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Orpheus

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It seems only fitting that the first literary reference we have to 'famous Orpheus' (*… onomaklyton Orphēn …*) should be in a mid-sixth century BCE lyric fragment (Ibycus, frag. 306), and that the earliest extant image we possess should be part of an early sixth century BCE temple frieze fragment (of the Sicyonion treasury at Delphi) depicting a badly disfigured and defaced 'Orpheus' playing his lyre on the deck of the Argo. The fragmented afterlife of antiquity's most famous poet, lover, prophet and priest, infamously torn to pieces by angry women, aptly dismembers even as it remembers Orpheus, reminding us always that there never was a fully incorporated Orpheus myth. We cannot piece together an original form of the myth, intact and untouched by later receptions and mutilations: in the beginning, as in the end, Orpheus is composed of many parts.

Indeed, the tripartite themes that we now associate with Orpheus – the shamanic musician who charmed birds, beasts, and wild men with his songs; the devoted lover who went to hell and back to recover his dead wife, only to lose her again; the misogynist pederast torn to pieces by women – are themselves discrete fragments of scattered stories that the reception of Orpheus has seen re-assimilated and re-assembled since antiquity, with different parts overlooked and with others picked up and placed in different positions of prominence at different times. This chapter seeks to piece together some of the scattered fragments of this myth from different dates in its reception, concentrating not upon its great many orthodox retellings and harmonious translations (characterizing the 'traditional' rememberings and reconstructions of the Orpheus myth), but instead focusing upon moments of schism, of mutilation and *sparagmos* (characterizing the moments of anger, resistance and pain in the myth's reception). In reviewing these necessarily selective and fragmented pieces of the Orpheus 'corpus', it will seek to argue that Orpheus is most appropriately remembered by his 'dismembering' – and that it is those who resist the legendary charms of his song, like the women who tear the poet apart and scatter pieces of his corpus abroad, who keep the head and lyre of Orpheus singing still.

Dismembering Orpheus

For the Sicyonians dedicating their treasury to Apollo at Delphi in the sixth century BCE, as for the lyric poet Simonides writing in the fifth century BCE, and for Apollonius writing in the fourth century BCE, famous Orpheus was famed above all for his abilities as a musician and his shaman-like powers over the natural world. Indeed, Apollonius tells us (*Argonautica* 1.23) that it was solely on account of Orpheus' abilities to charm and calm birds and beasts, men and monsters, that the unlikely hero was recruited as an Argonaut to help on Jason's quest for the golden fleece. For Horace in the first century BCE (*Ars Poetica* 391-399), as for Seneca in the first century CE (*Medea, Hercules Furens*), this too was how Orpheus was best remembered. The same charming poet Orpheus held the same attractions for Shakespeare in the sixteenth century (*Merchant of Venice* 5.1.70-88*, Two Gentleman of Verona* 3.2.72-80) and for Milton in the seventeenth ('L'Allegro' 136-152; 'Il Penseroso' 103-108; Lycidas 50-63; and *Paradise Lost* 7.1-39). And the same Orphic Ur-poet worked his magic upon Dryden, Pope, the Romantics, and innumerable poets, musicians, and artists in-between and thereafter (see Miles 1999, Strauss 1971, and Warden 1982).

But as charming a figure as this Ur-poet Orpheus may have presented to these fellow poets, evidence from the fifth century BCE on suggests that Orpheus' magical musical powers were always somewhat less potent when it came to women. Whereas Orpheus' harmonies could civilize the most savage men and beasts, they appear to have had the opposite effect upon the opposite sex. The lost Aeschylean tragedy, the *Bassarids,* has Orpheus torn to pieces and his body parts scattered abroad by a chorus of bacchants. Numerous fifth-century BCE vases similarly depict Orpheus being attacked by women (see Guthrie 1966: figs and plates 4 and 6). And in the fourth century BCE, Plato touches upon this same motif in the *Republic* (10.620a), where he describes the gynophobic ghost of Orpheus electing to be reincarnated as a swan, preferring to hatch from an egg rather than to have any physical contact with the sex (of the sex) responsible for his violent death and dismemberment.

