

The function of time in the narration of Orpheus myth

Stefania Marinelli

“ We were happy once,
And now let my verse remind us how.”

J. W. Goethe. Epigraph to *Roman elegies*

Abstract

Through the narration of Orpheus Myth, and the contrast between the time of the underworld and the time of light, the instant of experience and knowledge is described as an exclusive time requiring an absolute presence of the participants and doesn't allow either the anticipation of the future through desire or the filing of the past by means of memory.

Key words: myth of Orpheus, desire, memory, narration, temporal relationship.

Goethe's deep love for Italy is especially evident in his writings about his first journey.

His “Roman Elegies” capture loving memories of his Italian sojourn in verses filled with moving, creative intimacy that—although he made use of the classical/mythological arsenal in fashion with the writers of his day—was nevertheless rendered less imposing and even quite playful by the lyric love song. This temporal fusion made *the Elegies* passionate and communicative, and the epigraph that introduces them forges a link between past memory and new meaning: a narrative link intended to endow the lived experience with continuity and validity. And I have cited it here since it so concisely exemplifies what I shall attempt to describe as the link between time and narration.

All things considered, the key to narration lies in its link with time (the space–time continuum); with the possibility of going in and out of time, of conceiving it and then treating it either as a unique set of rules, or else as multi-faceted, progressive and linear, circular, spiralling, cyclical, and so forth. The narrating voice makes

contact with the manifold and simultaneous dimensions of memory and with the expressive force released as they intersect in various and mysterious ways.

The ancient myth that most clearly draws upon this element—that of Orpheus—describes a hiatus in temporal continuity; the creation of a distinction between being and loss of being, between the active wholeness of achievement and the passive fragmentation of loss, between the “narrated”, the “non-narrating” and the present narration. It describes in detail how the inversion of the space-time progression activates the negative undertaking of the unelaborated caesura. If the space-time continuum and its manifold dimensions are not whole and in continuous inner transformation (memory and the possibility of passing from the world of darkness to the world of light, and vice versa, through a deeper grasp of art and music, of love and trust), and if these space-time dimensions are in conflict or inert, then the development and maturation of the life project gives way to regression and *caesura* (*caesura*: a pause near the middle of a line of poetry).

Orpheus—blind poet and solitary singer according to the ancients Homer and Tiresias (Greek: ὄρφεος, Latin: *orbus*, expressing solitude and privation), as well as in the legends of Thrace and the areas where his myth was disseminated—was considered an enchanter, capable of communicating with animate and inanimate nature and the gods through his lyre and his song. In the original Thracian myth, Orpheus is a follower of Apollo and Dionysus is his enemy, but subsequent, embellished and even contradictory versions associate the myth with the Orphic and Dionysian mysteries and with many other events particularly rich in complex elements. In particular, Orpheus’ death is associated with divine intervention and the transformations consequent to the fertility, death and rebirth cycle.

Orpheus descends into the underworld ruled by Hades and Persephone in search of his beloved wife, the nymph Eurydice, who has been bitten by a serpent and is apparently now in the land of the dead. Orpheus’ sweet love songs persuade¹ the gods to allow him to bring his wife back up to the land of the living, on the condition that he obeys one command.

The pact negotiated with the gods will permit Orpheus to lead Eurydice back into the world of light only if he walks ahead, playing his lyre, and promises not to turn back and look at her; otherwise at the very instant that he violates this promise, she will be cast once again, and forever, into infernal darkness. Orpheus begins his journey, but grows worried when he hears no footsteps following—a shadow makes

¹ Poliziano thus describes Orpheus’ power and art: “Who is that with so sweet a note and with his glorious lyre move the abyss?... Nor does the water longer shrink from Tantalus/ and I behold... and the furies grown calm at his command” Louis E. Lord, trans., *A Translation of the Orpheus of Angelo Politan and the Aminta of Torquato Tasso* (London: Oxford University Press, 1931)

