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## Re-visiting The Myth Of 'Orpheus' In Rainer Maria Rilke's *The Sonnets To Orpheus*

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Rainer Maria Rilke, a Bohemian-Austrian poet and art critic (4 December 1875 – 29 December 1926), is one of the significant poets in the German language. Rilke is a transitional figure in twentieth century European literature, midway between the traditional and modern movements within poetry. His work struggles with the difficulty of union with the transcendent, in an age of anxiety, disbelief, and isolation. He wrote more than 400 poems in French, dedicated to his homeland of choice, the canton of Valais in Switzerland. Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus* (1922) is a series of fifty-five poems indissolubly linked to Greek myth. Rilke dedicated this to Vera OuckamaKnoop, a young girl who was a talented dancer but died of leukemia as a teenager.

The Sonnets are 'little songs' (sonetti in Italian) sung by Orpheus, the legendary musician and poet in ancient Greek religion and myth whose divine music charmed all living things and moved inanimate objects. Overcome with grief at the death of his wife, Eurydice, Orpheus played beautiful mournful music on his lyre that the gods of the underworld allowed him to retrieve her from there on the condition that he walk in front of her on their journey back to the earth and not look back. Due to his fear of losing her again he did look back and lost Eurydice forever. In Ovid's version of the story Orpheus was torn apart by the Maenads, female devotees of Dionysus, during a drunken orgy when they were enraged because he had spurned the love of women since losing his wife and had taken only young men as lovers. His head and lyre floated down the river of Hebrus, his head still singing. His head was buried at Lesbos and his lyre was placed among the stars in the sky.

Through the story of Orpheus, Rilke connected with the archetypal divine-human whose gift is the harmony of all being in a time of chaos and disorder, and is dismembered and journeys to the realm of Death and returns. Orpheus became the nexus allowing communion not only with his own story, but through him, with Tammuz of Babylon, with Osiris of Egypt, and with the Christ who is broken as sacred bread to feed the people daily on the Altars of Christendom. At best, Orpheus is sometimes called a semi-god. He is a shaman, a priest with magical powers, which include the ability to speak the language of animals, to fly, and to go down under the earth.

*There rose a tree. O pure transcendence!  
O Orpheus sings! O tall tree in the ear!  
And all was silent. Yet still in this silence  
proceeded new beginning, sign and transformation.* (Sonnet.1)

. The major stories about Orpheus are centered on his ability to charm all living things and even stones with his music, his attempt to retrieve his wife, Eurydice, from the underworld, and his death at the hands of those who could not hear his divine music. As an archetype of the inspired singer, Orpheus is one of the most significant figures in the reception of classical mythology in Western culture, portrayed or alluded to in countless forms of art and popular culture including poetry, film, opera, and painting.

For the Greeks, Orpheus was a founder and prophet of the so-called "Orphic" mysteries. He was credited with the composition of the *Orphic Hymns*, a collection of which survives. Greeks of the Classical age venerated Orpheus as the greatest of all poets and musicians; it was said that while Hermes had invented the lyre, Orpheus perfected it. Poets such as Simonides of Ceos said that Orpheus's music and singing could charm the birds, fish and wild beasts, coax the trees and rocks into dance, and divert the course of rivers. He was one of the few of Greek heroes to visit the Underworld and return; his music and song even had power over Hades.

The production of poetry transforms the visible into the invisible, a purely linguistic entity: poetry transcends the experiential world. In *The sonnets to Orpheus*, the concept of poetry as a place of metamorphosis goes far beyond a particular treatment of the poetic genre. It also encompasses the idea that poetry also plays a prominent role in the attempt to lead a fulfilled life. Myths answered many questions related to existential phenomena of mankind in modern times; these myths are still known through their literary presentation by classical authors, Homer, Virgil, Ovid and many others, but they had lost their original power to give meaning to life, as the Enlightenment had replaced the mythological approach with rational investigation. As a result, war, for instance, is no longer seen as a battle of divine forces but turned as a conflict among various states gratifying their personal, political, economical interests; these interests can be identified and explained by rational investigation.

