MYSELF, SPLIT OPEN: OVID, RUKEYSER, AND THE TRAUMATIC POETICS OF ORPHIC RE-MEMBERING

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OVID'S ORPHEUS AND MODERNITY: TRIUMPH OR TRAUMA?

> When I wrote of the women in their dances and wildness
> it was a mask […]
> when I wrote of the god,
> fragmented, exiled from himself […]
> it was myself, split open, unable to speak […]
> No more masks! […]
> Now, for the first time, the god lifts his hand,
> The fragments join in me with their own music.
> —Muriel Rukeyser, from *The Poem as Mask: Orpheus*[1]

'Orphea nequiquam voce vocatur': thus does Ovid introduce Orpheus, the vates who will provide perhaps the most haunting and enduring tale in the *Metamorphoses* (10.3): *He was called by the voice of Orpheus in vain.*[2] Orpheus's intoxicating expressive power arises for us at the intersection of desire and limitation, as his summons of the marriage god, Hymen, proves simultaneously efficacious and empty. Despite the pleonasm (*voce vocatur*), which emphasizes Orpheus's employment of voice in attempting to command the god, his endeavor is futile (*nequiquam*). Moreover, *nequiquam* precedes *voce vocatur*, acting as a physical impediment dividing *Orphea* from *voce*. Indeed, here is the first instance of an orphic *sparagmos,* with Orpheus syntactically split from his voice, the very element that synecdochally defines him. At its inception, orphic agency arises, in Muriel Rukeyser's apt phrasing, 'in exile from [it]self'.

Fashioner of verse that materializes metaphors and transcends mediations yet remains shadowed by catastrophic loss, Ovid's definitive figure of bardic ambition has provoked a radically divided reception history, particularly among post-Romantic poets and modern critical interpreters. Critical response ranges along a spectrum stretching from a tragic view of Orpheus as shattered— first emotionally by his inability to retrieve Eurydice, then physically by the vengeful Maenads, whose deafening noise overwhelms the sweet power of the Orphean voice—to a celebratory emphasis on the heroic *katabasis* and capacity of song to exceed bodily fragmentation. Among the latter, Charles Segal has argued most forcefully the case for Orpheus as 'victorious' poet-lover whose propitious transgression of spatio-temporal obstacles serves as model for modern poets seeking what Gerald Bruns (addressing appropriations of Orpheus in post-Romantic 'metaphysical' poetics) terms a mode of speech that 'annihilates the world of things in the very process of signification,' thereby 'building up a new world' in which 'differentiations are dissolved into a … magical chain of causality'.[3] Against Segal and his compeers in what we might call the vein of

orphic triumphalism (a view that often reads Orpheus as a figure for Ovid himself)[4] stands the critical insistence that psychic and pragmatic failure hollows glorification of orphic voice, directing (in John Heath's trenchant and influential words) 'the reader past Orpheus' artistry towards his inherently unheroic nature,'[5] a skepticism that complements Walter Strauss's reading of post-Romantic poetic orphism as marked by the question of 'whether the poet can even exist in the modern world'.[6]

Caught, as R.A. Smith cannily notes, between the heroism of epic descent and the trauma of lyric elegy,[7] Orpheus might well be read as embodying both an Ovidian and modern *ambivalence* about the possibilities and limits of poetry itself. On this view, a self-divided classical model becomes progenitor of modernity's constitutive fears of cultural dismemberment along the dark descent from crisis and insufficiency to eventual disappearance. The aspirational charm of orphic song is thus subject to the irony or pathos of fragmentation and defeat, composing within Ovid's tale a narrative arc that anticipates modern poetry's account of its own agonal belatedness. Against this reading of 'victory' (epic descent and continuing song) and 'catastrophe' (redoubled loss in the backward gaze and in the psychic and bodily *sparagmos*) as alternative or sequential positions in the orphic drama, whether in Ovid's tale or its post-Romantic poetic revisions, I contend that orphic triumph and trauma are mutually constitutive elements within a single psychic, narrative, and poetic design. This is not to claim for the orphic configuration a fantasized wholeness as solution to perceived dissolution[8] or, more simply, a thematic extension of Ovid's flair for rhetorical paradox.[9] Instead, I assert that the braiding of achievement and anxiety throughout Orpheus's story marks a struggle *within* Ovidian poetics about its capacity and limits, a struggle that is, in turn, the most telling legacy of Ovid to modern poets seeking self-realization within a contemporary dialectic of orphic wretchedness and regeneration.

This essay will ultimately pursue these hypotheses with particular reference to Muriel Rukeyser's persistent, if ambivalent, involvement with Orpheus as poetic exemplar and antagonist, prototype and challenge. Not only does the Ovidian seer instigate Rukeyser's keenest poetic reflections of the poetic enterprise itself, but her anguished revision of her own *Orpheus* in the later *The Poem as Mask: Orpheus* enacts its own mimesis of orphic re-turn, descending into the agonies of the myth once again in order both to reform and retrieve its potential for a redeemed poetics in the very crucible of crisis. As we shall see*,* each crucial feature of this reflexive *katabasis* is already anticipated by the Ovidian pre-text, particularly the specific interest in passing through the limitations of writing ('when I wrote') to the more 'originary' mode of eloquent, if still fractured, song ('the fragments … own music'), an interest that is in turn a synecdoche or symptom of the more encompassing orphic pattern of doubleness and division that finds most complex expression in the twining/twinning of trauma and triumph. But this will not mean that Rukeyser merely doubles the orphic narrative; rather, in taking up that lyre again and again, she poses anew for modern verse and contemporary criticism alike the Ovidian questions of poetry's constraints and possibilities. Thus, I aim finally to show that we have in Muriel Ruykeyser's sequence of orphic poems a multi-layered experience of Ovid's presence in modern literature: first, a challenging *reinscription* of the Ovidian vision of catastrophe as itself the site of creativity; and then, a cogent *reading* of the Ovidian matrix of orphic struggle that models reception as a means of critically producing, not just reproducing, knowledge of the past.