no sound. The second he turns to make sure that she is behind him she falls back, lost forever, into the realm of dead shadows from which he had tried to reclaim her. The myth arouses a multitude of reactions and images, and is a metaphor for a series of psychic and affective movements, which can be interpreted in a variety of ways and at various levels: Orpheus turns back because his faith and the strength of his love are uncertain and ambivalent and because his knowledge is currently insufficient or linked with a past already lived (not infernal) and no longer useful because destiny is unchangeable and threatens those who dare defy the powers of Hades; because humans, to be able to tolerate and develop a link with their origins and the unchangeable do not go in a straightforward direction, but look at their present and past reflections, or regress into amorous mirroring, which gives them the energy and confidence to continue into the future, and reassures them about the present (similarly, the legend of Lot's wife warns the man not to turn back). Orpheus cannot bear the uncertainty looming over his success because his beloved is behind him, rather than at his side sharing their life's journey; for this reason she still belongs to the father and mother of the underworld and to the powers standing in the way of desire. Desire lives protected by the pronounced prohibition, and it is believed to be unchangeable; it is similar to the fall of Eurydice, who returns to the darkness because she hasn't been imagined as living, or transformed and led towards the living, but deposited in the immutable past of things dead. Orpheus does not use the moment (of resolution and of the divine pact)—which contains experience and change—as a new condition to be produced and tested, but considers it as having already occurred and been lived; he fills it with knowledge already gleaned from his own past (fear that Eurydice is dead since he cannot hear her footsteps) or of a presumed future (she should already have arisen and her footsteps should be audible), and thus the moment of new experience and of transformation cannot be created. That eternal, cyclical contrast between the seasons of light and darkness, evolving from rebirth in springtime toward winter's slumber, which has been temporarily, and rebelliously, halted and postponed to that other temporal dimension of divine concession that precludes nature from taking her course, is once again established. Relying on that extraordinary moment means risking losing Eurydice as a resurrected bride, linked once again to the budding season and spared that of hibernation.

That brief “unconscious” leg of Orpheus’ journey, and the instant of Eurydice’s fall, might, therefore, represent conflicts of a different nature depending on the standpoint and level from which we choose to view them.

Orpheus does not seem to believe that his reality is exactly the one he is experiencing, and he turns round because he is unable to accept that he is in the

present, and that the present contains and limits the other possible timeframes of memory and hope (of non-memory and non-hope).

Seen as one half of a couple, Orpheus cannot be united with Eurydice because he is unable to bridge a caesura—a break in space, time, and knowledge. The two halves lose each other, separate, and will remain forever in contrast with each other. Just like the two halves of the seasons of nature, and of the day–night cycle, they will go on alternately completing the life cycle and renewing the unchangeable impossibility of union through time everlasting.

The pairing contained in natural time is longitudinal, binary and cyclical. The moment in which it is achieved is contained in such an order. The societies of nature and of culture celebrate and vie for the instant of the fertile union and transformation, and the myth that recounts their vicissitudes narrates either their attempt to transgress and transform eternity by creating a moment of encounter independent of the temporal cycle but subject to its laws, or else an eternal, unchanging separation.

The dominant theme here is narration, not only of the myth but of the narration of the myth; like something relating poly-semantically with time and space, it reveals them, transforms them, multiplying them in order to render its containers and connections current with other multiple space–time dimensions that contain them and that are contained within them. This modernization of the myth shifts the present into a relationship of mutual exchange with the imagery of the past. If narration does not *tell what has* and which is not living now, but rather carries out, creates and *is* what it narrates, then its function resonates with the person who listens and, in turn, with the person who narrates, producing an experience and a bond that previously did not exist. If, on the contrary, this myth is not renewed in its present narration and does not connect back to its origins in order to evolve, then it falls like Eurydice back into a literal, concrete text lacking in the mutable, transformable value of experience; its meaning is lost, locked away in eternal unchanging repetition (it may even generate fear and incomprehension as it would, for example, in one or a group of persons listening to someone singing, if their bond was not resonant).

