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Descent and Return

THE ORPHIC THEME
IN MODERN LITERATURE

Walter A. Strauss

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The translations are all my own unless otherwise noted. They serve the purpose of providing the reader unacquainted with French or German with the closest possible English equivalent of the original: they are *transpositions* into English and claim to be no more.

The May 1970 issue (no. 22) of the *Cahiers de l'Association Internationale des Etudes Françaises*, which contains a long section (seven essays) entitled "Le Mythe d'Orphée au XIX^e et au XX^e siècle" (pp. 137-246), reached me too late for consideration and possible inclusion; the interested reader will find that the various discussions of the Orphic theme in that volume can be situated in a more traditional context from the one that I am setting forth in the present study.

WALTER A. STRAUSS

November 1970

Contents

I. Introduction: The Metamorphosis of Orpheus	I
II. Novalis: Orpheus the Magician	20
III. The Seasoning of Hell: Nerval	50
IV. Mallarmé: Orpheus and the "Néant"	81
V. Rilke: Orpheus and the Double Realm	140
VI. After Rilke: Orpheus, Paradigm or Paradox?	218
Notes	275
Index of Names	285

In an age in which disbelief is so profoundly prevalent or, if not disbelief, indifference to questions of belief, poetry and painting, and the arts in general, are, in their measure, a compensation for what has been lost. Men feel that the imagination is the next greatest power to faith: the reigning prince. Consequently their interest in the imagination and its work is to be regarded not as a phase of humanism but as a vital self-assertion in a world in which nothing but the self remains, if that remains. So regarded, the study of the imagination and the study of reality come to appear to be purified, aggrandized, fateful. How much stature, even vatic stature, this conception gives the poet! He need not exercise this dignity in vatic works. How much authenticity, even orphic authenticity, it gives to the painter! He need not display this authenticity in orphic works. It should be enough for him that that to which he has given his life should be so enriched by such an access of value. Poet and painter alike live and work in the midst of a generation that is experiencing essential poverty in spite of fortune.

Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel*

Wer nur weiss was er weiss, kann es nicht aussprechen;
erst wenn Wissen über sich selbst hinausreicht wird es zum Wort,
erst im Unaussprechbaren wird Sprache geboren.
Und es muss der Mensch, da ihm das Göttliche auferlegt ist,
stets aufs neu die Grenze überschreiten und hinabsteigen
zu dem Ort jenseits des Menschhaften, ein Schatten
am Ort des wissenden Vergessens, aus dem Rückkehr schwer wird
und nur wenigen gelingt.
Aber die Gestaltung der Irdischkeit ist jenen aufgetragen,
die im Dunkel gewesen sind und dennoch sich losgerissen haben
orphisch an schmerzlicher Rückkehr.

Hermann Broch, "Vergil in des Orpheus Nachfolge"

Il s'agit là bien plus d'une métamorphose que d'une métaphore.

Georges Braque, *Cahier de Georges Braque*, 1917-1947

I

Introduction:

The Metamorphosis of Orpheus

Orpheus, seer and bard in one, weaned savage forest-tribes from murder and foul living; whence the legend that he tamed tigers and fierce lions. It was said, too, that Amphion, founder of Thebes, moved stones by the sound of his lyre and drew them where he would by the magic of his entreaty. This was the poets' wisdom of old—to draw a line between the Man and the State, the sacred and the common; to build cities, to check promiscuous lust, to assign rights to the married, to engrave laws on wood. Thus did praise and honour come to divine poets and their lays.¹

Thus Horace celebrated the power of Orpheus in his *Art of Poetry* and invested him with the noblest attributes reserved by antiquity for poetry: the force of magic and the strength of wisdom. This Latin Orpheus, consecrated not only by Horace, but also by Vergil and Ovid, has prolonged the sound of his lyre and of his voice across the ages, modulating his song to accord with the deepest needs and desires of men in their troubled histories. And, in his journey through history, this mythical figure has himself been modulated and modified.

Three fairly distinct stages define present-day notions about the Orpheus myth. The first of these, of course, is antiquity, from the sixth century B.C. to the Hellenistic period, in which the figure of Orpheus first appears and becomes the center of a cult that arises in conjunction with the cult of Dionysus; this cult was revived during the decline of antiquity, the original Orphic doctrine having by that time been supplemented and ramified by all sorts of parallel doctrines such

as Neoplatonism and Gnosticism. The first phase of Orphism is the classical scholar's domain: despite the paucity of available and reliable documents there has been vigorous research activity from the end of the nineteenth century to the present, resulting in our current knowledge of the Orphic cosmogony and the ritual practices of various Orphic sects.² The second phase, the Renaissance, is derivative in its special manner: the themes of antiquity are imitated, but in such a way as to provide new forms for a new kind of art. The poets of the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries, from Poliziano to Pope, drawing primarily on Vergil's *Fourth Georgic* and on Ovid's *Metamorphoses* as sources, look upon Orpheus as the archetypal poet—the "sacer interpresque deorum," as Horace designated him, who celebrates in song a cosmic harmony that philosophers and scientists were then demonstrating in their own disciplines. But more original than this traditional attitude was the role allotted to Orpheus as a patron saint of opera. The first known opera is Peri's *Euridice* of 1600, which was followed by Monteverdi's more familiar *favola in musica*, *Orfeo* (1607). Between this *Orfeo* and Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice* (1762) the opera grew and developed into a superbly expressive art form under the patronage, so to speak, of Orpheus.

