

Orpheus as Gap, Border, and Bridge 1

Focussing of all forces on a single point is the prerequisite of all mythical thinking. . . . When, on the one hand, the entire self is given up to a single impression, is "possessed" by it, and, on the other hand, there is the utmost tension between the subject and its object, the outer world; when external reality is not merely viewed and contemplated, but overcomes a man in sheer immediacy, with emotions of fear or hope, terror or wish fulfillment: then the spark jumps somehow across, the tension finds release, as the subjective excitement becomes objectified, and confronts the mind as a god or daemon.

—Ernst Cassirer, *Language and Myth*

One could read this statement in an early work of Ernst Cassirer, propaedeutic to his monumental *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, as his "founding myth," that moment of essential insight in which the germ of a lifetime's work lies: here, the near-identity of myth and language. Throughout these pages, and again in his summary work, *An Essay on Man*, which looks back upon the body of his opus, he speaks of these two symbolic modes in a single breath.¹ Despite the development since Cassirer in this century of powerful analytic tools for prying apart myth and language, I want to accept this linkage because of the play, what Maurice Blanchot calls the "looseness in the mechanism," it allows.² The process that Cassirer describes in his early little book is basic not only to "mythical thinking," but also to the making that goes on in all language acts: what the Greeks called "*poiesis*." When the Orphic critic Elizabeth Sewall speaks of Orpheus as "poetry thinking itself," she refers to something other than the mimesis the Greeks traditionally associated with the activity of the poet or *rhapsode*.³ Though Cassirer's statement sounds a bit like the mimetic transfer that Eric Havelock sees as the essential pre-Platonic mode of acculturation, that is, "possession" of the "entire self," involving the *thumos* (appetitive self) with its emotions fear, hope, terror and awe, I see the "mythical thinking" that Cassirer describes as characteristic of original thinking of any sort.

This genealogical thinking, which must always go back to its origins to "think itself," requires honoring both the appetitive

self and the reflective processes of *nous*, the divining rod within the mind. It is the thinking involved in the Platonic *anamnesis* (recollection) of the soul, and it is a shift from the poet's traditional operation by *mimesis*. Poetry and philosophy are the children of myth, and in the poet-philosopher, they seek a passionate reunion, one that has never been better described than by Plato in the *Phaedrus*. Paradoxically, Plato's own poetry, the myths that he weaves into the text at key junctures, insinuates itself into the dialogues long before he boldly throws out the archaic poets as sirens that the well-ordered state can ill afford to sanction (*Republic* 10). Indeed, he ends that book with one of the more remarkable pieces of *poiesis* in the dialogues, the myth of the warrior Er, who returns from a shamanistic trance to describe life after death.

Cassirer's remark, which serves as our touchstone, contains a second place of looseness or hedging: "the spark jumps somehow across." Across what? Reading further, the mystery remains: "as soon as the spark has jumped across, as soon as the tension and emotion of the moment has found its discharge in the word or the mythical image, a . . . turning point has occurred in human mentality: the inner excitement which was a mere subjective state has vanished, and has been resolved into the objective form of myth or of speech."⁴ "Word or mythical image," "myth or speech"—again, there is slippage; he hedges. Like many original thinkers, Cassirer builds his entire edifice on instinctively undefined axioms. It seems to me that his are these: (1) that language and myth are a single symbolic mode, so closely intertwined that they cannot be separated, and (2) that there is a threshold in human experience on the nether side of which one stands victim of a "mere subjective state," whereas after crossing it, the experience is "resolved into the objective form of myth or speech."⁵

This study is about the close relation of myth and language, in particular how language *functions as myth* in the poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé, the remarkable French symbolist poet whose work revolutionized the course of modern poetics. At the same time it is about a moment: one suggested by the image of the cricket's jumping into the gap created by Eunomus's broken string. In the largest sense, this moment is the [—] across which language as *poiesis* moves in "fixing" the experience wherein the

god or *daimon* is named. Like Cassirer, I could simply leave the object of “jump across” unnamed, respecting its infinite potential as an essential openness at the center of this naming process. But imaging it, I will call it a “gap”: a space that can be seen as channel, point, or iota; chasm, gulf, or vortex. Plato says in the *Timaeus* that the “marrow of all sciences” is the art of generating “middle terms.” Our gap is the perennial open center where middle terms come into generation. From this silent, hidden, and prelogical center arise analogy and metaphor, in which each of the authors appearing in this study excels: Plato and Nietzsche, boldly; Mallarmé, with great subtlety.

Crossing the Gap

ORPHEUS, who reduces the wild beasts of Greece to humanity, is evidently a vast den of a thousand monsters.