THE OVIDIAN MATRIX: DOUBLENESS AND DIVISION

In order best to grasp the resonance of Rukeyser's Orpheus poems for post-Romantic poetry's exploration of critical reception and self-revaluation, we must become intimate with Ovid's Orpheus, who (unlike the vates of Virgil's Fourth Georgic or of Greek cultic myth) has served as poetic archetype for centuries of Anglo-European verse.[10] In his story of Orpheus and Eurydice, Ovid employs dramaticism in diction and syntax, emphasizing the suddenness and anguish of the lovers' tragedy. From the very onset of Book 10 of the *Metamorphoses,* their misery is proleptically established: the wedding torch is hissing tearful smoke—*lacrimoso stridula fumo* (10.6)—portending the sibilating serpent that will fatally strike Eurydice. The ominous whir of the flame serves as the only auditory element in this opening scene, which involves a swift progression of events, culminating in Orpheus's mournful impatience, the impetus for his pursuing entrance to the Underworld. Finally, premeditated sound: Orpheus's arresting vocal and instrumental music (*pulsisque ad carmina nervis* (10.16)) pervades the realm, entrancing the population of Hades.

Purposeful sound, a force conceptually and psychologically correlated with creation, life, and restoration, is captured—albeit fleetingly—in the form of Orpheus's song. In the logocentric logic of Ovid's tale, such sonorous intentionality counters sight, a faculty materialized in such scriptive and imagistic forms as the doleful smoke, a figure of writing, which is in turn associated with the danger of death and loss. In the orphic myth, sound functions as a kind of primordial, unadulterated mode of poiesis, an originary power of response to and even (re)making of the world. By contrast, sight suggests a kind of displacement and subordination of that originary authority into a secondary and impure one; the unsung, purely visual, image by extension functions as a diluted or dangerous expressive medium, one through which the self is distanced from the world, perceiving it from a distance rather than actively engaging it. While the flow of ideas remains unbroken in the bard's continuous music, an etcher of the static image must produce requisite jarring auditory pauses and hollow visual spaces.

Thus, from the orphic vantage the ocular sign is inherently a fractured and fracturing entity, the interval it requires between eye and object figuring the rifts of trauma itself. The distancing image opposes song's steady stream that renounces absence and repairs rupture. Orpheus the minstrel employs the stability and continuity of his oral command when pacifying the Tartaran gods, aware that a break in his music would permit the divinities' anticipated incredulity and devastate his plea. Interrupting seemingly unchanging icons of punishment in a moment suspended between defining images of pain—*nec Tantalus undam captavit refugam, stupuitque Ixionis orbis*—'nor did Tantalus capture the fleeing water, and the orb of Ixion stood amazed' (10.41-42)—orphic voice negates torment and provides for a possible alternative relation to time and desire: the dream of his song is the redemption of what Cathy Caruth terms 'trauma's belated experience'.[11] Indeed, it is only when Orpheus himself, in his abusive turn to the power of sight, undermines his verbal agreement with the Underworld deities that his own desires are irrevocably thwarted.

The dichotomy between the visual and the auditory as encountered within the orphic myth itself effectively exemplifies this alternation between refractive and uniting forces. When mingled with the consistently destructive power of vision, aural perception assumes a correspondingly lethal capacity, as illustrated by the juxtaposition of *lacrimoso* (tearful) and *stridula* (hissing) in 10.6. Conversely, when set in direct opposition to an ocular element, sonority works propitiously.

Orpheus sings the simple truth (*vera loqui* (10.20)), assuring the shades that he wishes not to *see* their domain (*non huc, ut opaca viderem Tartara, descendi*—'I descended here not in order to see dark Tartarus' (10.20-21)). Instinctively, Orpheus recognizes—in the most literal sense of the word—that to see is to imperil, to risk the well-being of oneself and of others; he pledges his blindness even before requesting the return of his wife.

This promise is well-wrought: in yet another compounding of audio and optical apprehension, 'as [Orpheus] spoke thus, accompanying his words with the music of his lyre, the bloodless spirits wept': *talia dicentem nervosque ad verba moventem exsangues flebant animae* (10.40-41). Finally, 'conquered by the song [with] the cheeks of the Eumenides wet with tears,' the rulers of the Underworld 'call Eurydice': *lacrimis victarum carmine…Eumenidum maduisse genas…Eurydicenque vocant* (10.45-46, 48). Here, the Fates themselves are syntactically caught between *lacrimis* (tears) and *carmine* (song), given no choice but to surrender to the lyrical spell. Their own eyes cloud with tears incited by their ears' reception of the melodic message; ocular clarity yields to musical fluidity.

