be more precise, observing Goethe's distinction between reality and truth, a film in which I express a truth peculiar to myself. If that truth is not the spectator's, and if his personality conflicts with mine and rejects it, he accuses me of lying. I am even astonished that so many people can still be penetrated by another's ideas, in a country noted for its individualism.

While *Orphée* does encounter some lifeless audiences, it also encounters others that are open to my dream and agree to be put to sleep and to dream it with me (accepting the logic by which dreams operate, which is implacable, although it is not governed by our logic).

I am only talking about the mechanics, since *Orphée* is not at all a dream in itself: through a wealth of detail similar to that which we find in dreams, it summarizes my way of living and my conception of life.

These receptive audiences are more and more so, the further north the film travels, or when a mass audience immerses itself in it sincerely, without the coldness of soul of an élite or its fear of dipping its toes in dangerous waters that might disturb what it is used to.

Already, when the wish to make such a film is transformed into a concrete undertaking, everything is disturbed through the machinery, actors, sets, and unforeseeable events.

So I have to admit that the phenomenon of refraction begins even before the work leaves me, and I run the ultimate risk of the phenomenon of multiple refraction.

Marcenac's piece for *Ce soir* (since you have asked what I think of it), provides me with a remarkable example of this phenomenon of refraction, after a work has been launched.



Jean Marais as Orpheus in Cocteau's *Orphée*. Photo © Marion Boyars Publishers.

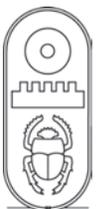
And, just as the analysis of a film by a psychoanalyst can tell us about some implications and some sources of a labor that is all the less tightly under our control since the material problems we encounter during it make us insensible to tiredness and leave our unconscious quite free, so the interpretation of one of our works by the mind of an outsider can show it to us from a new, and revealing perspective.

How disturbed we should be, were there some machine that would allow us to follow the strange progress of a story as it winds its way through the thousand brains in a cinema! No doubt, we should stop writing. We should be wrong to do so, but it would be a hard lesson. What Jules de Noailles said (recounted by Liszt), is true: "You will see one day that it is hard to speak about anything with anyone." Yet it is equally true that each person takes in or rejects the sustenance that we offer, and that the people who absorb it, do so in their own way; and this it is that determines the progress of a work through the centuries, because if a work were to send back only a perfect echo, the result would be a kind of pleonasm, an inert exchange, a dead perfection.

Obviously I was quite stupefied when, one Sunday in the country, I heard *Orphée* on the radio and caught the following remark, intended to depict the no man's land between life and death: "They go through the subterranean cathedrals of hell." But when a serious and attentive man (whom I do not know personally) takes the trouble to recall a plot and, in several stages, with an almost childlike elegance, tries to draw a simple and easy-to-read storyline out of this very complex plot, without abandoning either his personal viewpoint or precision, I can only refrain from criticizing him. To do so would be as inappropriate as those critics who hastily condemn a work that is the product of thirty years of research.¹

Endnote:

¹ From *Les Lettres françaises*, November 16, 1950.



ORPHEUS TODAY

Ralph H. Abraham, Ph.D.

Emeritus Professor, Department of Mathematics, University of California Santa Cruz

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The 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.

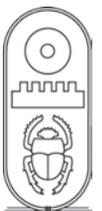
And then that is the myth of Orpheus, the myth of Eurydice and so on. A splendid book written in this style of mythography is *The Greek Myths*, by Robert Graves. This is a great one because all the piles are there and after every pile it tells the list of all the sources, every single Greek author, 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

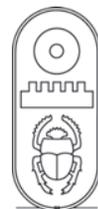
the transformation from gender partnership to male domination. The Roman Orpheus fable is a representation of this transformation, in a simple myth for ordinary people by Virgil and Ovid, as Orphism submerged, and the Roman Empire, and its atheistic approach, took over. The essence of the story was packaged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

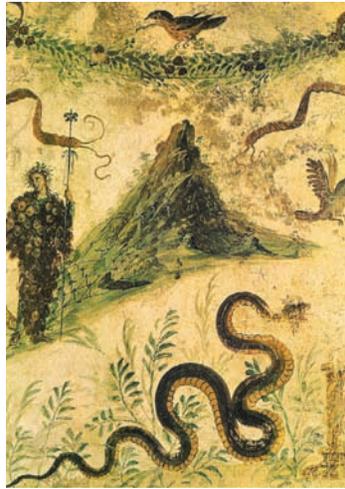
But what is this popular theme? I think it has to do, ultimately, with the nostalgia for the Garden of Eden, the partnership society, a world of peace and plenty, and harmony with the environment. There is a longing to re-attain a world which exists only in the unconscious, in a racial memory not really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