—Giambattista Vico, *The New Science*

Another name for this gap or space is Orpheus, who appeared in the Greek sixth to fifth centuries, an era transitional between the oral, formulaic culture of the Homeric epic and the invention of literature. Orpheus is a paradoxical figure who is considered to be the very type of the Greek poet—older than Homer and Hesiod, even though they predate his appearance in both written and plastic record. Vico’s Orpheus is a “poetic character,” a class name for the civilizing figure whereby the fierce Thracians became humanized, or Hellenized.⁶ Though a “moment” to the poetic mind, Vico says that it nevertheless took a thousand years (“a monstrosity of Greek chronology”). Orpheus is the poet of the divine age (Kronos’ age of gold): the first of Vico’s *ricorsi*, as Homer is another “poetic character,” a collective noun for the Greek oral poet on the border between the heroic age and the third Vichian age, that of men in the grips of history.⁷ But in Vico’s curious way of putting it, Orpheus is both the “reducer” to humanity *and* a den of monsters. He is a figure for a humanizing capacity located within and emergent from something monstrous. This dual nature, located at the very birth of the human (in Vichian terms), looks ahead to the Orphic anthropogony and

its emphasis upon the “mixing” of titanic and divine in the human as characteristic of the Orphic turn. Vico’s den is Plato’s cave, as we will consider below.

Orpheus and Shamanism

One of the chief characteristics of Orpheus is that he always seems to unite what is oldest and newest. As a poet-singer with the power to entrance, he bears close resemblance to the oldest go-between of the spiritual and human realms, the tribal shaman. Several works of the last forty years focus on the close relation between Greek religion and the shamanistic cultures extending from the north of Greece into Thrace, Scythia, Siberia, Alaska and thence into the North American mainland.⁸ Characteristic traits of the shaman identified in these sources include: bilocation, flying on an arrow, survival for long periods under the earth (suspended animation), androgyny, assuming the form of an oracular bird (usually a crow), and a prophesying head surviving the body after death.⁹ The shaman’s instruments include the lyre—fashioned of sheep gut and the carapace of the tortoise—the drum, and the rattle. What is most important about the shaman, however, is his ability to insinuate himself into the energy patterns of the complex web of life and death in which humans live. In this process he becomes a channel of divine energies, a conductor for the “peculiar mode of activity” that is the daimonic.¹⁰ As this channel, he is an instrument for enacting sympathetic magic, the principle that, according to its adherents, holds together the universe. The phenomenon that I shall later call the “poet as instrument” (chapter 4) rests upon this same principle.

Based upon the widespread evidence of the Orpheus motif in North America, Europe, and northern Asia, Orpheus appears as a shamanic figure involved in a mission of retrieval of a lost or stolen soul.¹¹ The shaman is a Paleolithic figure, whose powers grow out of a highly individualistic spiritual culture rather than out of the collectivist Neolithic model, where the entire society is involved in the enactment of a ritual built around the ever-dying, ever-rising son and consort of the Mother Goddess.¹² In the latter, the survival of sun, seed, or savior is a resurrection miracle of world-shaking proportions. With the Orpheus motif, on the other

hand, the underworld journey is a matter of simple retrieval; overcoming the forces of darkness and death to be sure, but with a modest goal on a personal scale. Though involving enchantment, the vulnerability, limitations, and even some bumbling comic aspects keep Orpheus close to the realm of human achievement and expectation. He is a magus, not a savior.

Bordering Greece on the north, Thrace (or Phrygia—modern Rumania), was always viewed by the Greeks with some suspicion as “wild.” At the crossroads between West Asia, the northern “shamanistic” lands, and Mycenae and Greece to the south, it was a religio-cultural melting pot. Associated with Thrace, Orpheus is a figure in whom it is tempting to see a blending of northern shamanism, Mycenaean Dionysian religion, and the Apolline cult widely thought to have migrated from Lydia (modern Turkey). Whereas W. K. C. Guthrie sees him as an “Apolline missionary” sent north to quell the raging Dionysian cult that had enthralled the Thracians, the Greek habit of viewing him as something foreign, an “alien drop” in the Greek bloodstream as Erwin Rohde put it, seems to confirm that he is indeed a Thracian figure.¹³ The views of E. R. Dodds and Mircea Eliade that he is an eponymous Thracian shaman who mediates Mycenaean-West Asian religion and northern shamanism (viz., Dionysos and Apollo) seem to make the best sense. Several historical Greek figures may be viewed as belonging to the shamanist type, including Parmenides, Pythagoras¹⁴ and Empedocles, whom Dodds calls “the last belated example of a species which . . . became extinct in the Greek world.”¹⁵ The Phrygian figures Abaris and Aristreas, however, have the most extensive documentation.¹⁶ It is interesting that the first references to shamanistic possession appear in the sixth century, where Orpheus, with his singing head, turtle-lyre, and underworld journey, appears as one of numerous Phrygian figures. Some view him as a double of the Phrygian daimonic/shamanic figure Zalmoxis.¹⁷

Jack Lindsay (*The Clashing Rocks*) sees a continuity in the shamanic tradition, with the tragedian building upon the prototype of the shaman. The tragedian is an ally of the pre-Olympian tribal groups (“Pelagians,” among others) in contest with the Olympians and the advanced *polis*-forms.¹⁸ His hero is an individualist of the “defiant shaman type” such as Prometheus, especially in Aeschylean tragedy. To Lindsay, the shamanistic experience is

the initiation-experience of the Mysteries raised to a higher intensity.¹⁹ The Mysteries are then the common link between the Paleolithic shaman and the tragedian of the classic age.²⁰ They also link the shamanistic cultures with the philosophy of Plato, as we shall see in the next chapter.