It is possible to speculate that these ancient accounts of Orpheus' *sparagmos*, stressing a profound lack of sympathy between Orpheus and women, reflect some strand of misogyny (or promotion of celibacy) in the philosophical or theological doctrines attributed to 'Orphism' and thus to Orpheus in antiquity (see Parker 1995), or relate to a primitive Dionysian fertility tradition allied with the myth (see Segal 1989: 157, 162, 180; and Clark 1979). But, whatever its origins, the hostility surrounding Orpheus' reception by women – in stark contrast to the positive response evinced by every other audience – is repeatedly highlighted as the focal point of these ancient Greek forms of the myth and thus carries particular significance for the myth's later reception. Indeed, this focus marks reception and 'feminist' reception in particular as among the central concerns not only of the early reception of this myth but of its continuing afterlife in the classical literary tradition.

In English letters, Anne Finch, Countess of Winchilsea, offers one of the earliest acknowledgements of this aspect of the myth in an early eighteenth century literary riposte 'To Mr Pope'. Contextualizing her verse as "occasioned by a little dispute upon four lines in 'The Rape of the Lock'", in which Pope had mocked female poets and their works, Finch identifies her fellow female poets with the bacchants of the myth, and playfully warns Pope to "soothe the ladies" so that "The *Lock* won't cost the head". Finch's proto-feminist response to the myth's reception motif is later echoed in a barbed witticism launched (again against Pope) by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, who likens Pope's audience of admirers to the dumb beasts and blocks of stone charmed by Orpheus' poetry: the clear implication of her simile being that she, like the bacchants of the myth, is resistant to such charms. Milton in the mid seventeenth century had already mapped the "barbarous dissonance / Of Bacchus and his revellers, the race / Of that wild rout that tore the Thracian bard" (*Paradise Lost* 7.32-34) as a potent metaphor for poetic reception, employing the Orpheus myth "to express his sense of the poet's vulnerability" (Miles 1999, 121) and unambiguously likening Orpheus' hostile reception to his own during the Restoration. More recently, in Margaret Atwood's 1984 'Orpheus (2)' – one of three pieces by her responding to the myth and its reception – Orpheus' bloody torture and death at the hands of unidentified persecutors takes on a very modern political dimension, as the poet continues to sing to – and for – "the mouthless ones, … / those with no fingers, those / whose names are forbidden", his refusal to be silenced a defiant political no less than poetical gesture.

It is for female and for feminist poets, however, that this aspect of the myth has proved to have particular resonance, and the *sparagmos* has received special emphasis in twentieth century feminist receptions of Orpheus – although, as we shall see, this emphasis forms part of the myth's fragmented reception in antiquity too. In Adrienne Rich's 1968 poem, 'I dream I'm the Death of

Orpheus', a potent work of reception responding directly to Cocteau's cinematic retelling of the traditional Orpheus myth, the poet identifies with the female figure 'Death', who watches herself "driving her dead poet" into the afterlife – a compelling analogy for this feminist poet's own reception of the classical world and all its dead poets. Elaine Feinstein, writing in 1980, similarly tunes into Cocteau's revisioning of the myth in 'The Feast of Eurydice', where her bacchants play a dual role in their reception of Orpheus' music. The Orphée of Jean Cocteau's 1950 film *Orphée* (just one piece of Cocteau's own fragmented Orphic corpus), receives scrambled fragments of poetry, numbers and sound through his car radio and tries desperately to make sense of them, to make order and harmony out of scraps of noise. In Feinstein's poem, the whole world falls silent: "Click! All transistors off. / Traffic stops." And while the mindless, murderous maenads represent "the curse of all future / poets to die by / rope or stake or fire", these women are also instrumental in reuniting Eurydice and Orpheus in death, paradoxically restoring harmony to the world through their violent *sparagmos*.

Sandra Gilbert, similarly makes Orpheus' *sparagmos* a catalyst (and metaphor) for harmony in her 1984 poem 'Bas Relief: Bacchante' (the bas relief of the title a fiction but one recalling Rilke's 1904 poem *Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes* – one of the poetic 'fragments' of his *Neue Gedichte* – inspired by an ancient bas relief with that title: for a reading of this poem see Segal 1989: 122-26). Gilbert identifies directly with the bacchants responsible for Orpheus' death and dismemberment, and offers a case for their defence: Orpheus – "the bastard" – with his phallic flute and conductor's baton demanded silence from everything else in the world – trees, birds, the wind, women – so that his "manly anthems" might be heard (for a discussion of the poem as feminist writing see Ostriker 1982: 133-34). His *sparagmos* at the hands of the bacchants returns music to the world.

