

Charles Segal

ORPHEUS

The Myth of the Poet



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Charles Segal

俄耳甫斯

诗人的神话

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The Johns Hopkins University Press
BALTIMORE AND LONDON

This book has been brought to publication with the generous assistance of the David M. Robinson Publication Fund.

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Printed in the United States of America

The Johns Hopkins University Press
701 West 40th Street
Baltimore, Maryland 21211
The Johns Hopkins Press Ltd., London

The paper used in this publication meets
the minimum requirements of American
National Standard for Information Sciences
—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library
Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Segal, Charles, 1936—
Orpheus : the myth of the poet.

Bibliography: p.
Includes index.

1. Classical literature—History and criticism. 2. Orpheus
(Greek mythology) in literature. 3. Poets in literature.
4. Classicism. 5. Literature, Modern—Classical influences.
I. Title.

PA3015.R50827 1989 880'.9'351 88-45411
ISBN 0-8018-3708-1 (alk. paper)

Frontispiece: Orpheus, Eurydice, and Hermes;
relief, Museo Nazionale, Naples.
(Photograph: Alinari, number 11171)

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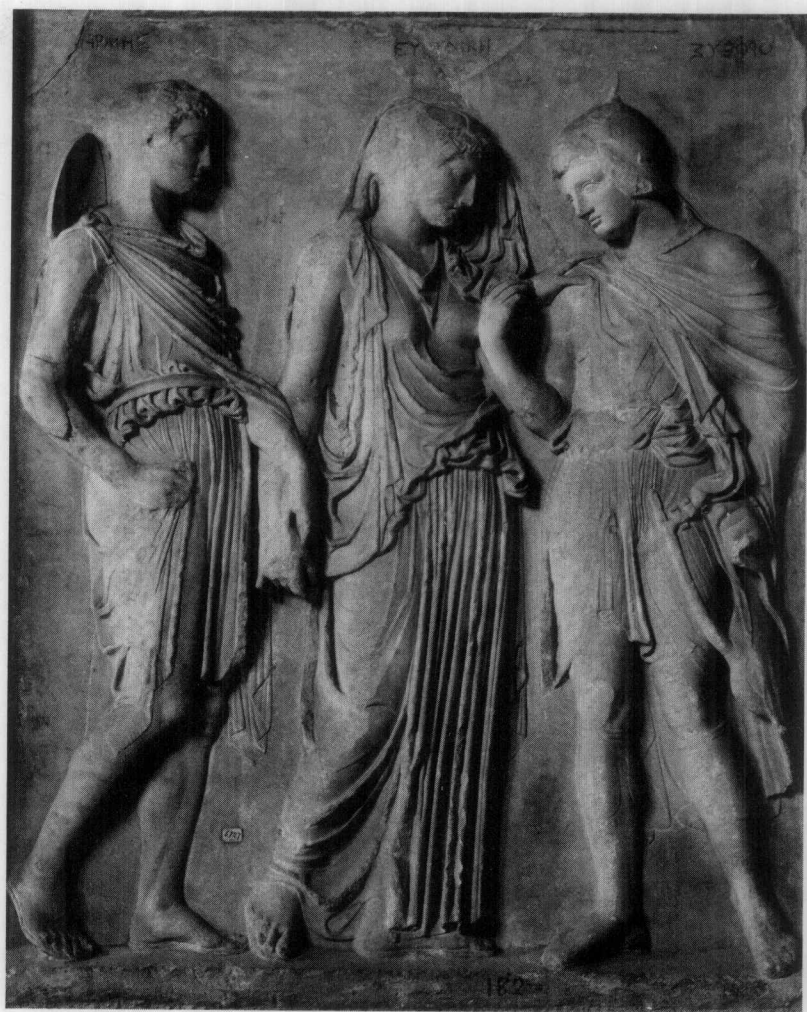
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For Nancy

Il chante, assis au bord du ciel splendide, Orphée!
Le roc marche, et trébuche; et chaque pierre fée
Se sent un poids nouveau qui vers l'azur délire!