The "Shamanist Contradiction"

The shaman, originally a possessed instrument of the spirit (the divine afflatus), develops a "bifocal consciousness," so that he becomes the interpreter (*choros*) for them.²¹ As Lindsay puts it, the shaman becomes a tragedian when "possession becomes poetry."²² But the two states continue to exist side by side, creating a tension experienced within the consciousness of the Orphic poet, a tension that grows out of what Lindsay calls the "shamanist contradiction": "The shaman feels himself a wholly free and independent person; yet he is at the same time nothing but the mouthpiece of forces beyond himself."²³ Or in the words of the Odyssean bard Phemios, "I am selftaught. The god has implanted in my heart songs of all kinds."²⁴

In conclusion, Lindsay notes that at the end of the classical period the "old shamanist power" remains in only two roles: the Dionysiac missionary and the poet-musician.²⁵ These are precisely the two separate traditions which Guthrie and Ake Hultkrantz see combining in the figure of Orpheus: the religious reformer and the legend. The two figures come together via the common element of incantation (*epoidos*). This term is related to the archaic Odyssean word *oima*, designating "song as way,"²⁶ linking the older tribal shaman with the lyric and dramatic poet of the classical era. Thus the voyage of the shaman, the initiatory spirit-journey into the underworld through a narrow and harrowing passage (the "clashing rocks"—*symplegades*—of his title) is a song-way. Lindsay sees the voyage of the *Argo* as a shamanic journey which probably rests upon the oldest stratum of Greek pre-history. Orpheus, whose voice and lyre provide the *oima*, or later, *epoidos* that leads the band through the clashing rocks (compare the "horns of dilemma" motif), appears then to be a very ancient figure.²⁷

Lindsay's association of the lyric dramatist with the Dionysian dithyramb suggests that the tragedian carries the spirit of

tribal shamanism into the classical era. But Mircea Eliade rejects the view that sees Dionysos in association with shamanism. For him the shaman is Apolline, not Dionysian. Following Guthrie and Dodds, Eliade sees Apollo originating in the northern shamanic belt, coming down into Greece via Scythia and Phrygia. He is thus Hyperborean, descending from “ultra-north,” the place where he retreats from Delphi every winter. Apollo shares some of the characteristics of the shamanic figures Abaris, Musaios, Aristeas, and Zalmoxis, including traveling on an arrow and bearing a lyre fashioned of turtle’s carapace and sheep-gut. But he does not manifest other shamanic aspects: bilocation, survival of long terms under the earth, and the prophesying head.

Dionysos shares even fewer shamanic qualities, though the drum—which is part of the Phrygian mode, associated in the classical era with Dionysos—suggests a connection between the god and the northern shamanic cultures. But the consensus of religious historians is that Apollo comes from Asia Minor (Lydia), Dionysos from Mycenaea, and therefore that neither is from the shamanic north—though Apollo may well pass through that territory en route to Greece. Again, some see Zalmoxis and Dionysos/Zagreus as the same god, placing Dionysos at once above and below Greece. What makes most sense to me is that Orpheus as shamanic figure, though appearing in the Greek records relatively late, antedates both of these gods. That he is a mediating figure—as in Guthrie’s calling him an “Apolline missionary” to the Phrygians and their cults of Dionysos/Zalmoxis, or in Lindsay’s remark about the link between the shamanic figure and the “Dionysian missionary”—need not be contested. He *is* a medial figure, but not necessarily one newly hatched. Like Phanes and Eros, he is a link between the oldest and the newest. This is in accord with the views of both Cornford and Burkert, who see the religious phenomenon called “Orphism” as the revival of an ancient religion as well as a reformation.²⁸

Orpheus as Melding of Old and New

As noted above, at every point of Orpheus’s history, both in the earliest appearances and in subsequent revivals, he represents the old and the new at once.²⁹ Thus he becomes a major figure in

the era of Hellenistic syncretism as the reputed author of the so-called Orphic theogonies, as a latter-day Moses and as the Greek incarnation of Hermes Trismegistus.³⁰ In the Christian Era he becomes the pacific shepherd, a type or double for Christ. In the Renaissance, he is the magus, both the model operator of Ficino's "natural magic"³¹ and the principal figure (along with Eurydice) in the spectacular rise of the opera in the first decade of the seventeenth century in Florence. He and Eurydice reappear as figures of the love-death in the Romantic era, after which they undergo a continual development into the modern era, as the themes of love, death, and night are replaced by the act of creation/sacrifice by the Orphic poet out of the void: Mallarmé's Néant. This final transposition will be the focus of the latter half of this book. Our task now, however, is to get a glimpse of Orpheus in his fifth century context.

The Greek fifth century

The fifth century was a time of enormous strife and revolutionary change. Along with a political situation dominated by civil war "absolutely unprecedented in its savagery: city against city, man against man, father against son,"³² with accompanying atrocities, including possibly the first instance of genocide, traditional myth underwent a rapid decline as carrier of what Gilbert Murray called the "Inherited Conglomerate." The old integrated culture disintegrated, supplanted by the arts of the Sophist, including criticism of the gods, the installation of theogonies that rivaled Hesiod's, and the invention of new myths.³³ *Nomoi*, the traditional laws that governed human behavior, came to be seen as human inventions subject to change, not the inalterable decrees of the gods. Though not in the first generation or so, this eventually opened the way to atheism, which was one of the consequences of the invasion of Athens by Protagoras (450 B.C.), who brought the Sophist's ruthless mode of questioning, following the strict antithetical thinking of Parmenides, into the center of the *polis*. In this climate of changing allegiances, the Sophists entered as hired teachers, each offering his *logos* as the best to advance the careers of young men. The new agon became that between the rival *logoi* of the Sophists. Plato's invention of the *philosophos* came against this background of shifting loyalties.