Muriel Rukeyser appropriately responds to this key aspect of the myth in different poetic pieces. Three of her most important poems deal with Orpheus: the 1949 'Pieces of Orpheus' (concerning the immediate aftermath of the poet's death and dismemberment as the bacchants flee the scene of the murder – "one woman in a million shapes, / procession of women down the road of time"); a longer 'Orpheus' poem from the same year (in which the poet's scattered body-parts individually sing of their loss and are re-composed through the power of their own music) ; and, nineteen years later, her 1968 'The Poem as Mask: Orpheus' (in which the poet revisions the bloody dismemberment and rebirth of Orpheus as an allegory of her own bloody experiences of childbirth, of awakening from the anaesthetic of a caesarean delivery to discover that an emergency hysterectomy had also been performed). Although in 'The Poem as Mask', Rukeyser identifies with Orpheus ("When I wrote of the god, / fragmented … / it was myself, split open, unable to speak") she clearly empathizes with the women who dismember him (identifying both with those women on the mountainside and those "down the road of time"). She represents them as:

> … those who, deprived at the root,
> flourish in thorny action, having lost the power
> to act essentially, they fall into the sin
> Of all the powerless. They commit their acts of evil
> in order to repent, repent and forgive, murder and begin again.

Rukeyser's description of the Bacchants' violence against the poet Orpheus here is conspicuously echoed in the language used by Alicia Ostriker to describe the act of "revisionist mythmaking" by

feminist poets who "examine the blackness that has represented femaleness so often in our culture … [and conclude] that the female power to do evil is a direct function of her powerlessness to do anything else" (Ostriker 1982: 78). Yet, although in 'The Poem as Mask' Rukeyser declaims "No more masks! No more mythologies", it is clear that her revisioning of the Orpheus myth here is not (only) a gesture of rejection born out of a position of powerlessness, but (also) a powerful gesture of forgiveness and rebirth – of beginning again. As Lorrie Goldensohn suggests in her reading of the final stanza of the poem (in which Rukeyser describes how, as "the god lifts his hand, / the fragments join in me"):

> The lifted hand becomes an acceptance of myth both paradoxical and necessary … By the time actual memory confronts myth through the reality of the birthing female, exile from the self is undone, and under the baton of the god's lifted hand, the shattered fragments of the self enact a literal movement of recollection and raise 'their own music.' And their own new mythology." (Goldensohn 1999: 121; see also DuPlessis 1985 and Kolodny 1987).

The act of resistance, the act of *sparagmos*, here, as in the other poems discussed above, thus becomes an act of acceptance, rejection becomes reception, and feminist 'dismembering' is reformed as a kind of mythopoetic remembering.

Remembering Eurydice

However, with the significant exception of Fienstein's poem, in each of these receptions responding to (receptions of) the reception motif in the Orpheus myth a key piece the myth seems to have been forgotten: the bacchants figure predominantly in these revisionist readings, but Eurydice is cut out. Even in Rukeyser's long 'Orpheus' poem, which unusually incorporates allusions to the myth's full sphere of traditional influence, from Orpheus' role as Argonaut to disciple of Moses, Eurydice is no more than a name: indeed, when Orpheus looks back at her, she has not even a face (on the "totality" of Rukeyser's treatment of the myth see Segal 1989: 180-84). Yet, in excising Eurydice from their mythopoetic rememberings of Orpheus, these poets invite us to look back to earlier receptions of the myth where 'Eurydice' similarly appears as an indistinct, barely visible presence. In ancient Greek receptions of the myth she is not even named until the third century BCE, when the poet Hermesianax (*Leontion III* =Kern, *Orph. Fragm*., test. 61) refers to her as Agriope (Savage Watcher or 'fierce-faced'), a cult name associated with Persephone, queen of the Underworld, and judge of the dead. And, it is not until the first century BCE that we hear the more familiar name used for the first time in the *Lament for Bion*, in which Agriope is 'translated' into Eurydice (the Wide Ruler or 'wide justice'), a cult title similarly associated with Persephone – whose own myth closely mirrors and colors that of Agriope/Eurydice. Similarly in the visual culture, according to Henry (1992:11), "Ancient representations of Orpheus with Eurydice [were] rare. Vase painters and others more often showed Orpheus with animals, or with maenads, or occasionally at the entrance to Hades." A bas relief apparently depicting Hermes as psychopompos either returning Eurydice to Orpheus or leading her (back?) to hell is presumed to be a Greek fifth century BCE work (extant in three Roman copies) but the names inscribed over the figures were certainly added at a much later date and it is impossible to identify who the female figure in the scene might 'originally' have represented and which fragment of the myth's many narratives it might depict.