He sings, seated at the edge of the splendid heavens, Orpheus!
The rock steps forth and stumbles, and each fairy stone
feels a new weight that becomes delirious toward the azure sky.

—Paul Valéry, "Orphée"

Preface

Inhabiting what the ancients considered the fringes of the civilized world, associated with the barbarian Thracians as much as with the Greeks, Orpheus embodies something of the strangeness of poetry in the world, the mystery of its power over us, and the troubling intrusiveness of its sympathy for the emotions that we cannot always afford. Orpheus sings the world's sorrow and the world's beauty with an intensity that compels the forests and the beasts to follow. His most famous song in the literary tradition is of love and death, of love-in-death, of death invading the happiness of love. For these reasons, perhaps, the Greeks were ambivalent about both his Hellenism and his divine parentage, treating him sometimes as the son of Apollo, sometimes as the son of the Thracian Oeagrus.

If Orpheus' magic recreates the sad music of lamentation with too irresistible a power, he also, as a recent commentator on Rilke suggests, turns "the hut of our emptiness into something positive, into a temple"; and so, for Rilke, as for many poets before and after him, Orpheus also embodies the essence of poetry, its ability "to find, in art, a way to transform the emptiness, the radical deficiency, of human longing into something else."¹ He is most familiar as the poet who can make the world respond to him; but he has another gift, an ability to hear the music of the world, to know its sights and sounds that others cannot perceive. His mythical cousin in this regard is the seer Melampus, who possessed the power to understand the language of birds, insects, and animals. This Orpheus too is the mythical forbear of Rilkean poetics, the poet's claim to know the hidden roots of things; but he has earlier incarnations in Heraclitus' knowledge of the paradoxes of existence or in Lucretius' conviction of the invisible realm of

the atoms whose movements hold the secrets to all of life and death.

Although the ancient legend receives barely a page in H. J. Rose's *Handbook of Greek Mythology*, a full study of its myriad transformations over the centuries would require many volumes. This volume more modestly offers a reading of only a few of the major literary texts in the classical tradition. This is not a book about Orphic religion, Orphism, the Orphics, or the so-called Orphic poems, but about the myth of Orpheus as it appears in literature.²

My leitmotif is Orpheus' place in the triangular relation of art to life, and especially to love, death, and grief. I try to show how the various versions of the myth oscillate between a poetry of transcendence that asserts the power of poetry, song, and imagination over the necessities of nature, including the ultimate necessity, death, and a poetry that celebrates its full, vulnerable immersion in the stream of life. These two strands are already present in the fluctuation of the earlier Greek tradition between a successful and a mournful Orpheus and in Euripides' allusive use of the myth in his *Alcestitis*; but they receive their sharpest delineation in the contrast between Aristaeus and Orpheus in Virgil's Fourth *Georgic* and in the two accounts of Orpheus in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 10 and 11, the one showing the defeat of the poet, the other a kind of victory. Seneca's use of the myth, in his *Tragedies*, is less familiar and deserves more attention than it has received, particularly for the way in which Orpheus helps focus the wish for a relation of harmonious accord with nature and its impossibility in this discordant world.

In modern literature, Rilke's poems about Orpheus are arguably the richest poetical recasting of the myth since classical antiquity. Rilke draws on the ancient ambivalences between triumph and failure in the myth when he uses Orpheus in the *Sonnets to Orpheus* as an embodiment of poetry as monument and poetry as metamorphosis. In this work, Orpheus highlights the paradoxical relation between art and life. Poetry transcends time and change, expressing the invisible life of the spirit; and poetry necessarily exhausts itself as it accepts its physical impulse toward the momentary beauty that is its origin and inspiration and accepts also its own materiality in a world that flowers and dies. For other modern interpreters of the myth, Orpheus is important not so much because he is a poet as because he is a lover. But here too he is a privileged, alien figure, isolated by the fact that he feels and suffers with the totality of his being. If, as John Friedman remarks, "the key to a myth's vigor is its adaptability," then the Orpheus myth is