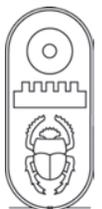
We might think of film, for example, as potentially our greatest art, where we have music, libretto, visual representation. We have animation, paintings that move. We have coordination between the speech, the music, and the visual music. And we have the greatest power of illusion. John Cocteau made the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



THE ORPHIC MYSTERIES

Joscelyn Godwin, Ph.D.

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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.¹ Jean Richer has shown that there is an imaginary zodiac whose twelvefold symbolism links mythology with the geography of the Aegean area.²

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

at ancient sanctuaries for the purpose of what he calls “enchanting the landscape.”⁴ 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.⁵ In the earliest versions of the myth, he did succeed in restoring her to life. Only later was the episode embroidered by the poets⁶ 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*].)

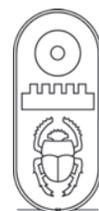
Most of what we know of Orphism derives from much later even than these philosophers. Under the Roman Empire, around the time of early Christianity, there was a strong resurgence of Orphism as a mystery religion. The Orphic Hymns, a set of magical incantations addressed to the various gods and daimons, date from this revival.⁷ 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.⁸

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.⁹ 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,¹⁰ 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.¹¹ 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).¹² 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.¹³

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.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵

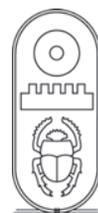
Orpheus, singing to Apollo’s lyre, is said to have had the power to move every kind of body and soul. He could force apart the Clashing Rocks so that the ship of the Argonauts could pass safely between them; he succeeded in touching the hearts of the chthonic gods. Stones that have been “moved” and set 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.¹⁶

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.¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ 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,¹⁹ 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."²⁰ 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.²¹ 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

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

² 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).

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

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

⁵ 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).

⁶ Notably in Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, book 11.

⁷ 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).

⁸ Homer, *Odyssey*, 11:601-4.

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 11:1-85.

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

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

¹³ 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).

¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ See Michell and Rhone, *Twelve-Tribe Nations*.

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

¹⁷ 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.

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

¹⁹ In Plato, *Republic* 5, 473d.

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

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

ANCIENT WISDOM RISES FROM THE ASHES

Steven Armstrong, F.R.C.
Research Librarian, Rosicrucian Park

In the field of Greek philosophy and religion one of the most important discoveries of modern times was the finding of the Derveni Papyrus in 1962. The story of the use of remarkable modern technologies to decipher the ancient manuscript not only is fascinating in itself, it also reveals the ways that the modern and ancient worlds are drawing closer to one another in many places.

Sometime during the latter half of the fifth century BCE, an unknown Greek philosopher and theologian, possibly in the school of Socrates' teacher, Anaxagoras, wrote a substantial commentary on one of the Orphic Theogonies. A Theogony describes in mythological terms the evolution of the cosmos from an original unity to the great multiplicity we experience, and the commentary went to great lengths to discuss interpretations of the text. This in itself was surprising for modern scholars to learn, since this kind of learned interpretive commentary was thought to have originated later, in the academies of Athens and Alexandria, as Neoplatonism arose in the third century CE.

The work of this Orphic *theologos* must have been popular, as a copy found its way into the library of a Macedonian noble during the reign of Philip II, King of Macedon

(father of Alexander the Great). When this unknown noble died in about 340 BCE, his funeral rites were celebrated in a northern Greek necropolis near present-day Derveni. The rites included the traditional pyre, and among the items dear to the noble that were burned with him was a papyrus scroll containing the Orphic theological commentary.