Thus, vision and hearing contest each other, for while Orpheus's vocal dexterity *conquers* Hades' king and queen, his postliminary, notorious glance back at Eurydice when leading her toward the upper world proves momentarily more puissant, and noxiously so. Instigated by fear and a willful 'eager[ness] for sight of her' (*metuens avidusque videndi* (10.56)), Orpheus's impetuousness engenders a near void of all sight and sound of Eurydice. She, 'dying a second time' (*iterum moriens* (10.60)), yields only the invisibility of air, uttering a 'farewell' (*vale* (10.62)), which '[her husband] scarcely received with his ears' (*vix auribus ille acciperet* (10.62-63)). Again, an unlikely juxtaposition (this time of *vix* [scarcely] and *auribus* [ears]) underscores the deprivation inflicted upon the curative aural organ by the destructive ocular one.

Orpheus's critical glance backward merges a remarkable doubled turn: a turn *toward* Eurydice and a turn *away* from his own poetic confidence. In his spoken contract with the Underworld gods, Orpheus was never explicitly denied spoken communication with Eurydice while leading her to the upper world, never warned against the utterance of her name. However, rather than seek oral affirmation of his wife's presence, he requires more nearly tangible proof: he needs to *behold*, to grasp the *image*, if only with his eyes. Orpheus thereby executes, with his injurious and doubled turn, a razing of his own vocal poetic power; by extension, he dilutes the authority of poetry at large and fashions a dual identity for himself: illustrious minstrel by vocation and mortal lover by birth and, perhaps, inclination.

This simultaneity of doubling and diminishing within orphic identity illustrates the psychological and figurative volatility that Ovid marks upon the hero's assumption of sight. Ovid demonstrates how the ruinous force of vision, the effort to concretize desire by fixing its object in a stable image, corresponds to a defining fissure within poetic craft itself. In addition to vivid and synecdochal imagery, which is reflected, or doubled, in the diction and syntax, he employs rhetorical devices not only to embellish the narrative, but also to illustrate physically the sundering effects of *writing* the narrative, as opposed to singing it. While Orpheus loses the literal sight of Eurydice precisely when seeking to grasp her completely, a reader of poetry must scrutinize letters, words, and phrases as distinct entities broken apart by syntactical and semantic gaps in an effort to apprehend the tale's total significance. Just as Orpheus repeatedly suffers interruptions of

possession that perpetually dislocate desire into loss, so Ovid organizes his verse through an interplay of continuity and rupture that is as much prosodic as thematic.[12]

One form of such disruptive extension, the enjambment, appears frequently in Ovid's narrative: as palpable emblems of ruptures in lyrical expectation, they are used to amplify the abruptness and celerity of the chain of events, seeking yet impeding closure. They act as components nearly independent of the overall sequence, emphasizing select details in order to momentarily agitate—perhaps even traumatize—the reader and to arrest the very continuity that they might seem superficially to promote. In his plea to the Tartaran rulers, for example, Orpheus explains that Love conquered him: *vicit Amor* (10.26). This unadorned two-word phrase commences its line, following the much lengthier justification of his presence, namely, that mere perseverance has failed him. Overcome with emotion, the bard allows his desperation to overflow from one line into the next; furthermore, the simplicity of *vicit Amor* resonates more distinctly than the complexity and, perhaps, superfluity of the rest of his speech. Even more dramatic is Orpheus's enjambment at the conclusion of his speech: *nolle redire mihi*: 'to be unwilling to return [is certain] for me' (10.39). Followed by 'rejoice in the death of two' (*leto gaudete duorum* (10.39)), this phrase is a willful testament to Orpheus's passionate integrity and determination, though it achieves this aura of incorruptible passion by the surprising reversal of l.38's terminal *est* into l.39's initial *nolle.* Moreover, the assertive *nolle redire mihi* culminates a climactic conditional in which Orpheus essentially threatens the Fates with his own self-ordained early death, should they choose not to reverse their verdict on Eurydice's life.

The enjambment succeeds in jarring the singer's audience, whose actions include their own enjambed weight. Disturbed by the bard's theatrical appeal, 'the bloodless spirits wept': *exsangues flebant animae* (10.41). The candor of this phrase—which is enjambed following a one-line description of Orpheus's musicianship—illustrates the spirits' inability to eschew emotion, the swiftness with which they exuded it, and its inherent and genuine benevolence. Finally, after detailing the underworld monarchs' inability to refuse Orpheus, Ovid ignites a thrill by enjambing their fulfillment of Orpheus's wish: *Eurydicenque vocant* (10.48): 'they call Eurydice'. In turn, this instant of vital realization, in which enjambment momentarily captures the interfusion of orphic desire and material reality (his voice taking over their realm even as they carry forth the 'call' of his longing), is echoed and reversed by yet another enjambment upon Orpheus's glance back at his wife: *flexit amans oculos* (10.57): 'loving, he turned back his eyes'. Strategic enjambment thus conveys strong emotion—elation and pathos—without need of further ornamentation.