A splendidly original and sensitive study by Elizabeth Sewell³ uses as its point of departure the Renaissance juncture of poetry and science, defining the Orphic voice primarily in terms of poetry and natural history. Its impact comes from treatment of the Orpheus myth as exemplary—it is "myth thinking about myth." Miss Sewell develops a morphology of thinking for the period from Shakespeare and Bacon to Wordsworth and Rilke, establishing a framework of relationships for science, myth, and poetry that sheds a great deal of light on the transformations which took place in intellectual history between 1600 and 1800. But she treats the modern period as a continuation of the earlier period, without taking into account the most recent ramifications of the Orphic theme such as the impact of new forms of Gnosticism and especially nihilism upon this mythological material. It is this particular situation that not only justifies but even necessitates a study of the third phase of Orphism, the central concern of the present study. What is this new sense of the Orphic myth? How and why did it come into being? And what is its final significance for literature and the study of ideas?

Understanding of the meaning of the "modern" Orpheus is dependent upon a grasp of the importance of the theme of metamorphosis and on the realization that Orpheus himself is its most powerful embodiment and emblem. It seems strange that a number of recent studies of the Orphic theme in modern literature

have not emphasized this point;⁴ after all, Orpheus has been traditionally associated with the power of transformation, especially since Ovid, who devoted an extended and crucial portion of his *Metamorphoses* to a recounting of the Orpheus myth. In view of the fact that, since the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, ideas about myth (as well as most other ideas) have been located in a context of change, and have actually been tantalized by the problem of change, it is to be expected that the Orphic myth and other classical myths should provide a rich occasion for reassessment and reinterpretation.

The use of the term myth, as it is understood here, needs clarification. The very fact that since the beginning of the eighteenth century, but more particularly since the end of that century, modern man—be he anthropologist, historian of religions, or artist—has been a collector, analyst, and consumer of myths and mythologies indicates something more than an antiquarian interest in the subject. Mircea Eliade has perhaps understood the deeper reasons for this preoccupation better than anyone else. "The life of modern man proliferates with half-forgotten myths, with lapsed hierophanies, with symbols fallen into disuse. The uninterrupted desacralization of modern man has altered the content of his spiritual life, yet it has not shattered the matrix of his imagination: a heap of mythological waste products survives in poorly controlled zones of his being."⁵ In the poets this receding flotsam and jetsam has been to some extent salvaged and reassembled, often in very bizarre arrangements. What has been seen and understood by now is that the rationalistic age that succeeded the Middle Ages and found its most transparent formulation in the eighteenth century was an attempt—which has turned out to be unsuccessful—to demythologize thinking. As Eliade maintains: "Symbol, myth and image belong to the substance of the spiritual life . . . they can be camouflaged, mutilated, degraded, but . . . they will never be rooted out."⁶ What is now known as the Romantic period is in effect the prolonged effort at a new stock-taking based on a more acute sense (and a more intense self-consciousness) of the altered historical, theological, philosophical reality of modern man. The Romantics, particularly the German Romantic movement centering around Friedrich Schlegel, Schelling, and Novalis, were intoxicated with mythological and symbolic thinking.

But immediately an important distinction must be made: all modern myth-making, no matter how broad its scope or universal its ambition, is doomed to be artificial. Primitive myth exists first in close conjunction with religion itself and cannot be fully understood apart from it; it contains the germs of what will later be categorized as narrative (for that is the basic form of myth) and idea or

concept (its basic *content*). Whenever a religious cult becomes reflective and self-conscious, that is, when it moves from what is conventionally called a "lower" to a "higher" status, this dissociation takes place, and from that point on it seems legitimate to speak of "myth" or "mythology." In this way, a psychic distance from religion has been created, which is subsequently elaborated: the formal aspect develops into epic narration or is transmuted into lyrical rhapsody or dramatic enactment, whereas the content furnishes the basis for ratiocination, whether the direction of inquiry be scientific, metaphysical, theological, ethical, or political. This schematization does not sufficiently take into account the slow and often erratic progression of the development; it is given here primarily to argue that the genesis of myth out of religion constitutes also the origin of artistic forms and logical structures. Myth, then, is here understood as the matrix out of which issues the life of mental forms, logical as well as imaginative. It is a movement toward abstraction and artifice, but a movement that strives to remain in contact with its source and, indeed, seeks by a process of creation-in-reverse to rejoin it. The greater the distance, the more arduous the effort. Modern myth-making, however, takes place in or across the void created by the progressive decline of symbolic perception beginning with the end of the Middle Ages⁷ and reaching its nadir in the "enlightened" simplifications of the eighteenth century. This void can no longer be bridged or filled by communal creeds, because such creeds have, for the most part, decomposed to such an extent that re-composition is possible only by the mythical imagination of the individual. In terms of the above analysis of primitive myth, modern mythopoeia tends to be a private fabrication utilizing traditional personae and details (though this is not necessarily the case) to protect a personal vision of the world that expresses a certain notion about man and his "reality," the world, and some power or destiny that lies beyond or within.

As far as the myth of Orpheus is concerned, the materials are utterly confusing—and not merely to the nonspecialist in classical studies. In his discussion of Orpheus and Orphism within the context of Greek culture, E. R. Dodds throws up his hands in despair at the proliferation of theories concerning Orphic cults. Speaking of the "edifice reared by an ingenious scholarship," he remarks: "I am tempted to call it the unconscious projection upon the screen of antiquity of certain unsatisfied religious longings characteristic of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries."⁸ But what may be reprehensible in the field of historical scholarship becomes the earmark of a great deal of poetry of the modern age: the very fact that Orpheus serves as a screen or medium necessitates

a different order of investigation from that required of the study of Orpheus in antiquity or in the Renaissance.