Both *Duino Elegies*, *The sonnets to Orpheus* is an attempt to find valid answer to the existential question. Rilke's attempt to use Orpheus as a symbol is the culmination of a number of themes and motifs dating back to the poet's earliest writing, which coalesce into the figure of the singing god who redeems out of time into space. His function links him with *Duino Elegies* through the principle of transformation. Orpheus is also equated with the poet, as Rilke reiterates the need to unite life and death through his poetry. Orpheus literally sings among the dead and the poet does the same.

In the *Duino Elegies*, *The sonnets to Orpheus* and the uncollected late poems, Rilke's modernism also takes a mythic turn. Rilke's mythic modernism remains preoccupied with the subtext of social and political modernity. Within the context of literary modernism, Rilke's mythical turn is not unique. The most famous of the mythic creatures is the angel of the *Duino Elegies*, who becomes a trope for viewing the human world from an extra-human perspective. Rilke's mythic poetry involves a return to saying the seemingly simple, elementary things associated with human life.

Rilke's idea of metamorphosis counteracts the religious concept of martyrdom, according to which eternal life is to be attained via neglect of human nature. Orpheus and Wera are the product of metamorphic character in Rilke's view; her dancing is described as an 'art of movement and metamorphosis', experiences a transformation into music and finally into drawing where it expresses itself more accurately. Another aspect of it is that Wera dies young and thus makes her truly a figure of metamorphosis for Rilke. The opening sonnet on the metamorphic power of Orphic song sets the tone for the entire cycle:

*A tree rose up- O apogee of rising!  
Now Orpheus sings all hearing's tallest tree.  
And nothing speaks but signals in the silence,  
new births and transformations, come to be. (I: I)*

Orpheus's singing transforms animals into cultural beings and thus helps them to overcome the boundaries of their natural existence. It is important to note that this metamorphosis takes place in rather than after life: the animals emerge from their natural habitat, the forest, and Orpheus whose singing brings about metamorphosis is as fully part of the natural world as he is figure of transcendence. Thus Rilke's idea of metamorphosis thwarts the religious concepts of martyrdom, according to which eternal life is to be attained via a neglect of human nature. The sonnets point in the opposite direction; they appreciate human nature on the way to eternity:

*For what we are, we the strivers  
are valued still by the powers:  
part of the life the Gods live. (II : 27)*

Rilke's mythic poetry involves a return to saying the seemingly simple, elementary things associated with human life. But even a myth-making poet such as Rilke, who placed poetry in an alternative time, -space recognised that modernist writing is of its culture and history.

Like *DuinoEegies*, Rilke seeks to achieve metamorphosis by means of poetry and as a result the concept of metamorphosis becomes a core principal of poetic composition in his another writing *The sonnets to Orpheus*. The purpose of the sonnets is to establish a connection to the greatest and most powerful elements of humankind existence. The ancient myth of Orpheus, son of the Thracian king Oeagrus and the muse Calliope, appealed to Rilke as it presents a whole series of metamorphosis. Rilke has given a parallel text, revisits the Orphic myth through his reading of Ovid. Three moments of metamorphosis are identifiable in the orphic myth as following:

Orpheus was the son of Apollo and the muse Calliope. He was presented by his father with a lyre and taught to play upon it, and he played to such perfection that nothing could withstand the charm of his music. The character of Orpheus, Rilke refers to as the " God with the Lyre". Not only his fellow mortals, but wild beasts were softened by his strains, and gathering round him laid by their fierceness, and stood entranced with his lay. Nay, the very trees and rocks were sensible to the charm.

Hymen had been called to bless with his presence the nuptials of Orpheus with Eurydice; but though he attended, he brought no happy omens with him and brought tears into their eyes. In coincidence with such prognostics Eurydice, shortly after her marriage, while wandering with the nymphs, her companions, was seen by the shepherd Aristaeus, who was struck with her beauty, and made advances to her. She fled, and in flying trod upon a snake in the grass, was bitten in the foot and died. Orpheus sang his grief to all who breathed the upper air, both gods and men, and finding it all unavailing resolved to seek his wife in the regions of the dead. So Eurydice is set free on condition that Orpheus does not look back at her while leading her out into the world of the living. When Orpheus fails to fulfill this condition, his wife has to return to the dead.