Ovid's use of enjambment as an instrument, simultaneously, of sustaining and breaking narrative flow—sparking, alternately, sensations of heroically determined triumph and tenderly ironic failure—physicalizes for the reader the all-too-corporeal *sparagmos* suffered by Orpheus. Thus, the fractures created in the bard's body are linked directly with those inherent in the art of writing. The orphic myth thereby emblemizes the dialectic of rupture and recuperation in poetry and the poetic process (encapsulating, too, the duality of transmission and transgression harbored etymologically in poetic *traditio*[n]). Moreover, while exemplifying poetry's deficiency and fatal capacity, Ovid's use of the enjambment—succinct phrases positioned paramountly across their lines—structurally reinforces a recurring simultaneity of doubling and division in the narrative. In turn, this simultaneity of meaning and its suspension independently illustrates the concurrence of poetry's progressive and interruptive faculties.

The very beginning of Ovid's story depicts a perfect, indeed instigating, instance of this coincidence of doubling and division: a wedding followed immediately by the death of one spouse. The poignancy of Eurydice's death is perhaps enhanced by the immediacy and confluence of events: *exitus auspicio gravior*: 'the outcome [of the wedding] was worse than the beginning' (10.8). Here, 'outcome' (*exitus*) is juxtaposed with 'beginning' (*auspicio*), emphasizing their temporal proximity. Grief thus becomes not the sequel to desire but its displaced (if intensified) continuation, so that mourning and marriage are doubled upon each other in their mutual extension and incompletion.

In his ensuing address to the Underworld dwellers, Orpheus offers the rulers that all-or-nothing conditional of his *nolle redire,* which would presumably result in a re-doubling of the spouses, either in life or in death. The rulers' resultant generosity in accepting the bard's proposal, notwithstanding their own appended conditional denying Orpheus sight of Eurydice before reentering the upper world, exacerbates Orpheus's ultimate grief upon his re-division from Eurydice: *Non aliter stupuit gemina nece coniugis Orpheus*: 'Not otherwise [than a frightened creature] was Orpheus stunned by the double death of his wife' (10.64). This single phrase is awash with doubles. *Non aliter*, a litotes meaning 'not otherwise,' uses two negating words to state a single actuality, underscoring the verity of what follows. *Gemina*, which denotes 'twin, double,' ironically divides the line. Finally, the contiguity of *coniugis* (wife) and *Orpheus* tragically ironizes the pair's dissolution, turning the hero of 'conquering song' (by a further irony) into a stupefied image or vision of 'petrifying power' (10.45, 67).

It is this subtle yet profound intensification of emotion through which Orpheus becomes victim in the very terms used earlier to denote his vatic power[13] that proves most emblematic both of Orpheus the minstrel and of the orphic myth at large. Passion—both despondency and exhilaration—pervades the tale all the way to the final anaphora of *flebile* (lamentable) in *Metamorphoses* Book 11, lines 52-53: *flebile nescio quid queritur lyra, flebile lingua murmurat exanimis, respondet flebile ripae*: 'The lyre bemoaned I don't know what lamentable thing, the lifeless tongue murmured lamentably, the riverbanks replied lamentably'. This final emphasis on sounded lamentation, now splintered into both essence and limitation of orphic agency, renders the dismembered bard both emblem and caveat for poetry's aspiration for 'boundless' significance.

> Rukeyser's Re-Visions: *Sparagmos* as Poiesis
> membra iacent diversa locis, caput, Hebre, lyramque
> excipis: et (mirum!) medio dum labitur amne,
> flebile nescio quid queritur lyra, flebile lingua
> murmurat eanimis, respondent flebile ripae.
> iamque mare invectae flumen populare relinquunt
> et Methymnasae potiuntur litore Lesbi.
>
> Ovid, *Metamorphosis* 11.50-55

As we have seen, *sparagmos* emerges at every phase of Ovid's narrative as a definitive component of Orpheus the poet, and so it must be recognized as intrinsic to poetry itself and thus to all poets who interpolate him into the reflexive process of their poetic projects. Indeed, it might

be preferable, even productive, for poets to embrace fracture both thematically and structurally in order to reveal not only poetry as an ultimately finished product—Horace's iconic *monumentum* (Odes 3.30, line 1)—but also the poetic process as a healing art. While his surrender to temptation and his corporeal fracturing might be regarded as auguring similar anguish for the creators of verse, especially for those who forsake song for writing, his mélange of intense emotions—anxiety, desire, grief, hope, remorse—and his resolute enactment of vatic power mesmerizes his literary descendants, the very ambiguity of his story often energizing their own quests for poetic purpose and authority. Furthermore, the orphic myth's tumultuous sequence of events epitomizes both the summit of poetic potential and the nadir of poetic torment. Thus, imagistically, narratively, and emotionally, the story of Orpheus invites a passionate yet ambivalent mimesis of Orpheus's confrontation with traumatic crisis as the very ground of poetic achievement. Accordingly, subsequent poets, most particularly those in the post-Romantic era,[14] have risked creative cataclysm as they embrace orphic poiesis, formally mingling the image's determinateness with music's fluidity in order thematically to confront the shock of loss with the urgency of reclamation.

Orphic lyricists across a range of modernist idioms have not merely fashioned verse whose expressive performance can exceed the material inscriptions of other artistic 'monuments,' but also, more radically, have adopted his very personage as subject for their compositions.[15] It is as if his mere presence within their strophes could ensure contemporary poetry's own continuity and affirm its own commanding claims. In so incorporating Orpheus, these poets must determine the symbolic implication of the bard's exploitation: how does the simultaneity of his *sparagmos* and his enduring poetic authority affect the poets themselves as potentially parallel artists? Does identification with orphic experience necessarily entail lamentable loss as the price of vatic inspiration? Just as importantly, what does this potential redoubling of poetic power into fatal self-division say about *poetry* itself?