Nevertheless, the choice of Orpheus as a screen suggests that there are certain particularities in the Orpheus myth that make it eminently suitable to a certain kind of modern mentality. When the myth itself is looked at and the points where it lends itself to the modern imagination analyzed, it is clear that the screen is in reality a prism.

In its raw outline, the myth runs like this: Orpheus was a native of Thrace (whether he was a historical figure has been the subject of lengthy scholarly disputes, but his historicity is inconsequential here), the son of a local king, Oïagros, or, according to some accounts, of Apollo. His mother was one of the Muses, presumably Calliope, the Muse of epic poetry. It is generally believed that the mythological figure of Orpheus appeared in the sixth century B.C., since there is no mention of him in Homer and Hesiod; and as a native of Thrace he was from the very beginning associated with the cult of Dionysus. As a shaman-figure, he possessed magic powers and prophetic vision; his special attribute was that of a lyrist of such magnificent seductive force that all nature, animate and inanimate, was subdued by and followed him. In his many wanderings he introduced the cult of Dionysus wherever he went. Later traditions include him among the list of heroes and prophets who set out on the Argonautic journey; one of his achievements on that voyage was to charm the Sirens by the power of song so that the Argo and its crew could pass unscathed. Orpheus married the dryad Eurydice and lost her soon after his marriage; Aristaeus pursued her, and in flight she was bitten by a snake and died. Orpheus set out to rescue her from the underworld and succeeded in charming Pluto and Persephone by the powers of his song, so that permission was granted to Eurydice to return to life on condition that Orpheus not turn back to look at her before they had crossed the edge of the underworld. Nevertheless, near the mouth of Hades, he turned back toward Eurydice (for reasons which are variously interpreted), lost her, and returned to the upper world disconsolate and alone. After this point the accounts diverge once more. Some have it that Orpheus shunned the company of women altogether and is thus credited with the introduction of homosexuality into Greece; the female followers of Dionysus, the Maenads (Bacchantes), took vengeance upon him and tore him asunder. Other legends have it that, upon his emergence from Hades, he was set upon by the Maenads and torn apart. In any case, according to the myth, his head floating down the river Hebros continued to sing and prophesy, and his lyre continued to sound, until

both were finally washed ashore on the isle of Lesbos, subsequently the site of an oracle of Orpheus.

There are three major "moments" in this myth: (1) Orpheus as a singer-prophet (shaman) capable of establishing harmony in the cosmos (his apocryphal participation in the journey of the *Argo* elaborates this motif); (2) The descent into Hades (the *katábasis*): the loss of Eurydice, the subsequent subterranean quest, and the second loss (here all the accounts are in agreement except for the problem of motivation, and this is certainly the best known and most popular portion of the myth); (3) The dismemberment theme (*sparagmós*), which suggests a possible deviation from Dionysus or a friction between bacchantic Dionysus-worship and Orphic practices; it is particularly important that the conclusion of the myth reaffirms more strongly than before, in the "other" Orphic journey beyond death (that is, as a force transcending death), the Orphic power of song.

A problem which remains fundamental to an analysis of the myth is the position occupied by Orpheus with respect to Apollo and Dionysus. It is altogether possible that Orpheus was first thought of as the son of Oïagros and that he only later "became" the son of Apollo, who directly bequeathed to him, or taught him, use of the lyre. It must be remembered that the Olympian gods belong to an older tradition, and also that (as in Homer and Hesiod) they are the product of aristocratic imagination and reflection about the nature of the forces that govern the universe. Popular religion was certainly a good deal less ironic about the gods than Homer, or less cosmological in its objectives than Hesiod. The introduction of Dionysus worship—whatever the broader historical origins of Dionysus may be—in the sixth century had much wider popular appeal. It spoke to the "darker," more "irrational" side of the Greek religious sensibility and came to be understood only beginning with the Romantic period (that is, after the sunny-serene-rational view of the Greeks, in vogue since the Renaissance and culminating in Winckelmann, had run its course), finding its most incisive apologist in Nietzsche (*Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik*, 1872) and more recently in scholars like E. R. Dodds (*The Greeks and the Irrational*, 1951). The famous Nietzschean antithesis of the Apollonian and Dionysiac also sheds light on the position of Orpheus, for he resembles Apollo in certain ways, as a patron of the arts, for instance. Nevertheless, Orpheus is virtually always associated with the cult of Dionysus, though he would often appear to be Dionysus' adversary. Jane Harrison declares that "Orpheus reflects Dionysos, yet at almost every point seems to contradict him."⁹ This situation

accounts for the general ambivalence in the various explanations of the Orpheus-Dionysus-Apollo relationship and in the discrepancies found in the versions of Orpheus' death. Orpheus was ideally suited to bridge the gap between two modes of looking at the world; Eva Kushner states in her study of the Orpheus myth in France since the end of the nineteenth century that "The myth of Orpheus represents precisely the symbolic expression par excellence of the fusion of the Apollonian dream and of Dionysiac intoxication, in music, as well as poetry . . ." ¹⁰ F. M. Cornford's formula is even more attractive: "a Dionysus tamed, and clothed, and in his right mind—in a word, Apollinised."¹¹

On another level, since Orpheus is at the beginning as much a religious phenomenon as an artistic one, the fusion may be expressed thus: the Apollonian way designates essentially a separation from the gods, making possible the "principle of individuation" and of human autonomy, primarily through enlightened Reason; the Dionysiac way designates, essentially, nonseparation, indeed, union with the gods, through the darker and irrational powers of the body and the soul, in close conjunction with the "chthonic" elements of the earth. Orpheus serves as a mediator between the two orientations—without, however, losing his identification with the followers of Dionysus.