An allusion in Euripides' late fifth century BCE tragedy *Alcestis* (lines 357-362), certainly assumes the audience's familiarity with a story in which Orpheus uses his music to charm the gods of the Underworld: Alcestis' husband Admetus laments that, had he "the lips of Orpheus and his melody", he would have been able to bring his wife back from the dead. Orpheus' wife is not named here, however, and the force of the allusion may well be to the incredible range of Orpheus' musical powers and his ability to overturn the laws of nature (by bringing the dead back to life) rather than to an already distinct story in which Orpheus rescues a particular woman from the Underworld. Disentangling the myth of Alcestis from that of Eurydice to assess the priority of either one is unviable, of course, but Euripides' allusion to Orpheus certainly reminds us that the yet-to-be-named-Eurydice shares several common characteristics with Alcestis, and that the reception of the Orpheus myth in antiquity is unequivocally colored by its associations with this other myth. Indeed, Plato makes an explicit connection between the Admetus/Alcestis story and that of Orpheus in his *Symposium,* claiming that:

> They sent away Orpheus, son of the harpist Oeagrus, empty-handed, giving him an only an apparition of the girl he sought, refusing to give up the girl herself because he showed no spirit; he was only a harpist, and did not dare like Alcestis to die for love, but tricked his way into Hades alive. And afterwards, as punishment for this cowardliness, they brought about his painful death at the hands of women. (*Symposium* 179d: my translation)

Once again, the female object of Orpheus' Underworld quest is unnamed here, as she remains in all extant sources until the third century BCE. Yet, even when Eurydice gains sufficient focus in the Orpheus myth so as to become individuated as a distinct character, her initial role appears to have been very different to that of the tragic part for which she would eventually become best known. Just as the allusion to Orpheus in the *Alcestis* implies success, and the allusion in Plato to modified success, Hermesianax claims the rescue of Agriope/Eurydice a triumph, as does the *Lament for Bion,* Isocrates' *Busiris* (2.8), and Diodorus Siculus (*Bibl* 4.25.4). In fact, it is not until Vergil breaks away from the established pattern to introduce the fatal look back in his influential reception and retelling of the myth (*Georgics* 4.453-527), the first extant version to introduce Persephone's injunction to Orpheus not to look as he leads Eurydice up from the Underworld, that the double loss of Eurydice takes up its 'traditional' position at the centre of the Orpheus myth – and we find perhaps the first 'proto-feminist' response to it.

Vergil's innovative addition to the myth (although a contemporary parallel is also found in Conon's *Narrationes* 45) has tended to overshadow in received readings of the *Georgics* (4.429-558) his more subtle reprise of other aspects of the Orpheus story: in particular, the prominence of discordant female voices and viewpoints in the myth (for important scholarly receptions of Vergil's Orpheus see Heath 1994; Segal 1989; Warden 1982). Yet if we look back at Vergil's Orpheus in the light of the myth's earlier – and later – incorporations, we notice the remarkable authority given to angry women seeking retribution and settled scores here. The framing narrative within which Vergil's story of Orpheus and Eurydice is set, describes how the beekeeper Aristaeus, confused at the sudden death of his bee-hive, consults his mother and then the sea-god Proteus to find the cause and remedy of this misfortune. Proteus advises that Orpheus is the cause of his troubles and narrates the history of Orpheus and Eurydice – but it is then left to Aristaeus' mother, Cyrene, to make sense of this story. Her reception of Proteus' story effectively offers a radical re-visioning of that narrative: Cyrene declares that it is *not* Orpheus but Eurydice's female companions, her fellow nymphs, who

have punished Aristaeus for causing Eurydice's death. She advises Aristaeus to appease Eurydice and her nymphs with sacrificial offerings (*Georgics* 4.534-557), drawing an explicit distinction between the simple flowers that he is to offer Orpheus, and the expensive cattle that are to be sacrificed to placate Eurydice and her angry nymphs and so restore bees to Aristeus' hives – and harmony to his garden.