Orpheus between Apollo and Dionysos

It is against this strife-ridden background that Orpheus makes his appearance. When the founder of the Orphic mysteries at Athens, Onomacritus, forges Orpheus's name upon some of the state theological documents, he goes beyond the Sophists in questioning the authority of the traditional gods, behaving more like one of the Orpheotelestai whom Plato excoriates in the *Phaedrus*. The theory that Orpheus was an imposter, a hoax perpetrated upon the state of Athens, has had many supporters ever since Wilamowitz studied the evidence for his existence and found it severely wanting. I also see something of a trickster element in Orpheus, and as such he plays the role of mediator, a hybrid figure between Apollo and Dionysos.

We recognize these gods as divinities with whom whole realms of being came to be identified: Apollo as the Olympian principle and Dionysos as the chthonian. Something like this characterization of Apollo and Dionysos recurs in Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*, though the general model reaches back at least to Plutarch, with recrudescences in Robert Fludd, Marsilio Ficino, and Friedrich Schelling.³⁴ But in the fifth century, these divisions were not so obvious. It was during this time that a remarkable *rapprochement* occurred between the increasingly popular cult of Dionysos and the established cult of Apollo at Delphi. The grave of Dionysos was reputed to have been moved to Delphi, within one hundred feet of the oracle itself. During the winter months during which Apollo went on his retreat to Hyperborea, the *dithyrambos* was sung at Delphi, replacing the Apolline paean. A vase painting from about 400 B.C. shows the two gods holding out their hands to one another.³⁵ Macrobius recorded two striking instances of their mingling in fragments from Aeschylus and Euripides. Aeschylus speaks of Apollo "the ivied, the Bacchic, the prophet"; and Euripides invokes "Lord Bacchos lover of the bay, Paean Apollo of the tuneful lyre."³⁶ Orpheus's concurrent appearance at their meeting point in Phrygia is for many related to this *rapprochement*, which is how I view Guthrie's remarks on Orpheus as an "Apolline missionary" to the Thracians.

In order to understand Orpheus as the figure who arises as the *limen* of their respective domains—both in the classical Greek context and in the later context (chapter 3) as the missing third or

ignored moment in Nietzsche's formulation of the contrariety Apollo-Dionysos—it is important to attempt a brief sketch of the place of these gods in the Greek fifth century. I will then proceed to give a summary of the legend of Orpheus, noting where Apollo and Dionysos enter into it, followed by a review of the ways in which Orpheus may be seen as their mediator. Finally, I will end this section with a comparison of Orpheus and Dionysos as foreshadowing the analogous relation between Mallarmé and Nietzsche.

Apollo

Apollo's worship has at least three prehistoric components: Dorian-northwest Greek, Cretan-Minoan, and Syro-Hittite. The Greek habit of viewing him as coming from Lydia-Anatolia reflects the latest of these three.³⁷ In the earlier pre-Greek form, Apellon, he is closely tied to the *apellai*, annual gatherings of the tribe or phratry, including one at Delphi, which grew to be one of his two great, Panhellenic cult centers. He is intimately associated with one of the most important actions taken at these men's gatherings: the initiation of youths who have come of age.³⁸ In this respect, he is quite similar to his twin sister Artemis, who is associated with the initiation of girls into womanhood. Apollo's patronage of the initiation of adolescent males broadened in the classical era to include athletic and musical contests as well. As modeled in the *kouros*, he emblemizes the Greek worship of youthful beauty, poised on the threshold of manhood.

Apollo has special renown as an archer, which is another feature he shares with Artemis. She, however, is goddess of the hunt, whereas Apollo's bow is twinned with the lyre. Like the lyre, the bow sings when plucked; like the bow, the lyre flings its arrow-songs unerringly at their targets.³⁹ In contrast with Artemis, who is goddess of wild nature, Apollo is a city-god; his lyre "sang the stones into place" at Troy. One of Apollo's most common epithets is "striking from afar," which characterizes both his death-dealing arrows and the reach of his healing paeans. But though he was god of healing, he was also the sender of plague. Writers of antiquity spoke of the sweetness of death by his silver arrows. His distance, reserve, and aloofness are key characteristics and mark him as opposite to Dionysos, who gets painfully close to his worshippers.⁴⁰

Apollo is the great lawgiver of Magna Graecia, concerned, as W. K. C. Guthrie says, with the “statutory aspects of religion.”⁴¹ More than any other god, he is Panhellenic, and his oracle at Delphi was consulted as arbitrator of many a dispute. Via his oracle, he was the promulgator of legal code, but Delphi was also consulted with regard to such basic matters as where to found cities. The oracle at Delphi was an archaic shrine of Earth (Gaia) where he supplanted her by slaying the Python, though he retained the prophetess (Pythia) who proclaimed the oracle. He was preceded by a goddess at his other cult-center, too: the island of Delos, site of his birth by Leto, where his twin Artemis ruled before him (and assisted at his birth, since she was there first).⁴²

