

## Foreword

The poetic drama which follows was written more than forty years ago. On the occasion of this its belated appearance in print the question arose whether I had better add anything to the extensive commentary material in which it is already embedded, including John Ulreich's Afterword and my own Program Note written for the play's brief and inconspicuous production in 1948. I was at first unwilling to do anything of the sort, because my whole desire and intention in writing it was precisely not to express in allegorical, or even symbolical, dress any metaphysical or philosophical speculations or convictions I might then have arrived at, but simply to produce, if I could, a good play; and one moreover which (so far as my pronounced lack of practical Thespian experience allowed) would be "good theater." The convictions and speculations might or might not transpire through the way I dealt with the characters and the plot; they were not to be its object.

Perhaps the personal anecdote of its genesis is relevant here. I had casually mentioned to my friend C. S. Lewis that I seemed to be feeling an impulse to write a play in verse and was wondering about a subject, and at the same time that I wanted to keep clear of the sort of ulterior motives I have just referred to. I recall the occasion very clearly and, though I am not reproducing his exact words, he said in effect: "Why not take one of the myths and simply do your best with it — Orpheus for instance?" To which my mental reaction was, after some reflection: Well, why not? And so, in the event, I got down to it in the limited spare time then at my disposal. Apart from the actual writing, the "getting down to it" consisted almost exclusively of a careful re-reading, with a classical dictionary beside me, of Virgil's presentation of the myth in the fourth *Georgic*. I had "done" it at school, but my recollections of Virgil, apart from a line here or a phrase there, were pitifully vague. I knew of course that there was plenty of literature in existence, based on archaeological and other research, about the figure of Orpheus, the place of Orphism in the history of Greek mythology and philosophy, its influence on early Christianity as evidenced by murals in the catacombs, and so forth; but for the reasons given above I refrained from any attempt to convert my smattering into sound knowledge — an attempt for which I should have had scant leisure in any event. Thus, for example, if Act II Scene ii between Orpheus and the animals should bring into the spectator's or, more likely, the reader's mind St. Paul's remark that the whole creation groaneth awaiting the redemption, or Novalis's aphorism, "Man is the messiah of nature," it will not be because the scene was devised with that intention.

The reluctance I still feel to write anything of a hermeneutic nature is however mitigated in 1982 by the forty-five years' interval since its composition, a gap wide enough to enable me to approach the play almost as if it had been written by someone else. I ask myself therefore, not as its fond parent but as nearly as possible as a judiciously objective observer, whether I can add anything useful; and I think perhaps I can.

It appears to me that, if one is to talk of "themes" and such like at all, then there are really *two* themes, or perhaps enigmas, central to the narrative embodied in the drama. Maybe one of them should be labelled "diachronic" and the other "synchronic," though I am not very fond of the words. There is, firstly, "the nature of consciousness" and more particularly the evolution of consciousness in the individual and the race; with, integrally related to that, the theme of sacrificial death and rebirth. And there is, secondly, the theme or enigma of the relation between man and woman. Of these two themes, which are interwoven with one another, the first is dealt with so fully and understandingly by John Ulreich that it would be senseless to try to add anything — except perhaps that, in that context, the

symbolism requires not only Orpheus and Aristaeus, as Ulreich points out, but Orpheus, Aristaeus and Eurydice, all three, to be sometimes imagined as a single human entity.

The second theme however seems to me to have a more comparable status, and to fill a more central role than the Afterword may suggest. The play is very much aware (can a play be aware?) of the enigma inherent in the nature of love, of the two antagonisms (again, closely interwoven with one another) experienced there, or the two polarities demanding to be resolved: between flesh and spirit, and between egotism and altruism. The former makes itself felt particularly in Act I Scene ii, and again in Act IV Scene i, but is present as an undertone throughout; the latter, in Act II Scene ii, culminating, as it does, in Orpheus' resolve to visit the underworld, not in order to cure his own bereavement but to rescue the animals from their natural predicament. But this second conflict — between egotism and altruism — also transpires through minor touches elsewhere, such as the last two stanzas of the Nightingale's song, where Philomela affirms that she sings of her own woe, not out of self-pity but for the sake of her sister Procne (who is not yet aware of the brutal nature of her husband Tereus). Again, the two sub-themes, so to speak, to the theme of love — flesh/spirit and egotism/altruism — coalesce at the crucial moment in Act III Scene i, when Orpheus, expecting to see Persephone but seeing instead, not only Eurydice but Eurydice in the flesh, forgets about the animals and his selfless resolve and is aware only of his reawakened passion.