No modern poet has confronted these questions over time with a more compelling blend of courage and fury than Muriel Rukeyser, who most notably adopts the bard as the central figure in *Orpheus* and *The Poem as Mask: Orpheus.* Indeed, Rukeyser focuses on Orpheus so intently that eventually, with *The Poem as Mask*, the speaker seems to have *become* Orpheus, suffering his (or her) own *sparagmos*, splitting into the three figures of unidentified narrator, Ovid, and Orpheus. Thus, Rukeyser, progressively pressing interrogation of orphic identification into the center of poetic experience, forces rather than evades these fissures within her poetry, embracing rather than denying her verses' intrinsic ruptures, both visual and thematic. Most readers view this aura of crisis in the light of Rukeyser's biographical trials, correlating poetic and biological (re)production, thereby locating a literal female 'body in pieces' (including the body subjected, specifically, to hysterectomy) in the evolving matrix of the poems' orphic body.[16] With inadvertently appropriate irony, this approach to Rukeyser's poetic corpus elides the crucial catalyst of literary history, effacing Orpheus himself as a figure through and against whom Rukeyser takes fresh measure of her capacity for poiesis. Returning us to the *linguistic* crucible in which her poetry is forged at the crossroads of song and writing, I hope to show that Rukeyser's poetics are precisely 'orphic' in being forged as both a reading and critical transformation of the inherited Ovidian figure.

Rukeyser's *Orpheus*[17] is immediately reminiscent of its title character in its three-part split and its further visual, enjambment-heavy sub-fracturing into an enunciated *sparagmos*. This broken appearance is coupled with aural repetitions, thus combining division and doubling effects similar to

those inherent in the original wedding-death scene with which the Ovidian orphic legend commences. The poem begins *in medias res*, introducing the mountaintop on which 'the murder' occurred but one minute ago (1). We see 'the women' fleeing the scene. A subtle emphasis on the power of humans over nature pervades the narrative with intricate depictions of the fleeing women and of their scenery intertwined like the 'leaves and needles of these witness trees' (5); moreover, the dead one's slaughter is transposed onto nature itself: 'the murdered ground' (8). The scene is described as one of active dispersion, with the women disbanding from an original center-point and thereby collectively mimicking the divided slain individual. Duplicated depictions of both the fugitives and their surroundings parallel the reflection of the scene itself in the water of line 10. Added movement emphasizes the flowing of the body in the river: 'moon rocking back and forth…women are streaming down the paths' (12-14, 17). Finally, the first of many instances of anaphora ('walls' in lines 20-22), in conjunction with the first of many usages of the word 'scattered' in line 23, launches a literally convoluted interplay between multiply suffered death and the figure reduced by it.

The futility of darkness fills the walls of both natural and artificial constructs, those of rivers and olive groves, houses and villages alike. With the ruin of the poetic figure comes the destruction of *all the voices* (25). The visual and the auditory are here conflated—or perhaps confused—as 'darkness' is used as representative of both physical and ethereal obscurity resulting from the bard's death. The victim is 'scattered and done,' while 'all the voices are done' (23, 25)—this person *is* all the voices. He is the instrument and embodiment of expression. This is more corporeally illustrated in the list of his 'scattered' body parts, which includes a lyre (36-37). And yet, despite the scattering and 'done'-ness of both the voices and their personification, this poem continues, demonstrating the power of articulation that the poet and/or her speaker has assumed or perhaps absorbed from the lifeless one.

The lines immediately following the inventory of what will soon be termed 'pieces of a man' (41) reflect his stark, colorless face: presented in a harsh staccato rhythm, they prove emblematic of the reduction of poetic flair ensuing from the lyricist's demise. It is not until line 42 that a new literal resonance is added to the almost purely visual scene: 'Very quiet, the trees awake. And find their voices'. Now sound must originate from nature itself, to which the scattered limbs of the eternally 'flowing man' (34) lend their vivid expertise. Indeed, the man has become nature itself, spread physically and lyrically throughout in his donation of his voice to the trees, clouds, water, and moon.

However, the clouds 'build the sound of Lost!', the blankness of their 'white arpeggios' bleakly surfacing in their 'singing Lost; lost man' (45-46, 49). This last phrase presents a potential chiasmal relationship between 'singing' and 'man': these two entities might be equated, with the doubled 'lost' between them underscoring both their separation from each other and their joint removal from the world. While this reading would be somewhat ironic, since the clouds are, in fact, *singing* their lamentations, it nevertheless emphasizes the total mastery over poetic expression that this figure had embodied before his fatal *sparagmos*. Indeed, now nature's words must be 'called in a silence over the scattered man' (58-59). Only white arpeggios, robbed of sound's palette, can soar among the trees.