indeed one of the most vigorous of the classical corpus.³

My first chapter provides a general overview of the myth and sets forth some of the main concerns of this study. I then turn in chapter 2 to Virgil, whose rendering in the fourth book of the *Georgics* has been decisive for almost all subsequent interpreters, both in poetry and prose. Chapters 3–5 follow the development of Orpheus into Virgil's immediate successors, Ovid and Seneca. Chapter 6 studies Rilke's two versions of the myth, his narrative poem *Orpheus. Eurydike. Hermes* and his *Sonnets to Orpheus*. In the last chapter I have attempted to fill in some of the gaps between the ancient and modern Orpheus, concentrating on the continuities with and divergences from the classical tradition. Here, perforce, I have had to be selective. My intention was not to survey the material but to take a few representative examples. I have also taken this opportunity to utilize many of the recent studies of the Orpheus myth; but I have not attempted a full bibliography. That task is well performed in the recent studies by John Friedman, Fritz Graf, and John Warden.

Chapters 1, 2, 3, 5, and parts of chapter 6 have been published before (see Acknowledgments), and I am grateful to the journals and editors for permission to reprint them. Chapter 4, which is new, reexamines the Virgilian and Ovidian versions of the Orpheus myth in the light of recent criticism and from a fresh perspective. The discussion of *Orpheus. Eurydike. Hermes*, in chapter 6 incorporates a few pages from my 1973 study in the *Bucknell Review*, but on the whole it takes a rather different perspective and is largely new. To the study of the *Sonnets* in this chapter I have added some comments on Rilke's notion of "figure" and developed some points that are not in the originally published version. In addition to the modifications noted above, I have deleted two pages about the *Troades* from the Seneca chapter (5) that were not directly related to Orpheus, made a few stylistic changes here and there, abbreviated or deleted a few notes, and eliminated anachronisms where possible. The reprinting of earlier work inevitably leaves the author with hard choices and mixed feelings. Aside from chapter 6, where I have made considerable additions to the original publication, I have changed relatively little in these pieces and instead have presented my current views in the new chapters 4 and 7. I have also translated whatever Greek, Latin, or German was untranslated in the original publications.

Acknowledgments

Material previously published appeared in the following journals. Permission of the editors and publishers is gratefully acknowledged.

Chapter 1: "The Magic of Orpheus and the Ambiguities of Language," *Ramus* 7 (1978): 106–42. Reprinted by permission of Aural Publications and *Ramus*.

Chapter 2: "Orpheus and the Fourth Georgic: Vergil on Nature and Civilization," *American Journal of Philology* 87 (1966): 307–25. Reprinted by permission of the *American Journal of Philology* and the Johns Hopkins University Press.

Chapter 3: "Ovid's Orpheus and Augustan Ideology," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 103 (1972): 473–94.

Chapter 5: "Dissonant Sympathy: Song, Orpheus, and the Golden Age in Seneca's Tragedies," in A. J. Boyle, ed., *Seneca Tragicus. Ramus Essays on Senecan Drama* (Berwick, Australia, 1983): 229–51. (= *Ramus* 12 [1983]: 229–51). Reprinted by permission of Aural Publications and *Ramus*.

Chapter 6: "Rilke's Sonnets to Orpheus and the Orphic Tradition," *Literatur in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* 15 (1982): 367–80. I have also incorporated into this chapter three paragraphs from pages 139–41 of my essay, "Eurydice: Rilke's Transformations of a Classical Myth," *Bucknell Review* 21 (1973): 137–44.

Citations of ancient authors follow the conventions of classical scholarship. Translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

I would like to thank the Johns Hopkins University Press for its initiative in gathering these essays and suggesting their continuation. I am indebted to the anonymous readers of the Press for helpful comments.

I thank Eric Halpern of the Press for his interest and patience. I am also grateful to Irma Garlick for intelligent and incisive copy-editing and to Stephen Hall for help with indexing. The composition of chapters 1 and 5 was aided by research fellowships from the National Endowment for the Humanities and from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation respectively, and I warmly renew my thanks to both institutions. For various forms of aid and hospitality I am grateful to the Fulbright Exchange Program, the Australian-American Educational Exchange Foundation, the departments of classical studies at the University of Melbourne and Monash University respectively, the American Academy in Rome, the American School of Classical Studies in Athens, and the Seeger Foundation and the Hellenic Studies Committee of Princeton University. Professor William Childs of Princeton generously provided a print of the Orpheus relief in Naples. Mrs. Ronnie Hanley patiently helped with the final preparation of the typescript. I thank again the many friends and colleagues who have helped with counsel and criticism over the many years spanned by these essays. Last but far from least are the deep thanks I owe to my wife, Nancy Jones, for support, understanding, and advice.

