In the golden age of Latin literature, the poet Publius Vergilius Maro published his second work, *The Georgics*, in 28 BCE. Purporting to be a work on rural life and farming, it is in reality a complex didactic poem in the spirit of Hesiod and Lucretius. In the Middle Ages, Virgil was considered to be a mystic and mage, and his works were used for divination similarly to how Chinese culture uses the I Ching. In the Welsh myth of Taliesin, the Celtic Goddess Cerridwin is said to be reading *The Book of Pheryllt*, (i.e. Virgil). It is no coincidence that Dante makes Virgil his guide through the *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* in his *Divine Comedy*, so great was his reputation as a Noble Pagan and a forerunner of Christian teachers. Medieval mystics combed through his writings for esoteric meanings.

In this section at the end of *The Book of Georgics*, Book 4, Virgil tells the tragic tale of Orpheus and his lost wife, Eurydice. Together with Ovid’s version, these are the classic sources for all later Western treatments of the archetypal myth, adapted for modern readers.

But Aristaeus, the foe within his clutch,
Scarce suffering him compose his aged limbs,
With a great cry leapt on him, and ere he rose
Forestalled him with the fetters; he nevertheless,
All unforgetful of his ancient craft,
Transforms himself to every wondrous thing,
Fire and a fearful beast, and flowing stream.
But when no trickery found a path for flight,
Baffled at length, to his own shape returned,

With human lips he spoke, “Who bade thee, then,
So reckless in youth’s hardihood, affront Our portals? Or what wouldst thou hence?”—But he,

“Proteus, thou knowest, of thine own heart thou knowest;
For thee there is no cheating, but cease thou
To practice upon me: at heaven’s behest I for my fainting fortunes hither come An oracle to ask thee.” There he ceased.
Whereat the seer, by stubborn force constrained,
Shot forth the grey light of his gleaming eyes
Unlocks his lips to spell the fates of heaven:
“Doubt not ‘tis wrath divine that plagues thee thus,
Nor light the debt thou payest; ‘tis Orpheus’s self,
Orpheus unhappy by no fault of his,
So fates prevent not, fans thy penal fires,
Yet madly raging for his ravished bride.
She in her haste to shun thy hot pursuit
Along the stream, saw not the coming death,
Where at her feet kept ward upon the bank
In the tall grass a monstrous water snake.
But with their cries the Dryad—band her peers
Filled up the mountains to their proudest peaks:
Wailed for her fate the heights of Rhodope,
And tall Pangaea, and, beloved of Mars,
The land that bowed to Rhesus, Thrace no less
With Hebrus's stream; and Orithyia wept,
Daughter of Acte old. But Orpheus's self,
Soothing his love-pain with the hollow shell,
Thee his sweet wife on the lone shore alone,
Thee when day dawned and when it died he sang.
Nay to the jaws of Taenarus too he came,
Of Dis the infernal palace, and the grove
Grim with a horror of great darkness came,
Entered, and faced the Manes and the King
Of terrors, the stone heart no prayer can tame.
Then from the deepest deeps of Erebus,
Wrun by his minstrelsy, the hollow shades
Came trooping, ghostly semblances of forms
Lost to the light, as birds by myriads hasten
To greenwood boughs for cover, when twilight hour
Or storms of winter chase them from the hills;
Matrons and men, and great heroic frames
Done with life's service, boys, unwedded girls,
Youths placed on pyre before their fathers' eyes.
Round them, with black slime choked and hideous weed,
Cocytus winds; there lies the unlovely swamp
Of dull dead water, and, to pen them fast,
Styx with her nine-fold barrier poured between.
Nay, even the deep Tartarean Halls of death
Stood lost in wonderment, and the Eumenides,
Their brows with livid locks of serpents twined;
Even Cerberus held his triple jaws agape,
And, the wind hushed, Ixion's wheel stood still.
And now with homeward footstep he had passed
All perils unscathed, and, at length restored,
Eurydice to realms of upper air
Had well-nigh won, behind him following—
So Proserpine had ruled it—when his heart
A sudden mad desire surprised and seized—
Meet fault to be forgiven, might Hell forgive.
For at the very threshold of the day,
Heedless, alas! And vanquished of resolve,
He stopped, turned, looked upon Eurydice
His own once more. But even with the look,
Poured out was all his labor, broken the bond
Of that fell tyrant, and a crash was heard
Three times like thunder in the seas of hell.