The second part of the poem is composed of multiple fragments, separated from one another by obvious small black dots, which make more palpable the seeming haphazardness of ideas. The first fragment opens with 'scattered,' which is repeated twice in yet another anaphora. Even while introduced by this 'scattered,' the name of Orpheus is declared for the first time, thus establishing finally the dead man's identity. The name serves as the only unifier, the only grounding force for the various disconnected body parts that separately comprise the 'chaos' of Orpheus (5). However, in this first stanza, the body is deemed 'mother of self' (2), which seems to work against the overarching, ethereal duty of the *name* as origin and prolongation of *self*, both metaphysical identity and physical incarnation. The name would more likely act as the 'mother of permanence' (3) than the body, since upon Orpheus's dismemberment, the sole undying element of the poet is his appellation and, by extension, his reputation. Indeed, 'this scattered on the mountain is no man but body as circus' (11-12)—*Orpheus*, the poet and the man, is not represented by the divided limbs but by the 'myths [that] are within the body when it is most whole' (6).

After the second fragment introduces a ruthless correlation among the futility—or even fatality—of the cyclical act of turning back, vision, memory, and forbidden knowledge, the ensuing fragment finds the heart floundering in its forgetfulness: 'There was song, and the tomb of song, there was love, but it all escapes. What love? For whom?' (38-39). Its vision, like that of the eye itself, fails in the shadow of death's 'darklit' being (31). Now it can carry only the 'relics' (36) of 'something [that] was found at [its] base [that] it cannot find now' (34-35). *Relic*, in its archaic sense, denoted the corpse of a dead person, thereby indicating here Orpheus himself, floating now along the heart's vein as he had along the river. Slightly more abstractly, *relic* can signify simply a shell of a formerly animate being; therefore, in this poem it might represent the tangible aspect of orphic failure, namely, the mere husk, or shell, of the bard he had been. Finally, *relic* can indicate something—especially a part of the body—that, having belonged to a notable figure, is kept and venerated. Thus, it might connote the survival of Orpheus's literal limbs as well as, by extension, the poetry that his limbs, name, and *self* embody. The use of the term *relics* concentrates the double aspect of orphic mutilation and continuity upon that Rukeyser's poetic archeological has exhumed from the Ovidian pre-text.

The blood carries the relics on a 'pilgrimage' (35), which suggests a propitious destination, allowing death to become a welcome refuge for the mutilated parts of Orpheus to reunite. However, the poem's images of rivers—the literal mountaintop one and the conceptual vein—albeit bearing the relics away from the scene of despair, subtly recall the Lethe: all three rivers erase the satisfaction of memory from the newly dead. As each body part—eye; heart; the 'who am I?' of the next fragment—strains to piece together its identity, function, and elusive memories, the tension mounts. At last, a leg begins to emerge, reformulated in the present moment as memory is regrasped piecemeal, until it *becomes* a river:

> The muscles of the thigh are the rapids of a stream,
> the knee a monument of stone among the fast waters,
> light flowing under the skin, the current hardnesses,
> channels where, secret, the awareness streamed (57-60).

The physicality of this leg—the 'something [that] turned back, something [that] looked Hellward round…something that lived and ran' in lines 55-56—fuses with the imagery of rivers, igniting a dazzling explosion—'No!' (60)—of recaptured memory.

With a sudden shift into the first person, memory is questioned as the speaker simultaneously seeks to defend himself against an illicit act and acknowledges the possibility of his own guilt. Initially, he denies the flickerings of memory as uttered by the individual body parts, which eventually establish the existence of 'another body…another face' (52-53). The leg, belonging to the present speaker, had turned back, ultimately living and running to its survival and, criminally, retaining salvageable memory of 'something not to be seen' (28). Now, the speaker—the consciousness, the voice, the poet?—fears lest 'they say I turned to a face. That was forbidden' (61-62). But what, exactly, is forbidden? What is the antecedent of 'that'? Perhaps it is the act of turning—specifically, Orpheus's backward move toward Eurydice—that is judged an excessively daring move, however involuntarily the bard committed it.

Perhaps, though, it is the face to which the leg had turned. A look upon this face—presumably that of Eurydice—would therefore be held as a crime. Vision—the optical seizure of evidential knowledge and its inscription upon memory—defies the supernatural (and *sub*natural, as in the case of the Underworld) dominion over that knowledge. Etymologically, the verbs 'to see' and 'to know' are intricately linked; in the Classical tradition, *to see* is frequently deemed an act of intrusion and infringement, while *to know* is a fatal invasion.[18]

Like Ovid's seer, Rukeyser's Orpheus can paradoxically attain a *self*-understanding through bodily punishment, blown into and by a sudden expansion of acuity: the division of the his mind from his *relics* triggers *self*-awareness concurrent with the catastrophe of metamorphic rift. Orpheus, separated from a tangible wholeness, must learn that the body is strictly *not* the mother of self, that 'to live is to create' (100), that the physicality of wounds '[has] no song and no music' (107). The body does not create; the bones, blood, and nerves 'cannot remember…cannot imagine' (126)—they can only transport verse: 'Here is his body and the trees of life…powerless to bear another song' (115). Finally, the blood must be allowed to flow through reattached limbs, reclaiming the lyre to convey the song, *Eurydice* (152).