Cyrene's revisionist reception of Proteus' retelling of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth provides a pattern of response that we see again in Ovid's reception and revisioning of the 'Vergilian' retelling of the myth (*Metamorphoses* 10.1-11.84: for a useful summary of the Vergil and Ovid Orpheus narratives set side by side, see Anderson 1982, 37-39). Like Cyrene, Ovid also highlights the central role played by angry women in the Orpheus myth, not only focusing upon the bacchants and their angry response to Orpheus, but performing his own form of textual *sparagmos* in chopping up the Orpheus myth and physically separating its parts into different books of his *carmen perpetuum*. After losing Eurydice for the second time, Ovid's Orpheus sings of his loss to a spell-bound audience of trees, wild beasts and birds (10.143f; 11.1f) – which, as Glenn (1986:136) wryly observes, "since Orpheus proceeds to tell the owl and the wild pussy-cat about Ganymede, Hyacinthus, Pygmalion, Myrrha, and Adonis, there is something comic about the situation, just as there would be about singing true romances to a tortoise".

There is, however, another internal audience here, and it is not so charmed – or amused. The women of Thrace, apparently offended by Orpheus' unsympathetic treatment of women – not only his misogynistic rejection of the female sex but his treatment of all the other female characters in his poetic repertoire – tear him to pieces. Orpheus is unable to calm or to charm the women, and although his music initially renders harmless the rocks and ivy-wreathed spears that they throw at him, the women drown out the sound of the poet's song with their own, with the clamour of flutes and horns, with the beating of breasts and drums (11.1-43). As if anticipating feminist Amy Richlin's (1992: 161) suggestions of ways to deal with misogynist texts – "throw them out, take them apart, find female based ones instead"– the Thracian women refuse to listen to Orpheus, they tear *him* apart, and they drown out his music with their own (see Liveley 2011:111). Yet their resistance is not wholly destructive: the seeds of their *sparagmos* are scattered on fertile ground. The head and lyre of Ovid's Orpheus (singing an elegiac 'weepy something':11.52) eventually washes up on the shores of Lesbos (11.55), home of Sappho – who thus becomes the first female poet in the classical canon potentially to 'receive' Orpheus in this highly self-reflexive reworking of the Orpheus' myth *and* its reception.

Both Vergil's and Ovid's 'revisionist mythmaking' returned female voices and feminist perspectives to the core of the Orpheus myth, placing the interpretation and reception of the myth into the hands of women. And, whatever Sappho may or may not have done upon receiving the head and lyre of Orpheus, her feminist (and proto-feminist) literary successors have embraced that agency, contributing their own fragments of revisionist mythmaking to the Orpheus corpus, in part by cutting Orpheus out of the story and looking to Eurydice instead.

In the Middle Ages, Eurydice was a shadowy, passive figure, transformed either into a fairytale 'Sleeping Beauty' (as in the early fourteenth century Middle English romance *Sir Orfeo*) or identified in Christian allegories (such as those of Pierre Bersuire and Thomas of Walsingham) with Eve, her rescue from hell euhemerized as the redemption of Orpheus' soul from sin (see Friedman 1970: 127-

9). Renaissance receptions typically looked away from the drama centred upon Orpheus and Eurydice and turned back instead to remember famous Orpheus' powers as Ur-poet and musician (see Warden 1982). However, in the Restoration, Henry Fielding's 1737 farce *Eurydice* offered a striking and influential illustration of a 'pre-feminist' re-visioning of the myth, representing Eurydice as a modern woman with an agenda of her own. His Eurydice is a scheming adulteress, desperately contriving to resist the attempts of Orpheus to 'rescue' her from the Underworld where she is happily living with her coterie of lovers; his Orpheus is an unsympathetic opera-singing *castrato* (caricaturing the fashion in Italian opera for *castrati* no less than the ubiquity of the Orpheus myth on the operatic stage: see Henry 1992). Fielding's comic restaging of the myth, despite its playful antifeminist tenor, was ground-breaking in cutting away from the traditional Orpheus narrative and offering Eurydice a voice and viewpoint of her own, and might therefore lay claim to present an early 'pre-feminist' Eurydice. Indeed, while various tragic Eurydices might be heard lamenting untimely deaths or celebrating happy reunions with Orpheus in innumerable Italian, French and German operas in the interim, it would be another century before Eurydice's perspective and voice would again take centre stage – in the unlikely venue of a Royal Academy exhibition.