This Orpheus-Dionysus alliance is stressed by the followers of the Orphic cult in the sixth and fifth centuries B.C., who also draw on the teachings of mystical philosophers, particularly Pythagoras and Heraclitus. The central tenets of the doctrine are, in its simplest outline, a cosmogony rivalling Hesiod's and a doctrine of the soul that links Orphism with Gnostic traditions as well as with Christian theology.

The Orphic cosmogony has its origin in Hesiod's, but departs from it to make room for the pre-eminence of the force of Eros as well as for the central importance of Dionysus. According to Orphic accounts, Zeus's offspring (by Persephone) Zagreus is identified with Dionysus: the Titans devoured Zagreus and were in turn annihilated by Zeus's thunderbolts; from their corpses sprang the human race, a compound of the divine and the Titanic (evil). Athena, however, had preserved the heart of Zagreus from the Titans and offered it to Zeus, who swallowed it and thus was able to beget Zagreus a second time, via Semele, under the name of Dionysus.

The other central tenet, the notion of the double composition of man, is closely related to the Orphic notion of the soul and its reincarnations; indeed, this cosmogony is an attempt to explain mythically the good-evil dichotomy in the human being. According to this notion, the soul is immortal and divine but

imprisoned in a mortal, Titanic body; therefore it becomes the duty of the follower of Orpheus to liberate the divine, ecstatic, and pure soul from the shackles of an evil body by living a life of progressive ritual purification oriented toward the attainment of immortality. Thus, the ethical ideal of Orphism has interesting points of correspondence with the Hebraic and Christian idea about man's fall and builds an elaborate doctrine of the soul and its salvation upon it. But it must be stressed that, unlike the Jewish and Christian doctrines of redemption, Orphism was from its very beginnings an esoteric cult (and in this way not open, or popular, like the cult of Dionysus) requiring certain practices of initiation and instruction and an ascetic discipline, such as vegetarianism. Gertrude Rachel Levy defines Orphism in *The Gate of Horn*: "Orphism replaced the emotional ecstasy, which has been engendered in the thiasos through a realization of unity with the dynamic energies of wild lives, by the rapture of the individual aspirant acquired through long discipline and purification, both ritual and moral, which conserved its vitality to face higher power; to know it, and therefore to be at one with it. To accomplish singly and permanently what the Dionysiac thiasos had attained at moments, was the Orphic way of redemption."¹³

The doctrine of successive reincarnations of the soul, which Orphism has in common with virtually all forms of Gnosticism, is the attempt to account for the indestructibility of the divine element in man and to justify the requirements imposed on his ethical behavior to liberate his soul progressively from the evil element, which resides in matter. The old Gnostic idea of the body as a prison or a tomb (*sōma-sēma*), in which the soul is held captive, appears in full strength in Orphic thinking and accounts for cathartic practices as well as for the ascetic nature of the doctrine—indeed, it accounts for the general puritan cast of Orphism. It must nevertheless be pointed out that the purpose of all this *askēsis* is not simply to assure the reincarnated soul a higher form of existence, but to strive toward total liberation of the soul from its prison to enable it to reacquire its resting place within the Divine Soul. In brief, the ultimate aim of Orphism is to "escape from the unending cycle of reincarnation—to abolish, in other words, the periodic return to life."¹⁴

Another interesting feature of Orphism, again in comparison with the monotheistic religions, is its reliance on sacred books and hymns, most of them apocryphally attributed to Orpheus. This is quite at variance with official Greek religion, which recognized no sacred texts at all. There are obvious correspondences with Gnosticism (the principal common ground being that of

Pythagoreanism, with which Orphism is all too easily confused); or, at least, Orphism can be seen as a *gnōsis*, a special way of obtaining knowledge of the cosmos and of salvation.

The nineteenth century found the Orpheus myth intriguing in a new way. The Romantic movement is not, as some have claimed, a reaction against classicism, but a reaction to a particular way of looking at the art of the past. The Romantics, despite their medievalism and exoticism, were practically without exception lovers of antiquity, but in a new and different way. German Romanticism in particular is full of Romantic Hellenism, and the same phenomenon can be observed in France, England, and Italy. One may say that the Apollonian view of Greece was being replaced by an Orphic-Dionysian view. In this respect, the religious underpinnings of Romanticism are of particular importance, since the end of the so-called Age of Reason coincides with growing awareness of a religious void created, in part by the rationalistic and scientific energies released since the Renaissance, but more particularly by the gradual corrosion and erosion of Christianity. It is for this reason that the anti-Newtonian modes of thinking at the end of the eighteenth century, despite their eccentricities and aberrations, ought to be given serious attention within the context of scientific and philosophical thought. On the one hand, Goethe's insistence on the organic structure of the world can be cited as a levelheaded attempt to stem the tide of encroaching mechanism; on the other hand, the theosophical and illuministic revivals of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries can be regarded, despite their perverseness, as genuine attempts to restore to a mechanized universe its proper symbolic, even magical, perspective.¹⁵ Here again, not so much the Orphic myth but the Orphic cult made its contribution; it coincided neatly with the magical preoccupation of the illuminists and neo-alchemists. And, the figure of Orpheus played a considerable role in the esoteric literature of the seventeenth and particularly the eighteenth centuries, thus merging with all sorts of other currents from Hellenistic Orphism through all varieties of neoplatonism, the Kabbala, and the alchemistic, theosophical, and Swedenborgian movements and their multitudinous variants, up to the beginning of the twentieth century.