Orphism Linked to Immortal Life

It was not unusual for Orphic material to be linked to graves and burials. Beginning in the 1830s, thirty-nine golden leaves or tablets were found in burial sites in Italy and Crete with Orphic inscriptions on them.¹ The dates of the artifacts range from the late fifth century BCE to the second century CE. They contain aphorisms, instructions for the departed, and mystical sayings such as "Through being a mortal, you have become a God. A kid-goat, you fell into milk. Hail! Hail!"²

More recently in the 1970s, fifth-century BCE bone fragments with Orphic inscriptions were discovered in Olbia (Ukraine) on the Black Sea, with invocations such as "Life death life truth Dionysus Orphics."³ It is clear that Orphism had early on become associated with transcending temporal death. As Dominican priest and scholar Marie-Joseph Lagrange, founder of the École Pratique d'Études Biblique de Jérusalem, remarked:

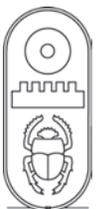
"We can summarize what we have to say on this subject: the center of Orphism is to be found in the golden tablets found in the tombs."⁴

The Papyrus Survives through the Pyre

Ordinarily, the climate of Greece is not favorable for preservation of papyrus.



Orphic gold tablet found near Petalía, Italy.





Leaf from the Derveni Papyrus

However, in this case, the flames carbonized and preserved the delicate papyrus. No other Greek papyri from this period or earlier are known to have survived. For over 2,300 years, the charred papyrus lay buried on top of the noble's tomb as part of the remains of the pyre.

One day in 1962, workers were laboring on construction work for the National Road from Thessaloniki to Kavala, when they unearthed the ancient necropolis where the Macedonian noble lay. Archaeologists were called in, and the papyrus was rescued from its age-old pyre. To date, this is the oldest papyrus found in Europe,⁵ prompting journalists to refer to it as "Europe's oldest book."⁶ The importance of this find could hardly be overestimated:

"In saying that the Derveni papyrus is the most important fifth-century text to appear since the Renaissance, I am not being hyperbolic, but perfectly serious. It is more significant than Bacchylides, the new Simonides, lost dramas, or the Strasbourg Empedocles, since we already had quantities of choral lyric, elegy, drama, and Empedocles. A piece by an unknown pre-Socratic author, who uses allegory and etymology to explicate rituals and an Orphic text at a date long before scholars thought Orphic texts existed, is a truly extraordinary find, even if it were shown not to derive from the milieu of Anaxagoras and Socrates."⁷

Recovering the Charred Text through Modern Technology

At first, the papyrus was painstakingly unrolled with the utmost care. The difficulties of handling such ancient and delicate manuscripts have plagued researchers on such projects as *The Gospel of Judas*⁸ and the Villa of the Papyri at Herculaneum.⁹ Preliminary Studies and translations were published in 1997 and 2004.¹⁰ Then in 2005, Apostolos L. Pierris of the Patras Institute for Philosophical Studies and Dirk Obbink, director of the Oxyrhynchus papyrus project at the University of Oxford, organized a team to study the Derveni Papyrus with the help of modern multispectral imaging techniques. They called on Roger Macfarlane (Classics) and Gene Ware (Engineering and Computer Sciences and the Papyrological Imaging Lab) of Brigham Young University to join them in this ultra-modern approach to seeing what previously could not be seen. In May 2006, the team began their scans.

Multispectral imaging originated in the world of space science, as astronomers capture light beyond the ordinary frequencies that human eyes can see. These include the infrared, for example. In so doing, investigators are able to retrieve far more information than is available in visible light. Since the infrared range includes vibrations at a length of 1000 nm (nanometers = one billionth of a meter), this is particularly useful for recovering burned or otherwise damaged documents.

To the naked eye, the text of the Derveni Papyrus appears to be black ink on black paper, and is, in spots, virtually unreadable. Viewed at 1000nm, there is a distinct difference between the reflectivity of the ink and the paper, thus rendering the text legible. This technique has recently been used in at least three high-profile archaeological finds from the ancient world: the Derveni Papyrus,¹¹ *The Gospel of Judas*,¹² and the library of the Villa of the Papyri in Herculaneum.¹³

In parallel, other modern technologies, such as digital processing of ultraviolet scanning, x-rays, and visible light have led to the full reading of ancient documents such as several lost works by Archimedes in the “Archimedes Papyrus,” a tenth-century scribal copy discovered in 1906, which had been overwritten as a liturgical text in the twelfth century,¹⁴ and other documents.

The Villa of the Papyri Divulges Its Secrets

The library of the Villa in Herculaneum may in the end prove to be the most exciting of all of the current multispectral imaging projects. Between 1750 and 1765 the Swiss architect and engineer Karl Weber tunneled underground in Herculaneum to discover the ancient library in the house with 1,785 carbonized papyrus scrolls now housed in the National Archaeological Museum of Naples.