After the Maenads kill Orpheus by pulling him to pieces and throwing him into the sea, his severed head continues to sing and his lyre continues to play. Yet the three parts of Orpheus's life, the song, the love, and the death, go very deep. His songs are never just a commentary on the world. They make things happen. They change the landscape, and stir what appears to be dead into life. Plato believed that Orpheus's seven-string harmony restored the connection between the soul and the seven-sphered heaven from which the soul had fallen, but once that link is restored it is not a passive thing.

When Orpheus makes his journey to the underworld, the meaning of his myth seems at first to become clearer. He represents the power of love, and the power of art, to overcome death. He challenges the shades and overcomes them with the loveliness of his song. He represents, too, the journey of the soul, which must descend to the lowest point, through realms of punishment—as he was apparently the first to teach—before it is purified, and can ascend again. Light to dark and again back to light. But of course, he doesn't tread this victory path for long. The fact that in the end he turns round and loses his love makes his story puzzling and complex. As in the beginning, he didn't fail, Orpheus saved Eurydice. He was bringing her safely back to sunlight on Roman tombs, even as, at the same time, Ovid and Virgil were establishing the story of the fatal turning-round. Even, in the early Church, Orpheus was regularly used by writers and preachers to accustom Greeks to the figure of Jesus: the son of a God, the gentle harmonizer of Nature, a man of miraculous powers and, above all, a savior

Orpheus transcends the boundaries of human existence by means of his singing. He enters the realm of death and overcomes his own death. Orpheus's singing transforms animals into cultural beings and helps them to overcome the boundaries of their natural existence. Thus Orpheus serves as an ideal figure of metamorphosis who keeps the 'double-realm' of life and death and of nature and culture connected.

Rilke has also adapted this part of the myth in his New Poems entitled '*Orpheus, Eurydice, Hermes,*

*Erect no gravestone to his memory: just*

*Let the rose blossom each year for his sake.*

*For it is Orpheus. Wherever he has passed*

*Through this or that.* (Sonnets to Orpheus I, 5)

The poem is based on the idea that things come back. The dead will come back. Rhythm and thought corresponds in this poem. Rilke wedded Irony into Tragedy. He believes that words are like coins and it can be over-used. Though death is a natural phenomena but also a cyclic return. Erect no gravestone, because gravestones are erect for those who are dead to their memory; but in this poem Orpheus is never dead. So one must let the rose bloom each year for his sake. We need not to look for other names for the Orpheus even when he appears again and again he is the same Orpheus. The second stanza of the poem emphasizes that it is Orpheus who is singing no doubt the light comes and goes but the same Orpheus return in different forms. Orpheus was afraid to disappear, but he has to vanish. Rilke humanizes the gods. If God can die, why not Orpheus? Even the God has to go. This is the greatest lesson of the life. He has to submit and obey the laws of nature. Irony is very much prevalent in Rilke's poetry. Myth is based on the assumption that anything can be explained. Myths explain inexplicable of life.

Rilke's another poem, *sonnet III* also deals with the Orpheus myth. The poem is about a song and song is a reality. Poetry gives happiness and happiness is the company of gods. Rilke in this poem is very close to Keats. Reality is song and song is reality. Song is a carrier of message Apollo is the god of poetry. The poem is based on the idea that can the human beings also create like the god does. Let poetry happens let it bloom like the leaves to the trees. The poet and god both are the creators. The poet in the absence of God in every modern civilization, where everything is treated as machine, the poet brings realization that the world is not a place to live. So the poet can attain the status of God. True singing in the last two lines emphasizes that it is a gust inside the god poem is a gust (a wind of the god). A poem is a vital energy wind. No one can define a poem. It is a reflection that a song cannot be defined, criticism is pushed into crisis.