With the new and syncretistic attempts to renovate religious attitudes came new formulations in philosophy and in the arts, indeed in all areas of intellectual endeavor. For the redefinition of the poet and poetry, the Orphic myth provided supports that were eagerly seized upon by theorists and by poets themselves.

Was it not tempting to think of the poet, dispossessed by ages of cold reason, recovering his own domain as soothsayer, harmonizer, even legislator—"être nécessaire," as Claudel said in a slightly different context? All the poets with whom this study is concerned stress, in one way or another, the irreplaceability of poetry, the need for symbolic expression, the perpetuity of the poetic voice. Their approaches differ sharply; but in this one sense, they are all "symbolists," makers of metaphors.

Though the Orphic mission of the poet is generally agreed upon, each of these poets handles the materials of the myth, particularly the Eurydice-Hades theme, in his own way. In keeping with the new sensibility, the Eurydice theme gives some (Nerval, Jouve, Emmanuel) the opportunity to formulate their convictions about the nature and place of the erotic, usually in the context of the descent motif—interpreted with varying stress as a plunge into the unconscious (Nerval), a confrontation with death and night (Nerval, Novalis, Rilke), and a coming face to face with Nothingness (Mallarmé, Blanchot). Consequently, it becomes evident that the decisive factor in appraising the nature of the modern Orphic is not so much in the magical mission of the poet, but in the account and interpretation of his experience as reflected in his poetry—the nature of his Orphic journey, that quest for a dark but "pure" center. These journeys are made more poignant by the fact that the poets, in their own descent into Hades, are directly conscious of their "ancestor" and model, Orpheus.

Because the modern world abounds in myths, the myth of Orpheus can be expected to collide and amalgamate with other myths. The connection between Orpheus and Dionysus has been pointed out; the antithesis to the Orpheus myth is the Prometheus theme. Certain Romantic poets are classifiable as Promethean (Shelley, Byron, Hugo) and others as Orphic (Novalis, Wordsworth, possibly Keats); in Nerval's case, the Orphic struggles against the pressure exerted by the Promethean. The differences can be summarized in this fashion: Prometheus and Orpheus are readily contrastable as half-gods and as mythological culture-heroes. Prometheus defies Zeus in behalf of mankind and is martyred for his deed; as a fire-stealer, he is at the same time the eternal rebel (joining forces with Faust, Satan, and Cain) and the representative of a "progressive" Romantic humanism. Orpheus does not rebel; he refuses to accept the world as it is; he does not lead the people, he charms them. Prometheanism aims for an outer transformation of society; it proposes to ameliorate man's lot by external action. Orphism proposes to transmute the inner man by a confrontation with himself and to alter society only indirectly, through the changes that man can effect

within himself. All of modern literature tends to fall within the area delimited by these two points of reference, rebellion and refusal. From the end of the eighteenth to the middle of the nineteenth century the Orphic and Promethean remained in conflict; thereafter the Promethean retreated gradually, with the result that the second half of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries remained largely under the Orphic spell. M. H. Abrams, in discussing August Schlegel's concept of a "creative" nature, remarks that "through the displacement, as creative principle of both Jehovah, Demiurge and Prometheus by an indwelling Soul of Nature, the role of a deliberately supervisory artisan, whether *deus* or *alter deus*, dwindles: the real and poetic worlds alike become self-originating, autonomous, and self-propelling, and both tend to *grow* out into their organic forms."¹⁶

From about 1750 the idea of art as *mimēsis* began to be replaced, or at least transformed, by the idea of art as *poiēsis*. In this development the accent shifts gradually from the Prometheus-figure, creator in a *natura naturata*, to the Orpheus-figure, creator in and through a *natura naturans*. This represents, in effect, a discovery of the dynamic principle of nature-as-organic, over and against the idea of nature-as-organized; it ushers in an age of process, rather than progress.

Herbert Marcuse, who contrasts the Promethean and the Orphic in his provocative *Eros and Civilization*, also points out that the theme of Narcissus plays a role in the modern self-consciousness that is closely related to the Orphic. Orpheus and Narcissus both reconcile Eros and Thanatos; they are ways of liberating the self through self-contemplation and death.

They have not become the culture-heroes of the Western world: theirs is the image of joy and fulfillment, the voice which does not command but sings; the gesture which offers and receives, the deed which is peace and ends the labor of conquest; the liberation of time which unites man with god, man with nature. Literature has preserved their image . . . The Orphic Eros transforms being: he masters cruelty and death through liberation. His language is song, and his work is *play*. Narcissus' life is that of *beauty*, and his existence is *contemplation*. These images refer to the *aesthetic dimension* as the one in which their reality principle must be sought and validated.¹⁷

Two important and related themes emerge from this discussion: first, the Orphic transformation of being, the ontological refusal of the Promethean existence; second, the attempt to struggle against limitations set by time and history. Here again there is an interesting correspondence between the strivings of the Orphic sects of antiquity to break out of the eternal cycle of reincarnation,

out of historical Being. This progressive attempt at liberation from Being as defined by the post-Renaissance world provides a kind of sequence for the present study. The first Orphics of the Romantic period, formed by certain rationalistic modes of thought of the Age of Enlightenment, are characteristic in wanting to replace rationalism by something missing in it—the imagination, the intuition, *Gemüt*. In this they appear to be more interested in extending the definition of man as rational animal to man as imaginative-and-rational animal in the late nineteenth century; for a really antirational program one must wait until Rimbaud and Lautréamont. But it is also significant that Romantic Orphism frequently attempts (as was true of Gnostic sects in the third and fourth centuries) to reconcile Orpheus and Christ;¹⁸ an early illustration is in catacomb frescoes and, subsequently, in Milton's *Lycidas*, as well as in Calderón's remarkable *auto sacramental*, *El divín Orfeo*. The best example of the synthesis is Novalis, with whom I shall begin my study. The same phenomenon occurs in Nerval but collides with a more acute consciousness of the incompatibility of antiquity and Christianity, of the pantheistic and the transcendent, and on occasion it shades off into Satanic-Promethean rebellion.