The scrolls had been charred when Vesuvius erupted in 79 CE. The house is reported to have belonged to Julius Caesar’s father-in-law, Lucius Calpurnius Piso.¹⁵ Since there are still 30,000 square feet of the villa which are not yet excavated, there will most probably be even further manuscripts, as excavations began again in the fall of 2007, after the Italian government assured that the site was properly conserved.¹⁶ Using multispectral imaging, the works already recovered are primarily by Epicurus and Philodemus.¹⁷

Orphic Mysteries Combine Science and Mysticism

In the work that is continuing on the Derveni Papyrus, it is becoming clear that the lines the modern West likes to draw between science, philosophy, and mysticism are often absent in this ancient text.¹⁸ Newer studies on philosophers such as

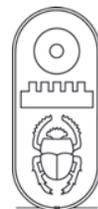
Empedocles—connected to the Pythagoreans who shared much in common with Orphism—also confirm this ancient view, manifested in the Rosicrucian lineage:

“. . . it is becoming clearer, especially since the discovery of the Strasbourg fragments [Ed: of Empedocles’ works], that, contrary to many former interpretations, Empedocles did not make a clear separation between his philosophy of nature and the more mystical, theological aspects of his philosophy, and so may well have seen no great difference in kind between healing ills through empirical understanding of human physiognomy and healing by means of sacred incantations and ritual purifications. His public as well may have made no great distinction between ‘scientific’ and sacred medicine as is suggested by the account of Empedocles curing a plague by restoring a fresh water supply, after which he was venerated as a god.”¹⁹

The prospects for continuing work on the Derveni Papyrus, and the consequent expansion of our knowledge about Orphism, are good. Polyxeni Veleni, director of the Archeological Museum of Thessaloniki, is very hopeful. “I believe that 10-20 percent of new text will be added, which, however, will be of crucial importance. This will fill in many gaps, we will get a better understanding of the sequence, and the existing text will become more complete.”²⁰

It seems very appropriate that our understanding of these ancient mysteries is being gradually increased through the use of the vibratory nature of light in multispectral imaging and associated techniques. We can visualize our ancient forerunners in mysticism—not least of which the practitioners of Orphism—being very happy to see science and spirituality once more in harmony, for the growth of knowledge and service.

(See Endnotes on next page.)