As lawgiver, Apollo has an even older and deeper connection to the rules concerning homicide: how the attendant pollution (*miasma*) from such an act could be ritually purified. This concern for purification (*katharsis*) reinforces his association with the purity of the young initiate; *katharsis* is a way to return to the earlier condition of purity after it is lost. Apollo himself makes an annual retreat to the mythical land of the Hyperboreans, in the far north whence he supposedly came, as a kind of ritual renewal of his purity.⁴³ The society of Pythagoras, with its elaborate set of regulations to assure purity in every aspect of life, is perhaps an extreme example of an “Apolline” society.

Pythagoras’s work with mathematics, music, and harmony is also characteristically Apolline. Though other gods have hymns and various connections to music, Apollo is *the* musical god par excellence. Harmony, balance, proportion, moderation: these are all qualities that we tend to think of as quintessentially Greek, yet they are more especially hallmarks of the Apolline. Around the sixth century, a series of injunctions were recorded on the walls of the temple that encode his values. They include these two: “nothing in excess” and “know thyself.” The latter connotes not what it came to mean after Socrates but simply “know thy nature”; that is, know your limits as a human being. In this sense, it is Apollo who defines the key Greek notion of *sophrosyne*.⁴⁴ Apollo’s limits, however, are simply those of the visible universe. With characteristic reverence, Walter Otto speaks of Apollo in his aspect as sun god (after the epithet *Phoebus*), paraphrasing the *Orphic Hymns* and Skythinnus to form the magnificent image of Apollo holding the

universe together with the tones of his lyre, his solar rays acting as the plectrum.⁴⁵

Dionysos

Though scarcely mentioned in Homer, Dionysos is an even older deity in the Greek context than Apollo; he is mentioned in Linear B, the Minoan alphabet found at Pylos which is the oldest deciphered record we have of Greek speech. Here he is already associated with wine, which remained central to his identity. Other data attesting to his early appearance in Greece include the following: a cult shrine dedicated to him at Keos since 1500; an association with the Anthesteria (one of his chief festivals) common to both the Athenians and Ionians, indicating that he predated the Ionian migration, and the exceedingly ancient form of the *dithyrambos*, the characteristic hymn to the god.⁴⁶ Before Linear B was deciphered, his absence from Homer was interpreted to mean that his cult had not become very well established in Greece in the archaic era, but now the sense is that this absence reflects a class difference. Apollo is a god of the nobler class, whereas Dionysos is a god of the common folk (especially the women), and Homer writes for, and thus portrays, the former.⁴⁷ In the era with which we are concerned, the sixth to fifth centuries, Dionysos is always seen as an invader, a foreign intruder. Guthrie thinks that the whole group of myths having to do with Dionysos's disruptive entry into cities and villages, challenging the local authorities to admit his cult, is aetiological, following the path of his westward course from Asia and Phrygia.⁴⁸ The pattern is one of refusal, followed by Dionysos's turning the women into raving Maenads who occasionally hunt down and destroy their own children. This is the model which Euripides gives in the *locus classicus* for Dionysos, *The Bacchae* (first performed about 400). The extraordinary phenomenon of the Maenads—adult women who heed the call of his drum and *aulos*, leaving their husbands and children to join in rituals of catching, tearing apart (*sparagmos*), and tasting the raw flesh (omophagia) of young wild creatures—is one of his most characteristic touches.

In their complementary aspect, the women (also called "Thyiades"), were nurses to the infant Dionysos, Dionysos Liknites, who was carried in procession in a *liknon* (linen-covered

basket) as the “heart” that Athena had saved from the Titans’ omophagia during his spring festival, the Anthesteria. As part of this rite, one of the Thyiades lifted the cover of the basket to revive the infant god by performing an “unspeakable act” (*arrheton*).⁴⁹ A similar kind of *hieros gamos* at the Anthesteria at Athens was the ritual marriage of the city’s queen, the Basilinna, with Dionysos in the god’s cave-temple on the city’s outskirts.⁵⁰ Only a priestess could accompany the Basilinna into the god’s inner chamber, where their ritual union was also “unspeakable.”⁵¹

The Anthesteria (Ionia/Attica) was the chief festival of Dionysos and the site of one of his most famous mysteries. It was preceded by the Lenaia, specifically dedicated to the new wine crop, and like all of the Dionysian festivals, an intoxicated period of license, precursor of the Roman carnival. This pair formed the first of four basic Greek festivals dedicated to Dionysos. The Agrionia (Dorian/Aelolic) was a time of dissolution and inversion. This festival commemorated the Minyades, who, after refusing Dionysos’s worship were maddened by the god, ending with the murder of one of their own children, Hippasus, son of Leucippe.⁵² The birth of Dionysos at Thebes is also associated with this regional festival.⁵³ The rustic Dionysia was commemorated by the sacrifice of a goat, a phallic procession, and a satyr-play. The antics of this lighter festival formed the basis of comedy.⁵⁴ The Greater Dionysia, Katagogia, was a commemoration of the god’s advent by boat from the sea, also celebrated in Athens.