It is only after the collapse of the Romantic ideal, around 1848 (Nerval can be said to have prolonged the Romantic Orphism by a few years) that, in a sense, poetic Orphism is partially relieved of its Gnostic baggage and that problem of the new Orphic attitude emerges more clearly. The question is no longer one of reconciling Orpheus and Christ, but one of a world vision that makes the sacred possible at all. In Mallarmé the essential question is whether the poet can even exist in the modern world—even the nocturnal vision of Hölderlin's "Dichter in dürftiger Zeit" is no longer valid—whether the modern world is any longer subject to poetic comprehension and treatment. The Orphic poet is, once more, at the beginning of a journey, confronted with the task of sacralizing time, space, and language before the Orphic spell can take place. His task is to face the Nothingness, to overcome (abolish) it in order to make poetry once more possible. In religious terms, what has come about is the creation of an immanent Orphic reality as it developed out of the unstable tensions of Romantic Orphism. Like Mallarmé, Rilke creates an immanent Orphic space-reality in which *Wandlung* (transmutation of the self) and a poetics of praise and lament are infinitely possible.

Two other themes, regeneration and memory, should be pointed out. All modern poetry has been a quest for self-renewal, and the Orphic poet seeks to regenerate himself particularly by means of the voyage downward, with its

attendant self-recognition through remembrance and its mandatory self-transformation, followed by return to the world that will become the ground of a vaster metamorphosis. The context of this new Orphic era is the modern pathos of time and history, coinciding with the Romantic period, with its quest for the lost or forgotten self—the legacy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Moreover, the nucleus of all varieties of Gnosticism (and this includes the major part of Orphic doctrine) is the quest for the lost, dimly-remembered or forgotten, repressed self—recovery of the authentic self underneath the incrustation of material and historical existence. In the orbit of modern Orphism the themes of regeneration and reminiscence go hand in hand. Seen in this perspective, the new Orphics are comparable to the Dante of the *Vita Nuova*, who experienced his renewal through the love and death of Beatrice very much in the way Orpheus "renews" himself (at least, according to the moderns) through his loss of Eurydice and his descent into hell. Because the *Vita Nuova* offers such a convenient counterpoise to the modern Orphic quest for rebirth it will be frequently invoked in subsequent pages, particularly since a number of poets directly refer to it. Furthermore, the reference point it provides enables one to see the vast differences between an age that could conceive regeneration in Christian terms only, and an age that feels impelled to create its own universe of redemption because the other, Dante's, is no longer felt to be valid.

This raises another point: the terms transformation and transmutation, so frequently used above, designate one of the key features of modern literature, again in contrast with literature before the end of the eighteenth century. Whereas in classical literature (that is, from the Greeks to the eighteenth century) the relationships of parts to whole revolve around a fixed center, a kind of closed aesthetic universe (like Ptolemy's, or Newton's), the nature of literature since the Romantic days has come increasingly to revolve around an imaginary center (or, more recently, around a point off center or even "around" no center at all). This patterning of shifting relations characteristic of modern literature was heralded by Coleridge as "organic," a term that has served well until the twentieth century. This term points toward an organic world view such as Goethe proposed and Darwinian biology actualized. The present age, however, looks back on the nineteenth century as a series of antitheses that call for a dialectical resolution, a kind of coincidence of opposites.

What are the wider implications of this coincidence of opposites for the modern Orphic mind? In a period like the nineteenth century, in which old, exhausted values are being replaced by new value schemes and by radical pat-

terns of thought and action, one of the major problems that invariably demands revaluation is that of the One and the Many. Not only the domain of professional philosophers after Kant, this was also a concern of the poet in his attempt to measure the new world in which he was living and writing. From the beginning of the nineteenth century on, the poet was impelled to become a thinker in a somewhat different way: he meditated not only upon his craft, or the subject matter of his discourse, but upon the relation of poetry to the world and to reality. New poets found themselves confronted with the necessity of retraversing the terrain originally occupied by philosophy and theology into which earlier poets, such as Dante, Shakespeare, Donne, Milton, and Pope, had made significant and successful sallies. By the end of the eighteenth century, Goethe, Blake, Hölderlin, and Wordsworth were writing a kind of poetry that, to be sure, proceeded from a tradition, but that bore witness to a new spirit and a new quest.