C. S. Lewis in a Note written in 1948 emphasized, I hope rightly, that *Orpheus* is a mystery drama, not a "problem" one.<sup>1</sup> Yet the scope of its territory is such that it does stretch a sort of tentacle here and there towards issues in the problem class: egalitarianism and its consequences; women's liberation; the permissive society; abortion; the idea of monogamy, its relation to the idea of romantic love, perhaps even the long long history of that relation and that idea; and so forth. Constancy — steadfastness — loyalty is the crucial stiffener that distinguishes love from passion, as the nuance of aesthetic contemplation is what distinguishes passion from lust; yes, but it is also "the lethargy of custom," repetition, "the same again," and as such is, as the Satyr points out in Act IV Scene i, "the thing they do in Hell." And no wonder, if Coleridge was right to perceive in the lethargy of custom the funeral of imagination and, with that, of all but superficial knowledge. What is the relation between knowing and being? Possibly it is from here, deep down in the mystery of cognition, that the interweaving of the two main themes begins. How, if knowledge without imagination is not knowledge at all, but only a kind of cataloguing? And if knowledge without love cannot be knowledge with imagination?

It is easy to lose one's way among such problems. I like to think that King Minos of Crete attempted, before the mental development of Greece was far enough advanced for it, to tackle the sort of intellectual problems that were later to be handled by Plato's *Parmenides*, and that, finding it all too much for him, he gave it up and went out and built a labyrinth instead. In the same way the author of *Orpheus* may perhaps be thought of as having "given up" on a tangle of equally bewildering but less abstract problems and gone out and written a play instead. A myth has been defined by someone — German, I believe — as "a symbolic idea with life-renewing force." If one cannot answer questions, or solve enigmas, one can at least write, or rework a myth around them. And since the solid stuff of authentic myth is pretty sure to be

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<sup>1</sup> C. S. Lewis's note, written to for the production of the play in Sheffield in that year: "I await with great interest the public reaction to a work which has influenced me so deeply as Barfield's ORPHEUS. On the technical side it presents us with a variety almost as rich as that of the Shepherd's Calendar. I hope that this will not be mistaken for virtuosity. The alliterative lines, the trochaics, the couplets, the blank verse and the lyrics are in reality so responsive to the different states of being they embody, that they serve the same purpose as dramatic orchestration. They mediate a drama which the Orpheus in each of us will understand best if he at first leaves the Eurydice in him free to follow the images and the melodic development. It is a mystery (not a 'problem') drama. It executes in us a re-union of which we always stand in need, never more than at present."

wiser than I am, there is always the chance that in my handling of it I may, without knowing it, throw up something that will one day, when the times are riper, help wiser heads than mine to arrive at answers and reach conclusions.

Theme — enigma — question: in its “synchronic” aspect (which is all I am here considering) I am inclined to see *Orpheus* as asking a question. And the question is: can the radiant warmth of erotic affection be expanded or metamorphosed into what the Germans call *allgemeine Menschenliebe*? Can Eros *become* Agape? That Orpheus himself, while still above, could only half achieve such a transition under the discipline of bereavement, is shown by his reaction to the encounter with his half-regained Eurydice in Hades. The one would have had to cease in order to make room for the other. But of course that is quite literally “not the whole story.” I wonder whether the play, taken as a whole, may not be hinting at a transition from, or rather through, Eros to Agape, neither as a Platonic transfer of attention from carnal copy to ghostly original, nor simply as darkness giving way to light, but rather as moonlight brightening imperceptibly into sunshine.