Eurydice falls as a result of a fate that Orpheus is unable to fully bring to term or to change, thus appearing to describe precisely the difference between that which has been relegated to the past—to what has gone before, to that inaccessible place of regression—and the essential value of art (music) and of faith (or illusion, at least that of group illusion according to Winnicott or Anzieu!) that makes vital and present the time (not) lived, as well as the possibility for contact and change. We could, perhaps, say that Orpheus is not able to withstand destiny's requirement to

be—to be here now, wholly—and to proceed, without memory, desires or doubts, and without crowding his mind with things already known or with future ideals. However, he cannot tolerate not knowing (that walking shadows sound no footfall) and not using knowledge already acquired, and is thus unable to make room for knowledge yet to come. He is unable either to separate and bid final farewell to the past, or to render it living and continuous. As he proceeds into the new and unknown experience, he is asked not to desire, not to seek himself in the experience that he is having, not to split himself between his previous time with Eurydice, the time of his pact with the gods, and the time of future life. Orpheus should not have to go to another place to find the person he is trying to save from death: waiting for her would have made her more alive and part of him, after an assigned time that is empty and unknowable since he can only ‘be’. He falls into a time that he cannot control, gives in to the temptation to use the deceptive concrete, unchanging present and is unable to face the unbearable experience of that unknown assigned non-time and space consisting of waiting, trusting and not knowing.

Neither is Euridice, the female side of that same inaccessibility to union, so wonderfully described by the poet Rilke (*Sonnets To Orpheus* XXV), able to leave behind springtime and the uninterrupted dance by means of her untimely death: "Dancer whose body filled with your hesitant fate (...) pausing, (...) grieving and listening. Then, from the high dominions, (...) music fell into your altered heart", not even after the divine concession, returned to "earthly, it gleamed. Till after a terrible pounding it entered the inconsolably open door"². Orpheus who activates the rupture, and Eurydice who is its victim, are two parts of the same inaccessible pairing and both contain a lost time deprived of revitalising experience and change. While Orpheus is unable to live in the time of the experience, but anticipates it before it happens or files it as having already taken place, as something already consummated and negotiated with the gods whom he has moved, Euridyce is the object of inaccessible knowledge, represented as a breakthrough and as time experience has denied.

Viewed from a broader perspective, however, the event does not only describe the loss of the love object and of the self as an experience that cannot be lived and completed. Indeed, it could describe the process itself of experience, and of the ability to learn from the experience, as the difference between being wholly here and now and straying perilously, but with promise and rigour, toward not being: toward dimensions of being and not being that belong to spaces and times that one is unable to make current and to integrate with the present, and that are still

² S. Mitchell, *The Selected Poetry of Rainier Maria Rilke*; Random House, 1962, New York.

represented as loss and object death, but the expectation and experience of which could be transformed into a life source and reserve.

To apply Bion's terms regarding forms of consciousness, knowledge of the past and of what one has left behind in the myth of Orpheus is the "K" form of historic cognition; while the future in which Orpheus would have been united with his beloved, had he gone ahead and continued strumming his lyre, is the "O" moment of the achievement of unison with the ultimate and unknowable truth contained by Hades, and his exit and return to the bond after his narcissistic descent into the world of empty shadows and divine prohibition.

The narcissistic descent, which contains childish impotence and the prohibition of desire in the presence of the primal scene—of the copulation of the gods of the underworld who guard the deep, nocturnal (winter) part of the fertility cycle, and of the underworld's possession of the dead nymph Eurydice—contain elements of life and death, recognition and non-recognition, thinkable and unthinkable. The cyclical narcissistic descent contains some elements of linkage with what is already known and tends to repeat or to become known and evolve through association and sharing. But it also contains elements of non-linkage with what is unknown and does not belong to it, and remains buried in an inaccessible, unknowable world represented as alien and even threatening. The tension between these elements makes the experience meaningful and cohesive, and also qualifies the possibility of achievement.

The recurring myth of origins, the myth of the eternal return, demands in an infinite number of ways that this descent be repeated continuously, so that re-surfacing will contain the passing and complexity of time and include—through the experience of curiosity, quest, rebellion and even fear—the necessary resources for the pursuance of life and the link with evolution.

During a recent conference a British author reviewed some aspects usually regarded as "mystical" in Bion's theories on thought and knowledge, sustaining, instead, the clinical function of element "O": ultimate, unknowable truth. I personally agree with this point of view, assuming that the mystical—or meditative, with regard to the Eastern philosophies known to Bion and present in his conceptions—perspective is not to be considered the final organiser either of the theoretical stance or of clinical practice; rather it is a way, or setting, in which to represent some phenomenological explanations of the analytical bond that contain echoes that resound in mental fields that, for their nature, belong to other disciplines. "O"—unknowable truth—cannot be known or narrated; it can only "be" (even in narration) and, perhaps, become.