Isaiah Berlin's classification of thinkers into hedgehogs and foxes acquires particular relevance when applied to this situation and, at the same time, points up a possible alternative solution whose impact on Orphic thinking is of paramount importance. In some ways, it is as if there were a need to recapitulate the essential orientation points of the pre-Socratic philosophers all over again.¹⁹ The modern thinker is required to orient his thought in relation to one of the three exemplary pre-Socratic minds. First is Parmenides, the perfect hedgehog, the philosopher of absolute being and of intransigent monism: "Being has no coming-into-being and no destruction, for it is whole of limb, without motion, and without end. And it never Was, nor Will Be, because it Is now, a Whole all together, One, continuous; for what creation of it will you look for?" (fragments 7 and 8). This mode of thinking is completely intellectual and depends on an ontological identity of Being and Thinking. ("For it is the same thing to think and to be" [fragment 3].) It accords no reality either to nonbeing or to becoming. The next model is Empedocles, the representative fox:

I shall tell of a double [process]: at one time it increased so as to be a single One out of Many; at another time again it grew apart so as to be Many out of One. There is a double creation of mortals and a double decline: the union of all things causes the birth and destruction of the one [race of mortals], the other is reared as the elements grow apart, and then flies asunder. And these [elements] never cease their continuous exchange, sometimes uniting under the influence of Love, so that all become One, at other times again each moving apart through the hostile force of Hate. Thus insofar as they

have the power to grow into One out of Many, and again, when the One grows apart and Many are formed, in this sense they come into being and have no stable life; but insofar as they never cease their continuous exchange, in this sense they remain always unmoved [unaltered] as they follow the cyclic process (fragment 17).

Here there is a double principle of Being, a polarity, whose interactions or mixtures account for Becoming. An antithesis within Being thus generates the antithesis between Being and Becoming.

In Heraclitus the dynamism remains, but the antitheses are overcome in a new unity—a concert of Being and Becoming: "That which is in opposition is in concert, and from things that differ comes the most beautiful harmony" (fragment 8). In Heraclitean metaphysics the principle of contradiction is expressly abnegated; the logical basis for this kind of thinking has much in common with Oriental modes of thought and with mystical theology. Since Western thought, particularly after Aristotle, has generally moved along the paths of syllogistic thinking, which proceeds by identities and equations and thus rules out all contradictions, Heraclitean inroads into its mainstream up to the end of the Enlightenment have been sporadic and to some extent ineffectual. To the classical, medieval, or Renaissance mind such Heraclitean assertions as "they do not understand how that which differs with itself is in agreement: harmony consists of opposing tension, like that of the bow and the lyre" (fragment 51) or "and what is in us is the same thing: living and dead, awake and sleeping, as well as young and old; for the latter (of each pair of opposites) having changed becomes the former, and this again having changed becomes the latter" (fragment 88) would, generally speaking, have made little philosophical sense.

The Heraclitean concert of opposites does, however, take on a new guise in the writing of Nicholas of Cusa (1400–1464), but in a completely new context. Briefly, a different logic and a different theology must be dealt with from the medieval one current before his time. Nicholas Cusanus is theologically the heir of the mystics, such as Dionysius the Areopagite and Meister Eckhart, who were visionaries and also formulators of the intellectual order implicit in their intuitions. The fact that both Dionysius and Eckhart frequently defined God's unity in *negative* terms is of particular interest; Rudolf Otto's juxtaposition of S'ankara and Meister Eckhart as virtually identical examples of Eastern and Western mysticism suggests that the problem of a dialectical theology is not to be dismissed simply on the grounds that it is nonrational or nontraditional.²⁰ What Cusanus attempted was to replace the logic of the Scholastics by a more compre-

hensive mode of thinking that would be applicable to a vision of the infinite. The solution, in his case, was a new mathematical logic: he was eager to ground mystical theology in a system of reflections that would bridge the gap between the finite and the infinite, and that system was mathematics. Cassirer observes in *Individuum und Kosmos in der Philosophie der Renaissance*: "[Cusanus' doctrine of God] requires a new type of mathematical logic, which does not exclude the coincidence of opposites, but rather one which needs this coincidence itself, this convergence of the Absolute Maximum and the Absolute Minimum, as a consistent principle and a necessary vehicle of progressive cognition."²¹ Without going into the detailed proofs of the *coincidentia oppositorum* in Cusanus as they are found in *De docta ignorantia*, it is possible to simply summarize by saying that, for Cusanus, the *coincidentia oppositorum* is a dialectical form of thought in which all possible contradictions are resolved and annulled in God. The dynamics of this dialectic involve a constant polar tension between *explicatio* and *complicatio*, between *alteritas* and *unitas*. "The one truth, inapprehensible in its absolute sense, can be represented to us only in the sphere of otherness; but similarly there is for us no otherness that does not in some way point toward Unity and participate in it."²²

The relevance of this digression about the coincidence of opposites points up a peculiar affinity of modern Orphic exploration with the Orphism of antiquity. The earliest forms of ancient Orphism had a strongly monistic tendency; the late Hellenistic version was marked by a strong influence of Gnostic-dualistic doctrines. As a consequence of certain correspondences between the Gnosticism of late antiquity and the dualism of the modern epoch,²³ the phenomenon of the Orphism of modern poets recapitulates the tensions of earlier epochs. Novalis and particularly Nerval stand under the spell of an Orpheus who bridges, rather than fuses, Gnostic dualities of spirit and body. It was Coleridge and Hegel who proposed, in their different ways, synthetic or concordant methods to establish unity rather than polarity. Coleridge emphasized the unity that grows out of diversity—a "reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities."²⁴ Put in another way, Hegel's and Coleridge's concepts are also evidence of a new shift in emphasis in nineteenth-century thinking, a movement toward historical and biological ways of exploring the nature of reality.