‘Orpheus! What ruin hath thy frenzy wrought
On me, alas! And thee? Lo! Once again
The unpitying fates recall me, and dark sleep
Closes my swimming eyes. And now farewell:
Girt with enormous night I am borne away,
Outstretching toward thee, thine, alas! no more,
These helpless hands.’ She spoke, and suddenly,
Like smoke dissolving into empty air,
Passed and was sundered from his sight; nor him
Clutching vain shadows, yearning sore to speak,
Thenceforth beheld she, nor no second time
Hell’s boatman brooks he passed the watery bar.

What should he do? Fly whither, twice bereaved?
Move with what tears the Manes, with what voice

The powers of darkness? She indeed even now
Death-cold was floating on the Stygian barge!

For seven whole months unceasingly, men say,
Beneath a lofty crag, by thy lone wave,
Strymon, he wept, and in the caverns chill
Unrolled his story, melting tigers’ hearts,
And leading with his lay the oaks along.

As in the poplar-shade a nightingale
Mourns her lost young, which some relentless swain,
Spying, from the nest has torn unfledged, but she
Wails the long night, and perched upon a spray
With sad insistence pipes her dolorous strain,

Till all the region with her wrongs o’erflows.

No love, no new desire, constrained his soul:
By snow-bound Tanais and the icy north,
Far steppes to frost Rhipaean forever wed,

Alone he wandered, lost Eurydice
Lamenting, and the gifts of Dis ungiven.

Scorned by which tribute the Ciconian dames,

Amid their awful Bacchanalian rites
And midnight revellings, tore him limb from limb,

And strewed his fragments over the wide fields.

Then too, even then, what time the Hebrus stream,

Oeagrian Hebrus, down mid-current rolled,

Rent from the marble neck, his drifting head,

The death-chilled tongue found yet a voice to cry
‘Eurydice! Ah! Poor Eurydice!’
With parting breath he called her, and
the banks
From the broad stream caught up
‘Eurydice!’”

So Proteus ending plunged into the deep,
And, where he plunged, beneath the
eddying whirl
Churned into foam the water, and was
gone;

But not Cyrene, who unquestioned thus
Bespoke the trembling listener: “Nay, my son,
From that sad bosom thou mayest banish care:
Hence came that plague of sickness, hence the nymphs,
With whom in the tall woods the dance
she wove,
Wrought on thy bees, alas, this deadly bane.

Bend thou before the Del nymphs, gracious powers:
Bring gifts, and sue for pardon: they will grant
Peace to thine asking, and an end of wrath.
But how to approach them will I first unfold—

Four chosen bulls of peerless form and bulk,
That browse today the green Lycaean heights,
Pick from thy herds, as many cattle to match,
Whose necks the yoke pressed never: then for these
Build up four altars by the lofty fanes,
And from their throats let gush the victims’ blood,
And in the greenwood leave their bodies lone.

Then, when the ninth dawn hath displayed its beams,
To Orpheus shalt thou send his funeral dues,
Poppies of Lethe, and let slay a sheep
Coal-black, then seek the grove again, and soon
For pardon found adored Eurydice
With a slain calf for victim.”

No delay:
The self-same hour he hies him forth to do
His mother's bidding: to the shrine he came,
The appointed altars reared, and thither led
Four chosen bulls of peerless form and bulk,
With cattle to match, that never yoke had known;
Then, when the ninth dawn had led in the day,
To Orpheus sent his funeral dues, and sought
The grove once more. But sudden, strange to tell
A portent they espy: through the oxen’s flesh,
Waxed soft in dissolution, hark! There hum
Bees from the belly; the rent ribs over-boil
In endless clouds they spread them, till at last
On yon tree-top together fused they cling,
And drop their cluster from the bending boughs.¹

Endnotes