Directly inspired by Frederick Leighton's 1864 painting *Orpheus and Eurydice* (and published in the exhibition catalogue alongside it), Robert Browning's 1864 short poem 'Eurydice to Orpheus' presents a reconstructed narrative fragment from the Orpheus myth, in which the silent Eurydice represented in Leighton's painting finds her own poetic voice. Leighton's Orpheus is seen in anguish with eyes tightly shut as a woman clings to him, gazing at his face, as if beseeching him, in Browning's words, for "one look … one immortal look!" Resisting the Victorian sentimentality that coloured so many responses to Orpheus in this period, Eurydice's final entreaty offers a powerful break with the 'traditional' myth, positing Eurydice as the one who forces Orpheus to break the infamous (Virgilian) injunction not to look at her, entreating: "no past is mine, no future: look at me!"

A few years later, Edward Dowden, in his 1876 poem 'Eurydice' would pick up Leighton's cue to offer a radically new revision both of the myth and of the central relationship between Orpheus and his wife by re-viewing them from her perspective. Dowden's Eurydice regretfully imagines that *she* rather than Orpheus had taken the lead in petitioning Hades and Persephone for her release, and that she had led rather than followed on their way back from Hell. Had their roles been reversed, she assures us that she would not have looked back, and that Orpheus – "as a babe" – would have followed patiently behind her until they safely reached the upper air together. Throughout the poem, there is repeated insistence upon Eurydice's autonomy, agency and authority: she laments that she did not more strongly claim "partnership with him/ … urging my right of wife"; she defends Orpheus as "Worthier than I, yet weaker"; she accepts the loss of "mastery" that her second death entails; and worries that the afterlife will slowly erase her identity, that she will fade:

> … till I am no more
> Eurydice, and shouldst thou at thy time
> Descend, and hope to find a helpmate here,
> I were grown slavish, like the girls men buy
> Soft-bodied, foolish-faced, luxurious-eyed,
> And meet to be another thing than wife.

What is particularly significant about this Victorian Eurydice is that, even as she creates a new image of and for herself, she is concerned for the status of her own reception, eager to hear stories about 'How Orpheus … had loved Eurydice", anxious to be remembered as an active and equal partner to Orpheus. Thus, she is, arguably, the first 'feminist' Eurydice, leading Orpheus, his myth, and a new generation of feminist poets and artists in a new direction – albeit a direction already signalled by Aeschylus' bacchants and further signposted by Vergil and Ovid.

Amongst these more recent feminist revisions of the Orpheus myth, it is often Eurydice rather than Orpheus around whom the reception is focused and, in many cases, Orpheus is not merely cut up but cut out of his own myth, as American poet Alta's powerful 1980 short piece illustrates:

> all the male poets write of orpheus
> as if they look back & expect
> to find me walking patiently
> behind them. they claim i fell into hell.
> damn them, i say.
> i stand in my own pain
> & sing my own song.