OWEN BARFIELD  
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## PROGRAM NOTE FOR THE ORIGINAL PRODUCTION

Most people have heard of the central event in the story of Orpheus and Eurydice. They know of the condition under which he was permitted to rescue his wife from the lower regions and of his failure to observe it. But the surrounding mythology is much less familiar. There is, for instance, nothing in Gluck's lovely opera to suggest that Eurydice was a Nereid. In Virgil's fourth *Georgic* the well-known story occurs as the centrepiece in another story, that of Aristaeus and the loss and restoration of his bees. It is in fact told to Aristaeus by Proteus, when the former consults him to ascertain the cause of the disaster and its proper remedy.

The framework of my play is the whole of the story told by Virgil. The play presents the story primarily for its own sake, but since it is a myth, the true dramatic shape and development lie as much in the sequence of images as in the incidents and characters as such. A single sequence progresses from incidents of which Orpheus is the central figure to others of which Aristaeus is the central figure. One way of putting the matter would be to say that the true *hero* of the play is represented in the persons of both Orpheus and Aristaeus. But now for the story itself.

Eurydice, a Nereid, one of the fifty daughters of the sea-god Nereus, is wooed and won by Orpheus, who is the son of Apollo by the Muse Calliope. Their joy in each other is paradisaical, while it lasts, but Orpheus, inevitably, begins to impart to the vaguely conscious water-being, his wife, some of that reflective self-consciousness which made him a musician and poet and without which (as he points out to her) he would never have been able to single her out as his bride. Eurydice learns her lesson with enthusiasm. She even seeks to dwell on ecstatic experience by deliberately interrupting and repeating it, and it is while she has momentarily left Orpheus with this object in view that she is seen and pursued by Aristaeus, another son of Apollo by the water nymph Cyrene. In her flight she is bitten by a serpent and dies.

She is conveyed by Charon to Hades (the name, both of the lower regions and of their tyrannical ruler) but arrives there in a condition of sleep. Hades seeks to awaken her, but it proves impossible. He declares that, when she does awaken, she must be judged and placed in chains like his other subjects. But Persephone, his queen (who is a goddess partly of the nether world and partly of the upper air), insists that when that happens, Eurydice shall be allowed to proceed to Elysium, the abode of the blessed. The dispute is left unresolved.

Crushed by his bereavement, Orpheus seeks consolation in his power of song, and such is the beauty of his music that the birds and wild beasts assemble to listen to it. Beneath its spell they are moved to utter a language which Orpheus is able to understand. It teaches him the beauty and wisdom of renunciation, and he promises, for their sake rather than his own, to visit the realm of Hades, in order to seek the aid of Persephone.

He visits that realm and, expecting to be confronted with Persephone, in fact encounters the shade of Eurydice, whom his voice arouses for the first time from the condition of sleep in which she has been sunken since her death. Her touch reawakens all his renounced personal passion. Chains are at once fastened on Eurydice, against which Persephone protests to Hades. Moved, as he says, by the beauty of Orpheus's song and desirous of pleasing his Queen, Hades agrees to allow Eurydice to return to earth, but he and Persephone together impose on the lovers the conditions that Orpheus shall lead the way to the upper air and shall not look back upon Eurydice till the journey is accomplished. With the help of his spy, Ascalaphus (recently transformed by Persephone into an owl), Hades takes care that the poet shall fail to

fulfill these terms. Eurydice is snatched back into the shades and Orpheus returns to earth once more alone.

He is no longer followed by the animals. Nature has deserted him, and with dull despair, he finds that even his power of music has gone. He sings, but the songs are banal or sophisticated, and he knows it. The Maenads, followers of the wine-god Dionysus, are incensed alike by his idiotic constancy to the mere memory of Eurydice (which makes him decline the renewal of living inspiration they can offer) and by rumours of his indulgence in unnatural practices. Excited by a piece of crude but all too significant ritual, half serious, half burlesque, as well as by the drunken orgy which preceded it, they fall upon Orpheus and tear him limb from limb.

Meanwhile disaster of a different kind has overtaken Aristaeus. His bees, on which he relied for a livelihood, have all died of famine or disease. Destitute and hopeless, he decides to implore the help of his mother Cyrene, and he visits her accordingly at the source of the sacred river Peneus, where she dwells with her sister nymphs. It was into this river that the Maenads, or the Satyr who led them, had flung the head of the dismembered Orpheus, and when the nymphs discover it there, it utters the name of his beloved. When she has heard Aristaeus' story, Cyrene, after pouring a libation to Oceanus, is able to advise him to consult Proteus, a sea-god older and wiser than Nereus and possessing, like him, the faculty of changing himself into every conceivable shape. Acting upon the sea-god's advice, Aristaeus sacrifices a bull to the shade of Eurydice, and thereupon a miracle is wrought and his bees are restored to him in richer measure than before.