In addition to these state festivals, there were private, localized *orgia*, which were trieteric, that is celebrated every other year. Carl Kerényi gives a fascinating account explaining these *orgia* as tied to the cycle of Sirius, the Dog Star. Their beginning was signaled by the first rays of the star entering the Idaea birth-cave of Zeus/Zagreus in early July.⁵⁵

Central to Dionysos is his identification with the procreative element: he is wet with the sap of the evergreen, the juice of the vine, and sperm.⁵⁶ He is the Greek version of the dying-rising god and as such is beautifully fitted for his burgeoning role in the sixth century as a mystery-god.⁵⁷ He also enacts the identity wine = blood, playing a double role as the wine coming from the death of the grape, and the infant king who rises up anew (phallically) after *sparagmos*. In the myth of his second birth from Zeus’s thigh,

there are overtones of castration and death (issuing from a “thigh wound”—where thigh is euphemistic of genitals) as well as of homoeroticism.⁵⁸

Walter Otto, whose *Dionysus: Myth and Cult* defines, in Guthrie’s words, the “German” Dionysos at the same time as providing his latest cult document, speaks of Dionysos as *der kommende Gott*: “the god who comes.”⁵⁹ He emphasizes the unpredictability of the god and an underlying connection with madness. Otto sees Dionysos’s arrival and departure as sudden, best symbolized by the accompanying din and silence. For him the Phrygian, which was the Dionysian mode, was binary, characterized by the juxtaposition of shrieks and silence. We will presently see an excellent example of this in the “concerto” by which Orpheus dies. As the “god who comes,” also called the “loosener,” Dionysos is at the other extreme from Apollo. Apollo is always distant and aloof, the god of boundaries.⁶⁰ Dionysos is a destroyer of boundaries; he erupts into the center of the lives of his followers, getting into their blood.

Summary of the Orpheus myth

The interplay between Dionysos and Apollo, with Orpheus as a kind of mediator, may be seen in the following summary of the main lines of the legend of Orpheus. As I shall note in enumerating the mythemes, I am including some of the material which was first “fixed” in Virgil and Ovid, thus expanding the nexus of the myth beyond the fifth to fourth centuries. Though there is some disagreement about the era in which Eurydice first appears, and more disagreement over the reasons Orpheus shuns the company of women after his unsuccessful bid to rescue her, these differences are far less profound than the scholarly disagreement over the existence of Orphism and the authorship of the Orphic theogonies, as we shall see below.

1. Orpheus is born of Kalliope and Oiagros (in some versions, Apollo is his father). Kalliope is a Muse, “she of the beautiful voice.” The Muses live high on the slopes of Olympus and are associated with Apollo. Oiagros was a river god but also king of Thrace, home of the religion of Dionysos. His father Charops was a pupil of Dionysos.

2. Orpheus is paired with Eurydice (Eurydike, “the wide-ruling” [Jane Harrison]), interpreted as a variant of Persephone but sometimes seen simply as a dryad (tree spirit). By some accounts, they have a son, Musaios. In other accounts, Musaios is Orpheus’s father. (Musaios is widely mentioned as a religious reformer and shaman, but these accounts are independent of stories containing Orpheus.)

3. In a famous episode, Orpheus charms the forest beasts, the trees, and the birds—even the stones—who all gather round him transfixed by his singing, as he accompanies himself on the lyre. The lyre is from Apollo (who got it in turn from Hermes). In all the ancient depictions (primarily vase paintings) his head is thrust back as he sings, as if in ecstasy. This episode is repeated in the accounts of the voyage of the *Argo*, where it is the seabirds and dolphins that he charms.

4. Eurydice, chased by Aristeeas (a beekeeper, aligned with Apollo), steps on a viper, which bites her on the heel, and she dies. A sorrowful Orpheus persuades Hermes to lead him into the underworld in an effort to bring her back (Virgil).

5. Once in the realm of Hades, Orpheus again takes out his lyre and sings, moving everyone to tears. Sisypheos sits on his rock, transfixed. Ixion’s wheel stops turning. The Danaides’ leaky vase stops overflowing. For the first time, the Fates cry. Hades and Persephone are persuaded to release the shade of Eurydice, but on condition that Orpheus not look back at her until he reaches earth again. As Orpheus, Eurydice, and Hermes approach the upper world, Orpheus, thinking to have lost her, turns around for reassurance, whereupon Hermes turns to guide her back, this time forever. After losing Eurydice a second time, Orpheus is griefstricken.

6. As a consequence, he goes into “celibate” retirement, “shunning the company of women.” He climbs Mount Pangaion daily to worship Apollo as Helios. The Thracian women complain that he has lured away their warrior-husbands (Aeschylus *Bassarides* fragment).⁶¹

7. While these warriors are worshipping inside Apollo’s temple, their angry wives—turned Maenads—steal their husbands’ weapons, piled outside the temple, and assault Orpheus.⁶² He continues to sing, warding off the first blows, but they overpower his music with their own wild Phrygian shrieking, piping, and

clapping; then they kill him with stones, spears, and in some versions, agricultural implements they have taken from workers in fields nearby.