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	xiii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xvii
1. The Magic of Orpheus and the Ambiguities of Language	1
2. Orpheus and the Fourth <i>Georgic</i> : Virgil on Nature and Civilization	36
3. Ovid's Orpheus and Augustan Ideology	54
4. Virgil and Ovid on Orpheus: A Second Look	73
5. Dissonant Sympathy: Song, Orpheus, and the Golden Age in Seneca's Tragedies	95
6. Orpheus in Rilke: The Hidden Roots of Being	118
7. Orpheus from Antiquity to Today: Retrospect and Prospect	155
<i>Notes</i>	199
<i>Select Bibliography</i>	221
<i>Index</i>	227

The Magic of Orpheus and The Ambiguities of Language

Language is among the most mysterious of man's attributes. Its power not only to communicate truths about reality, but also to compel assent in the face of reality has often appeared miraculous, magical, and also dangerous. The marvel that mere words can impel us to the most momentous actions, and the admiration or fear that this fact inspires, are recurrent themes in classical literature. To express and understand this power, Greek myth early framed the figure of Orpheus, a magical singer, half-man, half-god, able to move all of nature by his song. How that myth shifts in meaning and emphasis in representing that power is the subject of this chapter. Though primarily concerned with classical writers, I shall also consider how a few modern poets used and transmuted this mythic material. My reading of the myth is both diachronic and synchronic. I attempt to study some aspects of its historical development and also to interpret it (especially in section I) as if all of its versions, taken together, form a contemporary statement about the relation of art and life.

Orpheus is a complex, multifaceted figure. For the ancients he is not only the archetypal poet but also the founder of a mystical religion known as Orphism, with a well-developed theology, cosmogony, and eschatology of which much survives in hymns and short epics, mostly of late date.¹ The "poetic" Orpheus inevitably overlaps with the founder of Orphism, but it is the Orpheus of the poetic tradition that this chapter discusses.

I •

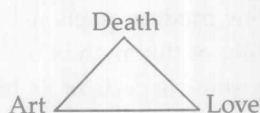
In Orpheus music, poetry, and rhetoric are composite, virtually indistinguishable parts of the power of art. "Rhetoric and music" are his pursuits in the fourteenth-century Catalan humanist, Bernat Metge (ca. 1340–1413), who has Orpheus begin his tale thus:

Apolló fo pare meu, e Calliöpe ma mare, e nasquí en lo regne de Tràcia. La major temps de ma vida despenguí en Retòrica e Música.

Apollo was my father and Calliope my mother, and I was born in the realm of Thrace. The larger part of my life I spent in rhetoric and music.²

The most familiar version of the myth is that of Virgil and Ovid. Eurydice, the bride of Orpheus, is fatally bitten by a snake; the singer, relying on the power of his art, descends to Hades to win her back, persuades the gods of the underworld to relinquish her, but loses her again when he disobeys their command not to look back. Renouncing women (and in one version turning to homosexual love), he is torn apart by a band of angry Maenads. The head and lyre, still singing, float down the Hebrus river to the island of Lesbos, where Apollo protects the head from a snake and endows it with prophetic power.

The fundamental elements in the myth form a triangle, thus:



The meaning of the myth shifts as different points form the base: love-death, love-art, art-death. On the one hand, Orpheus embodies the ability of art, poetry, language—"rhetoric and music"—to triumph over death; the creative power of art allies itself with the creative power of love. On the other hand, the myth can symbolize the failure of art before the ultimate necessity, death. In the former case the myth celebrates the poetic inspiration and the power of persuasive language. It is this aspect of the myth that Ovid dramatizes when, even at the poet's death, he represents the spears and stones cast by the Maenads as charmed by the song and reluctant to wound the singer until the women's raucous shouting drowns out the music (*Met.* 11.9–14). Two thousand years later, Rilke has his Orpheus "outsound [the Maenads'] cry with order," and his "upbuilding play arises from among the destroyers."