"If bees were always bees and nothing more," as Hades has remarked in Act II, Scene i, that would be all the story, but the bees had a way of carrying sunlight down from the upper air into the nether regions, a process which could end only in breaking down the barrier between the two worlds. It had begun to crumble a little before the story opens — a fact of which both Hades and, in his different way, Charon showed an uneasy awareness. The final choruses suggest that the dykes are down at last, and among them are heard the voices of Orpheus and Eurydice, joyous now, for Orpheus has found again both his music and his beloved.

That is the story, and Eurydice will find this account of it more than enough. Before I add any more, let me emphasise that it is the lady whom I am really concerned to please. If she should be delighted — even satisfied — not otherwise, I shall consider the play a success. The Orpheus in the Spectator's mind will be pondering over a *significatio* or inner meaning of some sort. I must tell him, not that there is no such thing, but that there is no single one. The figures of Greek mythology are so rich in imaginative potentiality that anyone who welcomes a few of them into his own imagination, with its twentieth-century furniture, will find that there is no need to go out of his way to hunt for modern instances and applications. Rather they come crowding so thick and fast that he is positively embarrassed by them. I think, however, that while I was working on this play, the figure of Orpheus came to stand, in some degree, for the practice of reflection on experience and its results. All conscious nature has experiences of pleasure and pain. Man alone can deliberately will the *repetition* of an experience. And repetition, experienced as such, is at the heart, for good and evil, of his faculty of reasoning, and thus makes possible his language, his art, his morality, and indeed his humanity. Yet it is the enemy of life, for repetition is itself the principle, not of life but of mechanism.

A — what shall I say? — a root-concept of this nature has a way of showing its face beneath many widely separated realms of human experience. Especially if you *give* it a face, by allowing it to coalesce with a living figure such as that of Orpheus. I at any rate seemed to see that countenance peeping through such things as: music and poetry, the relation between man and woman, the relation between mankind and

the world of nature, the progress or regress of civilisation, the fall of man and his morality, psychology, the history of the Romantic Movement, and the mystery of death and resurrection. And the lacerated look which it wore seemed to me to express the tragedy inherent in human destiny itself. The number “two” was regarded as sacred to the god Hades, and it was perhaps natural that I should conceive the place Hades as the region where the principle of lifeless repetition has triumphed, where Sisyphus’s stone rolls back to him with the regularity of clockwork, and where the innocent voluptuousness which Orpheus had awakened in Eurydice, and his own tendency to substitute for her personal “otherness” a mere wraith fabricated by the devil and his own desires, have both been carried by Tantalus to their logical conclusion (“logical” indeed) in sub-humanity. Whether it was equally natural to relate this place as closely as I have done to the upper world, as we know it today, the world of our highly abstract and therefore increasingly totalitarian and mechanized civilisation, may be disputed. The play was written before 1939. Those who can accept the convention will, I hope, feel with me that for us too, there are signs, faint enough no doubt, of an imminent crumbling of the stern barrier between that dreary place and what corresponds with the “upper air” of myth.

OWEN BARFIELD

## Glossary and Guide to Pronunciation

### CHARACTERS

**Arethusa** (ă-rĕ-thū'-să), a wood nymph who, to escape pursuit by the river god Alpheus, was changed by Artemis into an underground stream.

**Aristaeus** (ă-rīs-tee'-ūs), son of Apollo and Cyrene, father of Actaeon, and half-brother of Orpheus.

**Ascalaphus** (ăs-kăl'-ă-fūs), Hades's spy, transformed by Persephone into an owl.

**Charon** (kair'-ōn), the boatman who ferried the souls of the dead to the underworld.

**Cyrene** (sī-ree'-nee), a water-nymph beloved by Apollo, to whom she bore Aristaeus.

**Danaïds** (dăn'-ay-īdz), the fifty daughters of Danaus, who commanded them to slay their husbands; only one refused.

**Eurydice** (ēūr-īd'-ī-see), daughter of Nereus and wife of Orpheus.

**Hades** (hay'-deez), god of the underworld (also called Hades) m ravisher and then husband of Persephone, brother of Zeus and Poseidon.