Rilke's poetry expresses his philosophical ideas too. He, non-Platonically, non-Christianly and non-Cartesianly, reconciles the reader with the world outside. Accordingly his metaphors are largely used for reciprocity rather than hierarchy. Certainly the oneness of the world within and the world without is not peculiar to Rilke. Rilke adopts the darkness of the world easily and this is manifest in his juxtaposition of transcendence and immanence, beauty and pain, day and night, earth and space, and life and death in his poems where the reconciliation of binaries affirms continuation of existence. He explores human consciousness and the interaction between human and non-human world in a very novel way.

*Sonnets to Orpheus* speak of "we", "you", and "I" interchangeably and are thus directed towards no particular person but to humanity in general. It is divided into two parts. Part I consists of twenty-six sonnets, and part II, with its twenty-nine sonnets, from a cycle. The poems have fourteen lines, and all are divided, in the style of the Petrarchan sonnet, into an octave (two quartets) and a sestet (two tercets). The rhyme scheme and line length, however, are extremely varied. Some lines seem purposely constructed to defy the established order. The sonnets to Orpheus are Rilke's first and only cycle devoted to this single genre. With the sonnet, Rilke chose a poetic form that is above all characterized by two features: a long tradition reaching back to medieval times and a fairly strict formal pattern. The translations of several Italian sonnets not only inspire him to write in the mood of sonnet writing but it also fulfilled his long cherished desire to turn to aesthetics. But his aestheticism is no where escapism. By revisiting the traditional poetic genre he re-established a connection to the past, he revitalize the traditions of humankind primarily referring to ideas, beliefs and myths rather than to poetic forms. Accordingly, Rilke employs a genre with a traditional pedigree in the twentieth century, seeking to achieve a metamorphosis of poetic form. The sonnets to Orpheus: bright, discreet songs, ranging in tone from transcendent the dark rigging of the greater work. He believes that the important reason of the negation of the traditional poetic genre is the impoverishment of modern existence.

The content of the sonnets is, as is typical of Rilke, highly metaphorical. The character of Orpheus (whom Rilke refers to as the "god with the lyre") appears several times in the cycle, as do other mythical characters such as Daphne. There are also biblical allusions, including a reference to Esau. Several themes conjoined in the sonnets animals, peoples of different cultures, and time and death. The core of Rilke's orphic concept is that it is the poetry that accomplishes metamorphosis and transcends human existence into higher sphere. Within the darkness of our experience, there is always light is a one

of the lesson behind *The Sonnets to Orpheus*. Rilke praised the impermanence of the natural world where all that is born dies.

The *Sonnets* celebrate and appeal to the sense of hearing, entreating us to hear Orpheus's vibrations within nature, moving between and relating dissonances in harmonies. The organic and artistry imagery blended together in the sonnets suggests that Orpheus is myth, fiction, construct, existing only in our own articulations when we can create a language that praises life and death as one. We become Orpheus's mouthpiece when we find our own voice that transforms language and meaning and accesses the 'double-realm' in which antitheses can coexist. In this sense the *Sonnets* do not celebrate the Romantic idea of inspiration but usher in the modernist mode of conscious creation.

Rilke made an attempt to compose a whole cycle of sonnets using different stems of coherence like mythological figure Orpheus and a thematic centre of metamorphosis to understand the fulfillment of human existence. He uses the Orphic- a legendary musician, poet, and prophet in ancient Greek religion and mythlegend to explore the nature of poetry in relation to our lives. In Orpheus separation, loss and death are a vital part of music and singing and Orphic music is in all forms of life, connecting us to, and reconciling us with, silence, emptiness and non-being. It is equally important to keep in view the 'paramythic' quality of *The Sonnets to Orpheus* as reflected in the sophisticated presentation of modern technology by Rilke. It seems that Rilke was aware that there is no way back to a mythological era and thus addressed the problems of modern civilization with the help of his poetry. Though, Rilke employs various mythical elements in his writings, he was not intended to demand dogmatic obedience from his readers. Rather he stimulates his reader's imagination free from the constraints of modern thinking to turn towards the Orphic melody of life.

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