8. The Maenads then tear him to pieces in a ritual *sparagmos*, throwing the body parts in the sea (or they are retrieved by the Muses, who bury them) while the head and lyre float down the Hebrus, eventually landing on Lesbos. There the lyre rests in the sanctuary of Apollo, the head at the shrine of Dionysos.

9. The head continues to prophesy, until Apollo, made jealous by this intrusion on his function, silences it (usually by burial). When it first arrives, however, he saves it from being swallowed by a snake, which he strikes to stone, its mouth agape. Eventually the lyre makes its way to the heavens, where it becomes the constellation Lyra.

10. Dionysus angrily pursues the fleeing Maenads, spelling them into a grove of trees. (Mythologems 7–10, all Ovid).

From this summary account, one can see that Dionysos and Apollo are involved with the myth of Orpheus from the beginning. As son of Oïagros, he is associated with Dionysos, who taught Oïagros's father Charops. Rival versions, though, have Apollo as his father (occasionally even Musaios, his apocryphal son, is given as the father, doubling the connection with the Muses, who are traditionally associated with Apollo). Under Orpheus's spell, the Thracian warriors and their wives exchange places, the men going off pacifically to worship at the temple of Apollo, while their wives steal their weapons (and perhaps the leopard skins with which the wild Thracians are typically depicted, thus assuming the Maenad costume) as they storm by on their way to murder Orpheus.⁶³ Supposedly, says Aeschylus, they are angry because Orpheus, spurning women since his unsuccessful descent, has led their warriors into homosexuality (I will return to this important aspect shortly). From here on, the dialectic of the Apolline and the Dionysian becomes intertwined increasingly thickly. The story of Orpheus's death is the enactment of a concerto: the solo voice, accompanied by the lyre (often used for the stately Dorian mode, associated with Apollo) against the concerted performance of the Maenads: shrieking, drumming, sometimes wailing on the *aulos*, in the Phrygian mode.⁶⁴

As murderers of Orpheus by ritual *sparagmos*, the Maenads treat him as their lord and prey. In the manner of his death, Orpheus reveals his underlying kinship with Dionysos. And with Ovid's finishing touches, his head and lyre float down the Hebrus until coming to rest on Lesbos at the shrine of Dionysos. But Dionysos's turning the Maenads into a grove of trees (a "Phrygian" silencing—see note 64) as punishment for their crime indicates a continuing differentiation from the pacific lyrist. Strangest of all, we have the detail of Apollo's appearing at *Dionysos*' shrine to save Orpheus from the yawning jaws of a huge serpent, echoing the motif by which Apollo secures Delphi. But later, returning to command Orpheus's head to silence, he seems to have changed his mind. It almost seems as if, in these final movements, Apollo and Dionysos are in collusion—which is exactly the point. Later, in the context of Schelling, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche, we will see Orpheus as the reconciliation of opposites—that is, as Nietzsche suggests, of Apollo as the *principium individuationis* and Dionysos as the primal chthonic ground, the *Ur-Eine*. Here, though, what we seem to have is a subtle kind of cult battle.

Orpheus and Dionysos

Though Orpheus is widely seen as mediator of these two gods and their realms, he is usually interpreted as being closer to Dionysos. Genealogy and burial place are two cardinal aspects informing us of the essential nature of Greek heroes and *daimones*, and each of these indicates a deep likeness between Orpheus and Dionysos. However, as Jane Harrison says, "Orpheus reflects Dionysos, but at almost every point seems to contradict him."⁶⁵ There is something in Orpheus's nature that is perverse, in a way that Dionysos, as seed, sap, and sexual fluid, can never be. Nietzsche speaks of the triumph in Greek tragedy of saying "yes to life" as an essentially Dionysian phenomenon.

In *Eros and Civilization*, Herbert Marcuse speaks of two essentially different culture-heroes: Prometheus, the proud, assertive yea-sayer, stealing the gods' energies, and Orpheus, author of the Great Refusal.⁶⁶ To Marcuse, Orpheus's homophilia is as foundational as Prometheus's theft of fire, establishing a particular pattern of sublimation modeled upon the refusal of Dionysos's gifts. One might call this refusal an inversion, to take

up Freud's term for the homosexual. "Invert" is usually seen as yet another dated Freudian misnomer, but in this case, it seems apt—particularly if one gives credence to Marcuse's theory. It also fits the structuralist interpretation (see note 63): Orpheus's actions may be seen as a series of *inversions* that mediate Dionysos/Apollo, male/female, tame/wild, and so forth.⁶⁷

Orphism and the Orphic Theogonies

A few twentieth-century scholars have believed there actually was a historical man named Orpheus. One is W. K. C. Guthrie, whose book *Orpheus and Greek Religion* remains the basic, indispensable survey of Orpheus and Orphism. Guthrie sees Orpheus as an Apolline priest: a missionary who acts to calm the Dionysian cult, whose strength in Phrygia had begun to alarm Attic peoples. Jane Harrison's belief in Orpheus included accepting his followers' claims that he was a cosmogonic poet. Most scholars, however, do not find evidence for a historical Orpheus, reading him as a hero of legend, perhaps shamanic.