**Maenads** (mee'-nădz), female worshipers of Dionysus.

**Nereids** (nee'-rīdz), the fifty daughters of Nereus.

**Nereus** (neer'-ēūs), a sea deity, forerunner of Poseidon.

**Orpheus** (orf'-ēūs), son of Apollo and Calliope

**Persephone** (per-sĕf'-ō-nee), daughter of Demeter, and Hades's Queen; she spends half the year (summer) with her mother, the other half (winter) with her husband.

**Satyr(s)** (say'-tūr), nature spirits, half man and half goat; followers of Dionysus and companions of Pan.

**Sisyphus** (sīs'-ī-fūs), for attempting to cheat death, is punished by having to roll a huge rock up a cliff, only to have it roll down again as he reaches the top.

**Tantalus** (tan'-tă-lūs), for having fed his son, Pelops, to the gods, is tormented by being unable to drink from the river in which he stands or to eat from the cluster of grapes above his head.

## MENTIONED

**Acheron** (ăk'-ĕr-ŏn), Sorrow, one of the rivers of Hades.

**Actaeon** (ak-tee'-ŏn), the son of Aristaeus, was turned into a stag by Artemis (Chastity) and killed by his own hounds.

**Aegean** (ee-jee'-ăn), the sea between Greece and Asia Minor, named after Aegeus, the father of Theseus.

**Aphrodite** (af-rŏ-dĭ'-tee), goddess of generation and human love.

**Apollo** (ă-pŏl'-ŏ), the Sun God, father of Orpheus and Aristaeus.

**Argus** (ăr'-gŭs), a creature with a hundred eyes, set by Hera to guard Io, beloved of Zeus; slain by Hermes.

**Artemis** (ăr'-tĕ-mĭs), twin sister of Apollo, virgin goddess of the Moon, chastity and hunting.

**Avernus** (ă-vĕr'-nŭs), an entrance to Hades; also one of the rivers of the underworld.

**Beroë** (bĕr'-ŏ-ee), one of the Oceanides (sea nymphs), attendant upon Cyrene.

**Cadmus** (kăd'-mŭs), founder of Thebes and father of Semele.

**Calliope** (kă-lĭ'-ŏ-pee), daughter of Zeus and Mnemosyne, Muse of heroic poetry; mother of Orpheus.

**Cerberus** (sŭr'-bŭr-ŭs), the three-headed dog of the underworld.

**Cronos** (kro'-nŏs), a Titan whose union with Rhea produced Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades, who eventually overthrew their father and placed Zeus on the throne of heaven. The reign of Cronos had been associated with a Golden Age on earth.

**Clymene** (klĭm'-ĕ-nee), a Nereid, attendant upon Cyrene.

**Clytaemnestra** (klĭ-tĕm-nĕs'-tră), daughter of Leda and Zeus, who came to Leda in the form of a swan; twin sister of Helen and wife of Agamemnon, whom she slew to avenge his sacrifice of their daughter, Iphigenia.

**Coctyus** (kŏ-kĭ'-tŭs), Lamentation, one of the rivers of Hades.

**Deïopeia** (dee-ĭ-o-pee'-ă), a Nereid, attendant upon Cyrene.



**Demeter** (dee-mee'-tēr), The Earth-Mother goddess, mother of Persephone.

**Dionysus** (dī-ō-nice'-us), the Wine-God, son of Zeus and Semele, or Persephone (to whom Zeus presented himself in the form of a serpent). When Semele demanded that Zeus appear to her in his proper form, his radiance burned her to a cinder; Zeus preserved the fetal Dionysus in his thigh, whence is due course he was born.

**Drymo** (drī'-mo), a sea-nymph, one of the attendants of Cyrene.

**Elysium** (ē-liz'-ī-ŭm), the dwelling place reserved for the spirits of the blessed.

**Erebus** (ēr'-ē-būs), the underworld, particularly the region through which the virtuous passed on their way to Elysium.