Du aber, Göttlicher, du, bis zuletzt noch Ertöner,
da ihn der Schwarm der verschmähten Mänaden befiel,
hast ihr Geschrei übertönt mit Ordnung, du Schöner,
aus den Zerstörenden stieg dein erbauendes Spiel.

But you, divine one, you, till the end still sounding,
when beset by the swarm of disdained maenads,
you outsounded their cries with order, beautiful one,
from among the destroyers arose your upbuilding music.

(*Sonnets to Orpheus* 1.26.1-4)³

If, on the other hand, stress falls on the failure of the poet, the myth expresses the intransigence of reality before the plasticity of language. "Rhetoric and music" then appear as symbols of the creations of human culture in general. Death sets art and culture back into the perspective of nature.

It is this tragic aspect of Orpheus that Milton draws upon in the Orphic imagery of *Lycidas*.

Where were ye, Nymphs, when the remorseless deep
Closed o'er the head of your loved Lycidas? . . .
Ay me, I fondly dream!
Had ye been there—for what could that have done?
What could the Muse herself that Orpheus bore,
The Muse herself, for her enchanting son
Whom universal nature did lament,
When, by the rout that made the hideous roar,
His gory visage down the stream was sent,
Down the swift Hebrus to the Lesbian shore.

(50-59)

Even Milton's elegiac Orpheus, however, though subject to the inexorable power of death and the violence of nature, has his double and opposite in the shepherd-singer, also a poet, whose song is in harmony with nature's vital rhythms.

Thus sang the uncouth Swain to the Oaks and rills,
While the still morn went out with Sandals grey,
He touched the tender stops of various Quills,
With eager thought warbling his Doric lay:
And now the Sun had stretched out all the hills,

And now was dropt into the Western bay:
 At last he rose, and twitched his Mantle blue:
 To-morrow to fresh Woods, and Pastures new.

(186-193)

The power of song here participates in the movements of life and death in nature, correlated in sympathy with the passage from dawn to evening. Like the Orpheus who once lived, this poet sings to trees and rivers, and his song will be reborn with the "fresh" life of the morning that will succeed the darkness that is now approaching; his mantle, the color of the clear, daylight sky, already anticipates that rebirth to new energy of song and joy in "fresh Woods, and Pastures new."

Milton thus splits the Orphic voice into two: a mournful and a revitalized song. Poetry itself, through its identification with a singer-hero who suffers, dies, and is reborn, participates in the diurnal (and by metonymy the seasonal) alternation of life and death. The pattern is a very old one. It can be traced back to the shepherd-kings and singers of the ancient Near East such as Tammuz, Enkidu, and David and then recurs with a more self-conscious reference to the power of poetry and art, in figures like the dying Daphnis of Theocritus' First *Idyll* or the dead and resurrected Daphnis of Virgil's Fifth *Eclogue*.⁴

When in somberer mood Milton returns to the figure of Orpheus in *Paradise Lost*, a dualism is still present, but the terms have changed. Invoking the heavenly Urania as his own Muse at the beginning of book 7, he presents Orpheus' failure as unrelieved. Defeated by the "barbarous dissonance . . . / of that wild rout that tore the Thracian bard / in Rhodope," Orpheus embodies the precariousness and isolation of Milton's own poetic voice.

More safe I Sing with mortal voice, unchang'd
 To hoarse or mute, though fall'n on evil days,
 On evil days though fall'n, and evil tongues;
 In darkness, and with dangers compast round,
 And solitude; yet not alone, while thou [Urania]
 Visit'st my slumbers Nightly.

(7.24-29)

Over against the pagan legend, where, as in *Lycidas*, the Muse could not "defend her son," Milton sets his own post-Orphic "heavenly" Muse, with her fusion of Neoplatonic and Christian allegory.