Endnotes

- ¹ For a full scale study on the Golden Tablets and associated materials, with an excellent discussion of modern approaches to Orphism, see Fritz Graf and Sarah Iles Johnston, *Ritual Texts for the Afterlife: Orpheus and the Bacchic Gold Tablets* (London: Routledge, 2007).
- ² See the Greek text of Tablet 3, from Thuri, in Graf and Johnston, 8.
- ³ Graf and Johnston, *Ritual Texts*, 185.
- ⁴ Marie-Joseph Lagrange, *Les mystères: Orphisme. Introduction à l'étude du Nouveau Testament* 4:1 (Paris: Lecoffre, 1937), 136; cited in Graf and Johnston, 61 and 194, n. 39.
- ⁵ There is a scroll found in a tomb in Athens that dates from the fifth century, however, to date this has not been able to be read. See Gábor Betegh, *The Derveni Papyrus: Cosmology, Theology and Interpretation* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 59, n. 10, cited in Patricia Curd, "Review of Gábor Betegh, *The Derveni Papyrus*," *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, September 16, 2006, http://ndpr.nd.edu/review.cfm?id=7703#_edn1.
- ⁶ Brian Handwerk, "Europe's Oldest 'Book' read with high-tech imaging," *National Geographic News*, June 6, 2006, <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/pfi18239974.html>.
- ⁷ Richard Janko, "Janko on Kouremenos, Parássoglou, and Tsantsanoglou on Janko on Kouremenos, Parássoglou, and Tsantsanoglou, *The Derveni Papyrus*," *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*, November 20, 2006, at <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/bmcr/2006/2006-11-20.html>.
- ⁸ "The Gospel Saved," *The Lost Gospel of Judas* (Washington, DC: National Geographic Society website, 2006), http://www.nationalgeographic.com/lostgospel/conservation_saved.html.
- ⁹ The sometimes terrifying process of handling these kinds of manuscripts is detailed in David Sider, *The Library of the Villa dei Papiri at Herculaneum* (Los Angeles, CA: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2005), cited in Curd, n. 2.
- ¹⁰ André Laks and Glenn W. Most, editors, *Studies on the Derveni Papyrus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Gábor Betegh, *The Derveni Papyrus: Cosmology, Theology and Interpretation* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004); in addition, a later edition was published before the full results of the multi-spectral analysis had been completed: K. Tsantsanoglou, G.M. Parássoglou, T. Kouremenos (editors), *The Derveni Papyrus* (Florence: Leo. S. Olschki Editore, 2006) Vol 13 of the Series *Studi e testi per il Corpus dei papiri filosofici greci e latini*.
- ¹¹ See "Derveni Papyrus," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Derveni_Papyrus for a general introduction and web references.
- ¹² See "The Gospel of Judas," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gospel_of_judas; *The Lost Gospel of Judas* (Washington, DC: National Geographic Society website, 2006), <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/lostgospel/>; and Steven Armstrong, "Review of *The Gospel of Judas*," *Rose+Croix Journal* 3 (2006), 157-163, http://www.rosecroixjournal.org/issues/2006/book_reviews/vol3_157_163_review_armstrong.pdf.
- ¹³ See "Villa of the Papyri," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Villa_of_the_Papyri/ for an overview of the project.
- ¹⁴ "Archimedes Papyrus," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archimedes_Papyrus.
- ¹⁵ Nick Fielding, "Millionaire to Fund Dig for Lost Roman Library," *Times Online* (London: The Sunday Times website, February 13, 2005), <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,2087-1482342,00.html>.
- ¹⁶ Richard Owen, "Diggers Begin Herculaneum Task of Finding Masterpieces Lost to Volcano," *Times Online* (London: The Times website, October 24, 2007), http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tollarts_and_entertainment/books/article2726757.ece.
- ¹⁷ David Sider has provided an excellent overview of the progress of the project in *The Library of the Villa dei Papiri at Herculaneum*, 2005. See the review by Jan P. Stronk *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*, January 14, 2006, at <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/bmcr/2006/2006-01-41.html>.
- ¹⁸ Dirk Obbink, Ph.D., of Brigham Young University, cited in Handwerk, 2.
- ¹⁹ Gordon Campbell, "Empedocles," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2006, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/empedocl.htm>. This harmony of science and spirituality among the pre-Socratic philosophers is confirmed in the works of Peter Kingsley, *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery, and Magic: Empedocles and Pythagorean Tradition* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press of Oxford University Press, 1995); *In the Dark Places of Wisdom* (Inverness, CA: Golden Sufi Center, 1999); *Reality* (Inverness, CA: Golden Sufi Center, 2003).
- ²⁰ "Ancient Scroll May Yield Religious Secrets," *Associated Press*, June 1, 2006, available at <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/13081639/>.



TO THE STARS FROM THE ORPHIC HYMNS



Orpheus, Olga Deulofeu, S.R.C.

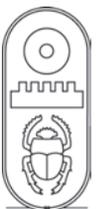
The writings that have come down to us as the Orphic Hymns are a collection of eighty-seven thematic poems written in hexameters, addressed to Gods, Goddesses and cosmic forces. The adscription indicates that certain incenses may have been used to accompany the recitation of each piece, associated with that particular power. The translation here is by the eminent eighteenth-century Neoplatonist, Thomas Taylor, adapted for modern readers.

TO THE STARS

The fumigation from aromatics.

WITH holy voice I call the stars on high,
Pure sacred lights and genii of the sky.
Celestial stars, the progeny of Night,
In whirling circles beaming far your light,
Refulgent rays around the heav'ns ye throw,
Eternal fires, the source of all below.
With flames significant of Fate ye shine,
And aptly rule for us a path divine.
In seven bright zones ye run with wand'ring flames,
And heaven and earth compose your lucid frames:
With course unwearied, pure and fiery bright
Forever shining thro' the veil of Night.
Hail twinkling, joyful, ever-wakeful fires!
Propitious shine on all my just desires;
These sacred rites regard with conscious rays,
And end our works devoted to your praise.¹

¹ From *The Orphic Hymns*. Translated by Thomas Taylor (London: Printed for the Author, 1792). Available at <http://www.sacred-texts.com/clal/hoo/index.htm>.





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