**Evoo** (ay'-vō-ay'), the ritual cry of the Maenads.

**Giants** (jī'-ents), sons of Uranus (Heaven) and Ge (Earth), who sprung from the wound given Uranus by his son Cronos; they were cast into Tartarus when they attempted a rebellion against Zeus.

**Helen** (hel'-ēn), daughter of Leda and Zeus, twin sister of Clytaemnestra, wife of Menelaus (brother of Agamemnon); Helen's abduction by Paris caused the Trojan war.

**Hephaestus** (hē-fige'-tūs), god of fire and metal work, unlovely husband of Aphrodite.

**Hera** (hee'-rā), daughter of Cronos and Rhea, wife of Zeus.

**Herakles** (heer'-ā-kleez), the greatest hero of the ancient world. His eleventh labor was stealing the golden apples of the Hesperides, whose secret he had forced Proteus to reveal; his twelfth was bringing the hell-hound Cerberus up to earth.

**Hesperides** (hes-pēr'-ī-deez), paradisaal gardens in the far west, in which there were golden apples guarded by a dragon.

**Hesperus** (hes'-pēr-ūs), the evening star, father of the Hesperides.

**Hippocrene** (hīp-o-kree'-nee), a spring on Mount Helicon, sacred to the Muses.

**Iacchus** (ee-ak'-ūs), another name of Dionysus.

**Lethe** (lee'-thē), Oblivion, one of the rivers of Hades.

**Marysas** (mar'-sī-ās), a satyr who challenged Apollo to a contest of musical ability.

**Metis** (meet'-īs), an Oceanid. She was the first wife of Zeus, who swallowed her when he learned she was pregnant; Athena was later born out of Zeus' head.

**Minos** (mīn'-ōs), king of Crete, father of the Minotaur, supreme judge of the underworld.

**Mnemosyne** (mnee-moz'-i-nee), Memory, the mother of the Muses, who inspire all human arts.

**Oceanus** (o-see'-a-nus), a Titan, god of the stream surrounding earth.

**Olympus** (ō-līm'-pūs), sacred mountain of the gods.

**Pan** (pan), part man, part goat; the god of the shepherds.

**Peleus** (peel'-ēūs), married Thetis, a Nereid, by whom he begot Achilles.

**Peneus** (pee-nee'-ūs), a river in Thessaly, home of Cyrene.

**Phlegethon** (fleg'-ě-thōn), Fire, one of the rivers of Hades.

**Philomela** (fīl-ō-may'-lā), sister of Procne, raped by her sister's husband, Tereus, and transformed into a nightingale.

**Phoebus** (fee'-būs), Brightness, a name of Apollo.

**Phyllodoce** (phīl-lōd'-o-kee), one of Cyrene's attendant nymphs.

**Procne** (prōk'-nee), sister of Philomela, wife of Tereus.

**Proteus** (prō'-tēūs), a sea deity, shape-changer, and prophet.

**Rhadamanthus** (rād-ā-man'-thūs), of Crete, became a judge of the underworld.

**Semele** (sēm'-ě-lee), daughter of Cadmus, mother of Dionysus; when Zeus appeared to her in his divine radiance, she was burned to ash, but Zeus preserved their fetal son in his thigh, from which in due course, Dionysus was born.

**Styx** (stīx), Hatred, one of the rivers of Hades.

**Taenarus** (tee'-nā-rūs), an entrance to the underworld.

**Tartarus** (tar'tā-rūs), the place in the underworld where sinners were punished.

**Tempe** (tēm'-pee), a famous valley in Thessaly.

**Tereus** (tee'-rēūs), husband of Procne, ravisher of Philomela.

**Theseus** (thee'-sēūs), slew the Minotaur in the Labyrinth of Crete.

**Thetis** (thě'-tīs), a Nereid, was the mother of Achilles by Peleus.

**Titans** (tī'-tānz), offspring of Uranus and Ge (Heaven and Earth), were overthrown by Zeus and other Olympian deities.

**Uranus** (yoo-ra'-nūs), Father Sky.

**Zeus** (zēūs), Father of gods and men, especially of Dionysus and Persephone.