It may be asked, in this connection, why my study is concerned primarily with Continental authors, despite the fact that Wordsworth and Coleridge figure in the preceding discussion and the names of Keats and Yeats might also be cited as relevant. The answer is that the theme of Orpheus does not figure promi-

nently or decisively in modern English literature. Miss Sewell's *The Orphic Voice* crosses the Channel after discussing Wordsworth, and this is as it should be. The spirit of Orpheus in its contemporary form comes to haunt British poetry again only after the expansion of French poetic ideas and ideals at the end of the nineteenth century. But there is a more fundamental distinction involved here, which helps account for the difference between the English view of poetry in its relations with science and philosophy and the Continental view, particularly as it was elaborated in Germany between 1795 and 1825. This difference explains why poetry in England has tended to remain more distinct from these other areas of intellectual inquiry than has poetry on the Continent.²⁵

My aim is not to inquire what Orpheus was in antiquity, or what he is at the beginning of the nineteenth century, but what he *becomes* in the modern age; the aim is to examine the metamorphosis of Orpheus, seen in the context of lyrical reflection and reflective lyricism—the poet-as-thinker. Orpheus is not only poetry; he has become, in modern times, the agony of poetry—a sort of ambassador without portfolio of poetry. He is the figure, the myth, entrusted with the burden of poetry and myth. His metamorphosis is the change in poetic climate itself, placed against an ever-darkening sky in which poetry recedes more and more toward secret and unexplored spaces, spaces that are obscure and must be illuminated by constellations of the mind ever threatened by disaster and extinction.

The first two authors, Novalis and Nerval, attempt to derive their Orphic vision within a setting of the Gnostic dualities. Novalis manages this feat by an almost total negation of the realm of light in favor of a nocturnal reality. Nerval pursues a similar path but finds himself at the end ambiguously suspended between affirmation and negation. Mallarmé, the third author, discovers in an anguished moment of his life that negation of the created world can also lead to affirmation of the creative act, which recreates the negated world by poetic affirmation. He develops a poetry that is both absence and presence, nothing and everything. Through him the paradox of the coincidence of opposites has taken root in modern poetry. With Rilke, this paradox is heightened and deepened, and to a large extent humanized. Orpheus becomes the mythical figure who affirms death-within-life, being-within-becoming. Mallarmé and Rilke bring the modern poetic paradox of language as silence and silence as language to a point of incandescence.

This shift in modern Orphism from an uneasy dualistic polarity to a paradoxical-

cal unity parallels also, in a peculiar way, the movement of modern thought toward a constructive nihilism in theology, the quest for a new ontology, and, finally, a resurgence of the mathematical and abstract over the biological and concrete. This may sound like an oversimplification; the problem is, in fact, a good deal more complex. But the changing Orphic vision over the last hundred and fifty years or so reflects in its own particular way the preoccupation and hesitations and audacities of modern thinking—thinking that has questioned the nature of reality, the nature of being, the nature of God, the nature of nature, and the nature of poetry and thought themselves.

And so Orpheus journeys down and up: down to the depths of the psyche, to the depths of being, to death's realm, and back up to life and creation and thence into death and song—this servant of Dionysus and pupil of Apollo, architect of the troubled soul and peacemaker for the distressed mind. For Orpheus is truly a reconciler of opposites: he is the fusion of the radiant solar enlightenment of Apollo and the somber subterranean knowledge of Dionysus. Indeed, this is what J. J. Bachofen demonstrates in his analysis of the Orphic myth and of the cosmological structure of Orphic thought, which rests on a dualism dividing the upper (uranian) from the lower (telluric) hemisphere: "Dionysus is recognized as the lord of the telluric sphere, and the uranian half is conceded to Apollo; and thus the highest domain of light relinquished by Apollo is restored to that god which the oldest form of Orphism had worshipped in its purer form." But Dionysus does not lose his luminosity thereby; on the contrary, the eclipse serves to affirm the principle of light and he becomes, as Macrobius describes him, "*sol in infero hemisphaerio*." Thus "Apollo becomes the upper complement of Dionysus, Dionysus becomes the downward continuation of Apollo. A Bacchic Apollo, an Apollonian Dionysus emerge from this conjunction, restoring in a double incarnation the unity of the principle of light."²⁶

Karl Kérenyi, from a different perspective, draws a similar conclusion, which emphasizes the concordance of Dionysus and Apollo under the aegis of Orpheus: "Orphic living and thinking is Dionysiac living and thinking, but in an atmosphere dominated by the Apollonian desire for purity, in an existence which is no longer so primitive that it can endure the contradictions of being that the Delphic cult still permitted by a fraternal juxtaposition of Apollo and Dionysus."²⁷

The most eloquent commentary on the quest of my study—an account of the modern poetic vision in its varied struggles to recover the true mythical meaning

of Orpheus—is to be found in Erich Heller's *The Disinherited Mind*. What Heller says about German literature applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to French poetry as well.

The attempt of scholars to unravel the complex of historical reminiscences, the images, insights, feelings that make up the story of Dionysus, Apollo and Orpheus in modern German literature and thought, and then to relate it to what may be the Greek reality of these divine creatures, is as heroic as it is doomed to failure. For a scholar's guarded steps cannot possibly keep pace with the rush and dance of the passions of the mind swirling around those names and arrested only for brief moments in innumerable figurations. Nietzsche, from *The Birth of Tragedy* onwards, is seeking spiritual employment in the service of a god who is a synthesis of Dionysus and Apollo. In this composite Nietzschean deity, Apollo, it is true, more and more loses his name to the other god, but by no means the power of his artistic creativeness, for ever articulating but the Dionysian chaos in distinct shapes, sounds and images, which are Dionysian only because they are still aglow with the heat of the primeval fire.²⁸