During the third and final part of the poem, we watch as 'very slowly, the sounds awake' (2) and 'the body is formed' (9) in a reversal of the orphic *sparagmos*. The blood, having soaked into the ground, is reabsorbed by the body, allowing life to flow through the reassembled limbs. There is an overlap, a blending, of body and voice: the renewed body has endured wounds, which now become 'mouths of music' (16) and then disappear, leaving only a 'body of song' (18). Now *body* and *song* are one and the same; the body is not just the vessel through which song can be transported, but also song itself. Furthermore, this body-song signifies the recovery of memory—*re-membering*—as Orpheus 'remembers the real; remembers love' (40). As corporeity, musicality, and recollection are melded, the poet sings the past and future, incorporating his surroundings and sufferings.[19]

Orpheus's song is 'transfigured' (58, 68), emblematic of the bard's own readjusted physical and psychic existence after having 'died the birth of the god' (62). Birth and death have collided within him, destroying and mending him almost simultaneously, intertwining the preciousness of blood with the fatality of fragments. The song merges images of violence with those of aspiration,

remembering the past while looking forward. 'Song of the dam destroyed over the widening river in a triumph of hope' (73-74): An image of demolition coupled with a feeling of elation. Indeed, the poetic nature of this modern *vates* incorporates countless other natures—particularly those of power, music, and love (85-86). 'Cyclic dependence the god and the miracle needing each other' (66-67): Orpheus forever revolving around and with a miracle—of what? Comprehension? Perplexity? The elucidating and confounding facets of poetry in Rukeyser's orphic vision seek a balance that must be externally wrought. Is *that* the miracle—the *concretizing* or *solving* of poetic intention? Poetry is itself symbolic of *sparagmos*, concurrently reflecting the source and scattering of meaning.

Rukeyser's *The Poem as Mask: Orpheus,* as self-conscious successor to *Orpheus*, embodies and thematizes this idea of poetry as continuous struggle with discontinuity. Speaking generally of her poetry's role in an era of catastrophe, Rukeyser provided a suggestive gloss on this perpetual confrontation with the 'split' of experience: 'In time of crisis, we summon up our strength … then we turn; for it is a turning that we have prepared; and act'.[20] While such keen readers of Rukeyser as Alice Ostriker and Rachel Blau DuPlessis read *The Poem as Mask: Orpheus* as a 'corrective' turning **from** *Orpheus,*[21] I see these works in continuous dialectical relation, the second poem variously 'turning' the first in an ongoing act of tropological revision. Viewed wholly, *The Poem as Mask: Orpheus* displays a fractal design that fosters this simultaneity of ruin and perpetuation through the quintessentially Ovidian effects of doubling and dividing:

> *Orpheus*
>
> When I wrote of the women in their dances and wildness, it
> was a mask,
> on their mountain, gold-hunting, singing, in orgy,
> it was a mask; when I wrote of the god,
> fragmented, exiled from himself, his life, the love gone down
> with song,
> it was myself, split open, unable to speak, in exile from myself.
>
> There is no mountain, there is no god, there is memory
> of my torn life, myself split open in sleep, the rescued child
> beside me among the doctors, and a word
> of rescue from the great eyes.
>
> No more masks! No more mythologies!
>
> Now, for the first time, the god lifts his hand,
> the fragments join in me with their own music.

Immediately one is struck by the use of the first person and the ambiguous ownership of the pronoun, I, in the initial line: 'When I wrote of the women in their dances and wildness' (1). Perhaps it is the voice of Ovid himself, retrospectively commenting on his own literary creation of Orpheus's

story, an inference possibly enforced later in the first stanza with the appearance of the similarly worded recollection, 'when I wrote of the god'. However, perhaps that initial 'I' represents the first of many fragments inherent in the character of Orpheus: this possible multiplicity and dispersion of orphic voice is revealed to us as the speaker elaborates on the subject of his writing:

> …when I wrote of the god,
> fragmented, exiled from himself, his life, the love gone down
> with song,
> it was myself, split open, unable to speak, in exile from myself (4-7).

It appears that the speaker, who doubles his expressive function semantically into his status as writer and grammatically into his subjective and accusative positions, had been writing about himself, namely, that he *was* the very god about whom he wrote. With this observation, one is prompted to examine the speaker as a broken composite of multiple parts: not only does he embody the dual identity of writer-god, but he also admits to having been 'split open…in exile from myself'. Therefore, he seems to be looking down upon himself as he writes *now*, seeing how he wrote earlier about yet another prior self. The self is constituted *in* its division, both temporally (as an autobiographical subject occupying a double past: *when* I wrote … of the god who [had always already been] exiled from myself) and psychically (as both stable locus and diasporic other of oneself).

If one embraces this reading of orphic 'splitting,' in which the speaker identifies with the vates precisely as a figure defined by self-difference, one must also accept that the writer-god is, in fact, Orpheus himself having suffered irreparable loss, specifically Eurydice's descent into Hell ('the love gone down'). But one must admit that a weighty problem is posed to this reading by a grammatical ambiguity: *what* is the antecedent of 'it'? If one understands 'it' to be 'the god, fragmented, exiled from himself,' then the reading just proposed holds true: the speaker, who is a writer, is also the god about whom he has written, and one can easily assume that this writer is both Ovid and Orpheus (the poet doubled into tradition's archetype of poetic vocation). However, 'it' might signify the actual writing process, namely, 'when I wrote'. Therefore, this speaker might be understood as bemoaning a painful, self-shattering writing *experience,* an experience that was, in essence, a part of him that allowed—or forced—him to expose his very core, with painful, nearly self-sacrificial results. This reading, too, permits the speaker to align himself, either completely or partially, with Orpheus: while the god is fragmented, the speaker is 'split open,' both 'exiled from [them]selve[s]'.