Saint Teresa of Avila, although not a Bionian, was certainly a gifted mystic who wrote verses that belong to the realm of religious ecstasy and which lend themselves well to representing an aspect of the truth of which Bion spoke, i.e. the co-presence of opposites in motion and the need to make room in the mind by emptying it (of memory, desire and understanding): “*That life up there/ it’s the only true life; /till this life is alive/we can’t enjoy it being alive:/don’t flee away, sweet death / On dying only I live /As not to die I die*” (*Fire of divine love*)³

Rilke, in his rich poetic intuition, celebrated Orpheus as the art of narration and being, of being one with the life of the universe, summarizing the experiences of living and dying: “*He is one of the permanent messengers/who deep within the doors of dead holds up bowls filled with glorious fruits*” ⁴(VII) “*your prelude endures/God with a lyre*”⁵ (XIX). Rilke venerated the Apollonian art of Orpheus who dared to venture down into the inferno: “*Only who holds the lyre among shadows/may be allowed to render the infinite praise/Only who with the dead shared/their own poppy seeds/will never lose the sound of their softest of tones (...)* *Only in the two-fold realm do voices become eternal and mild*”⁶ (IX), and come back out again: “*It is always Orpheus when you hear singing / He comes and goes (...)* *Oh, he must leave; it is for you to grasp this, as much as he is frightened by his leaving*”⁷.

It could be said that, at the very instant in which he tires of the journey toward achieving his goal and decides to turn back, Orpheus does, indeed, disobey the command of the special experience he has been granted by the gods and, instead, reinforces doubt and fear; that he uses a time already past and lived rather than advancing towards a time and a space yet to happen and thus yet to be lived. But in doing this, Orpheus also foregrounds an element of linkage with complexity, with the freedom to explore, with the non-fatality of the above-mentioned command, with the need to reconnect time and space with their origins in order to draw from them the thrust toward awareness, space-time integration and the possibility for renewal. The *claustrum* and the bright open space conflict, producing fear (phobia) of course, but they also manage to salvage bits of new spaces at the margins of that primary experience lacking in space, time, and movement.

Claustrophobic, indeed, “curious”, “proud”, “stupid”, (according to the three positions of the psychotic nucleus defined by Bion) and perhaps homosexual (in one

³ Translated from the original text by the translator of the English version of this paper.

⁴ Translated by Cliff Crego

⁵ Translated by Cliff Crego

⁶ Rilke, Rainer Maria. Rainer Maria Rilke: Selected Poems. Trans. Albert Ernest Flemming. New York: Methuen, Inc 1985.

⁷ Rilke, Rainer Maria. Rainer Maria Rilke: Selected Poems. Trans. Albert Ernest Flemming. New York: Methuen, Inc 1985

of the versions of the myth, Orpheus, Dionysus' enemy, is persecuted by the Maenads because after losing Eurydice he is unable to love another woman or, as in another version (Phanocles, *Death of Orpheus*), because he is in enamoured of “*the fresh ... Calais...he was the first in Thrace to desire men/ and to disapprove the love of women*”. The gods are divided, they neither love nor protect him during his descent and return (not very Kohutian of them) and his destiny is a painful one. But Orpheus is, above all, epistemologist and narrator. He knows the art of narrating, and the narrator, while communicating pain and loss and connecting himself with other sorrows and loses that change him, refreshes and energises the listener, resulting in their common celebration of mutual resonance, third and transforming in relation to the dialogue.

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Stefania Marinelli

Professor at Faculty of Psychology, Sapienza Università di Roma. Psychoanalyst of group (IIPG) and ordinary member with Training function of the Italian Institut of Group Psychoanalysis. Member of European Federation of Psychoanalytical Psychotherapy in Health and Related Public Services.

Founding Member and president of the Association for the research on homogeneous group (ARGO) member being approved of International Association of Group Psychoterapie. (<http://www.funzionegamma.edu/argo>). Director of “*Individuo e gruppo*” of Borla edition.

Codrector with Claudio Neri of the Internet Journa *Funzione Gamma*. She has been analyst and supervisor at several psychiatric institution, hospital as well.

E-mail: stefaniamarinelli@fastwebnet.it

Translated from Italian by Darragh Henegan