The significant argument, however, is not over the identity of the figure but over the existence of a bona fide religious movement called "Orphism." The word *Orphism* is a neologism, coined, according to Brian Juden, by Nietzsche's friend Rohde (*Psyche*).⁶⁸ Here is the issue: is the group of attitudes and activities, however loosely organized, designated by the term also a late invention? The chief positions here are represented by Guthrie, who argued for the presence of such a movement in the fifth to fourth centuries, and Ivan Linforth, whose *Arts of Orpheus* (1941), following Wilamowitz, presents a minimalist case, concluding that the amorphous body of beliefs called "Orphism" was a "rumor": merely the fabrication of neoplatonists of the Hellenistic and subsequent eras (including those of Proclus an entire millennium later).⁶⁹

However, if there was no such thing as "Orphism"—and I do not hold the sword with which to cut through the tangle of arguments—there were *Orphicoi*, "orphyic folk," and *Orpheotelestai* (wandering priests), who carried around trinkets, amulets, stock prayers, and the like, which they sold to (usually) poor people—much like mendicant friars peddling medals of St. Sebastian. And

there were also the trappings of a cult. Unlike the traditional Greek cults, anchored to the graves of heroes, oracles, and the like, the *Orphicoi* had manuals and hymnbooks in which their hero was said to have written praises of the gods and new cosmogonies. This made the (presumed) cult more portable and more open to revision and reflective thought during moments other than the administration of *teletai*. It also contributed to its democratization, something that it had in common with the cult of Dionysos (the god overseeing telestic madness).⁷⁰

Associated with this Orphic religion, one strand of a “protestant” movement in the fifth to fourth century that accompanied the greatest changes in religious life and belief that Greece had known, were rewritten cosmogonies and an Orphic anthropogony, “neatly explaining to the devotee why he felt wicked and guilty.”⁷¹ The Orphic theogonies are mostly known to us by the compilation of hymn fragments called the “Rhapsodic Theogony,” recorded in the first century B.C. (henceforth called “Rhapsodies”). Though these have long been criticized as later interpolations along the lines of those perpetrated by Orpheus’s priest Onomacritus, the relatively recent discovery of the Derveni papyrus (at Thessaloniki in the sixties) has pushed back the dates of known compilations of Orphic theogonies to at least the middle of the fifth century.⁷² They are widely accepted as rival theogonies to the canonical theogonic poem of Hesiod. Details vary, but the main lines and most replicated details are given in the Rhapsodies, which will form the basis for my summary. Though Orpheus as a mythic figure is more significant to my study, there are nonetheless elements of these Orphic theogonies that bear upon my thesis as well and, in fact, give glimpses of occasional unity between what are widely perceived to be disparate subjects: Orpheus the lyric enchanter and Orphism, displayed in part via the theogonies. Knowledge of both is necessary background for reading Plato and Mallarmé as “Orphic” poets.

Nyx, Phanes, the primal egg

The chief, striking difference between Hesiod and the Rhapsodic Theogony is that the universe begins with Nyx (Night), who plays a pivotal position. A birdlike creature with huge black wings, she lays the original Orphic egg “in the lap of darkness.”⁷³ As the

uncreated original, she thus takes the place of Chaos in Hesiod. After the birth of Eros/Phanes, hatched from the egg, she receives his scepter. Only Night can then see Phanes, the “shining” who appears in the space between the two halves of the shell, the *aither* above and the gulf below (which later become sky and earth, Uranos and Gaia) for there is nobody else to perceive him. She is the “nurse of the gods,” two generations later becoming counselor to Zeus, who begs her advice on how to reconcile the “one and the many” (admittedly a problem more philosophical than practical, indicating the “hidden agenda” of the Orphic reformers). Nyx advises him to swallow Phanes (all of visible creation) and, after “mingling” its elements with his own organs, to regurgitate the whole anew (looking ahead to Mallarmé, a *retrempe*, “re-saturation”). This is the cardinal solution to the Orphic cosmogonists’ desire that he become the demiurge, the connecting link between the reigns of Night and the Orphic Dionysos who succeeded Zeus. But though she becomes a powerful, pivotal figure in the *Rhapsodies*, Nyx is left behind when Zeus swallows Eros.⁷⁴

Dionysos and the Titans

The concern over demiurgy, then, unites Eros/Phanes and the infant Dionysos on his throne in the Idaen cave, bequeathed to him by the father who bore him from his thigh. This sets the stage for the second key shift in Greek myth wrought by “Orpheus,” the anthropogony. For no sooner does the infant Dionysos, the *Orphic* Dionysos, mount his throne than the *kouretes*, white-faced daimonic male dancing figures, turn upon the infant and redirect their din, originally protective, at their infant lord.⁷⁵ The guardian *kouretes* have become bloodthirsty Titans who divert him with toys and then kill him. While he is enthralled by a mirror, they rip him apart, roast him, boil him, and then eat him. Thus Dionysos, the shuddering progenitor, the “loosener,” is reduced in the Orphic version to an infant tricked into death by the play of a mirror. This sparagmos and omophagia of Dionysos is followed by Zeus’s enraged destruction of the Titans by a lightning stroke. According to Pausanias, he fabricated man from clay (*titanos*) and their remaining ashes. The human is thus a radically “mixed” creature, part Titan, part divine.⁷⁶