In fusing the subjectivity of the female poet who speaks 'i' here with that of 'Euridice', Alta self-reflexively reconfigures and resists both the Orpheus myth and its literary reception – the palpable pain and violence of that resistance evoking Rukeyser's in 'The Poem as Mask'. In an alternative vein, Rachel DuPlessis' 1973 poem 'Eurydice' revisions and re-makes the myth by retuning the harmonious affinity with the natural world usually attributed to Orpheus and ascribing these creative powers to Eurydice instead. Resisting Orpheus' desire to take her back to the light, within the dark "living cave" of the underworld, Eurydice is transformed into a snake, a thread of silver running through a rock, a plant and its roots, a "great cunt", a fragrant flower bearing "seeds of Eurydice". Given the self-reflexive emphasis upon female fertility and creativity throughout the poem, it is appropriate that these feminist "seeds of Eurydice" should find fertile ground in the works of other women writers and artists: notably Alta, Elaine Feinstein, Margaret Atwood (whose 1984 resisting 'Eurydice' even holds a forgotten "red seed" –also recalling Persephone's pomegranate – as she reluctantly follows Orpheus back from hell), Carol Ann Duffy (whose 1999 'Eurydice' remembers the traditionally received myth of "Big O" very differently), and Bracha Ettinger (whose 'Eurydice' series of paintings, produced between 1990 and 2003, offers an exquisitely messy and fragmented visual revisioning of the myth). For Ettinger, as for these other responses to the Orpheus myth:

> Eurydice is not distinct. And she is not singular. Her image is redoubled, and there seems to be a set of them, all of them fading and appearing at once … Somewhere, sometime, something was lost, but no story can be told about it; no memory can retrieve it, for the memory is itself fractured, partial, fading into an oblivion. Images emerge against and as a fractured horizon, and there is no chance of a recovery here… this is loss that does not stop happening, this is a past that does not stop being the past, that insists itself on the present … (Butler 2006, viii)

As with Ettinger's paintings, the sequence of organic creation described in DuPlessis' poem reminds us to look back for the "seeds of Eurydice" in earlier receptions of the myth too. Edith Sitwell's 1945 'Eurydice' similarly celebrates the "great linked chain" of life and death seen in DuPlessis' poem, transforming Eurydice into "bright gold" (contrast Duplessis' silver), the same color as the ripe grains of golden wheat seeded throughout the poem, and explicitly linking the Orpheus myth to other ancient fertility myths: Proserpina/Persephone, Osiris, Adonis, and Dionysus. Sitwell's optimistic revisioning of the myth itself draws directly upon earlier receptions in which we witness Eurydice speak of her life in and after death: Eurydice's description of herself as "heavy with Death, as a woman is heavy with child" explicitly echoes Rilke's famous picture of the same in his 1907 'Orpheus. Hermes. Eurydice'. Yet Rilke's own description of Orpheus' attempt to rescue Eurydice as a kind of rape or violation (death having returned Eurydice to a state of virginity, like a flower closed at twilight) is radically different to the positive celebratory tone of Sitwell's poem. In fact, Rilke's poem shares more with Duplessis' – from the vein of silver ore glimpsed in the rocks of its opening stanza, through its flowers and fruits, to its final figuring of Eurydice as "root".

Mediating, Hermes like, between these two feminist receptions is H.D, whose 1917 'Eurydice' poem reiterates Rilke's sexualised flower imagery ("hell must open like a red rose / for the dead to pass") but transforms Rilke's Eurydice from a passive figure of acceptance into a resentful figure of resistance. Addressing Orpheus directly, H.D's Eurydice unequivocally and repeatedly blames his "arrogance" and his "ruthlessness" as well as his careless, casual "glance" for condemning her to a second death. And yet, like the Eurydices of Rilke, Sitwell and Duplessis (and, indeed, of Alta, Feinstein, Atwood and Duffy) she accepts her death as a kind of independence: "At least I have the flowers of myself / and my thoughts". Described by Geoffrey Miles as "the first and fiercest of [the] feminist Eurydices" (1999: 71), H.D's Eurydice clearly led the way for other feminist revisions of the myth to follow, re-viewing the story from Eurydice's perspective and effectively merging her viewpoint and voice with that of the angry bacchants – the women who are transformed into trees in Ovid's metamorphosis of the myth. Yet, amidst the fragmented reception of the Orpheus myth, there are, as we have seen, several other scattered pieces which might claim precedence in this regard. Indeed, arguably, all of these fierce feminist responses glance back – sometimes carelessly, sometimes purposely – to the first fierce audience of women to respond to (or, rather, to resist) Orpheus: the bacchants. And, so it seems, it continues to be those who resist the charms of famous Orpheus, the women who tear the poet apart, who cut him about and out of the picture, who thus, paradoxically, play a fundamental part in maintaining the integrity of the Orpheus corpus and in keeping the head and lyre of Orpheus singing on.

Biographical Note

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