Yet a third assessment of the antecedent of 'it' lurks in this 'wild dance' of possible interpretations. 'It' could represent 'the love gone down with song'—Eurydice herself, or, again, the *process* of her loss and/or the poet's consequent bereavement. Thus, the speaker senses himself to have overlapped with Eurydice and to have been personally torn asunder upon her plunge into the Underworld: loss of the other not only engenders but entwines self-rupture. It is impossible to deny that in this construal, too, the speaker equates himself with Orpheus, who, having viewed his marriage with Eurydice as a doubling of two people into one ('iunxit Amor,' as Ovid's hero says in his plea to the Underworld gods), would experience a ripping apart of one person when the other

dies. Thus, no matter which interpretation of the antecedent of 'it' proves most appropriate, the speaker must be understood as connecting himself thoroughly, if paradoxically, to and with Orpheus as embodiment of a constitutively riven condition.

Having emerged through this fragmentation of possibilities and perspectives, this *self* is openly described in line 7—'it was myself, split open, unable to speak, in exile from myself'—as one divided both ontologically and expressively. 'Myself,' while doubled in line 7, is physically separated from its twin, with each instance of this word flanking the line and sandwiching 'split open, unable to speak, in exile'. Thus, syntactically the speaker has established his inner schism, from which 'memory' (line 8) emerges unfettered. Indeed, line 7 instigates the following lines, which form an ekphrasis:

> There is no mountain, there is no god, there is memory
> of my torn life, myself split open in sleep, the rescued child
> beside me among the doctors, and a word
> of rescue from the great eyes (8-11).

The anaphoristic line 8—the incantatory rhythm of which suggests the confessional gesture of emptying-out ('there is no …there is no') followed by declarative release ('there is')—introduces the inner truth revealed by the 'split' that has torn the speaker, who appears to retreat from his possibly histrionic ('mask') connection with Orpheus into a more rational, empirical domain. Now the split is explained as occurring in the unconscious realm of a dream, with memory playing itself out in 'sleep' (9). The mountain and the god from the first stanza are emphatically denied as the speaker gropes for the elusive comfort and logic of a mundane, anthropocentric existence.

However, the speaker cannot avoid a correlation, however undesired, with the orphic myth. A parallel can be drawn between the 'rescued child' of line 9 and Eurydice, as well as between the 'doctors' of line 10 and the gods of the Underworld who grant Eurydice's liberation. Naturally, then, the speaker, who is among this child and these doctors, must remain as before the counterpart of Orpheus, the descent into the murky terrain of mourning and desire making its own claims of 'reality'. Even so, the repetition of 'rescue' in line 11, located in the enjambed rhythm between 'word' and 'great eyes,' proves initially perplexing, disturbing the narrative parallel and imbalancing the apparent orphic identification. For when Orpheus glances back wordlessly at Eurydice as he leads her up from the Underworld, her rescue is obliterated; here, a perhaps equivalent look speaks promisingly.

Alarmingly, however, immediately upon the appearance of 'eyes' (notably, the organs not of the speaker-as-Orpheus but of the presiding deities, suggesting already the speaker's shift to a Eurydicean position) spring exclamations eradicating both masks and mythologies. Now these masks—which, in the first stanza, had both shielded and sustained the ultimately 'split open [self]' of the speaker—are mercilessly thrust aside; mythologies—whether understood to be the speaker's dreams of the second stanza or his writing of the first—are equally abandoned as the speaker confronts the new reality of the third stanza. As the speaker learns together with his audience, the previously assumed (i.e., presupposed and put-on) masks and mythologies are no longer

necessary as, with a raising of his hand, the god heals the fissures just lamented by the speaker. Indeed, this third and last stanza form a curative arc in the poem, rounding back to the first, injurious strophe in synchises structure, mirroring 'fragmented' and 'with song' (lines 5 and 6, respectively) with 'fragments' and 'with their own music' (line 12): the pieces have been perhaps newly arranged in their correct sequence, replacing the plangency of stanza one's 'it was' with an emphatically present 'now' (that crisp signifier of im-mediacy occupying a caesura-framed line-initial position), and fostering a stability starkly lacking when the selves of the speaker were exiled from one another.

It is the god's reclaimed self-mastery that acts to suture or seal the speaker as one body that is both physically and musically harmonious. While the speaker had been rendered disjointed and speech-less when the god was himself fractured, the god's salvaged control over the self not only re-bound the speaker's pieces, but it also restored those pieces' 'own music' (12). 'Music' resonates as the culminating word in the poem, emphasizing its vital necessity for the restoration and preservation of the speaker-god. Just as in the Ovidian tale, where Orpheus employs his own musicality in seeking to effect Eurydice's rescue and his own ensuing repair, here music is a healing force able to reunite exiled selves.

Indeed, it is the examination of Orpheus' very identity as a lyricist that pervades *The Poem as Mask: Orpheus,* linking it through Rukeyser's earlier poem back to the most continuous feature of the original myth in Greek cult and hymn.[22] When Orpheus' *self* is shattered in *Mask*, the internal music escapes, to be recaptured only in the mending of that self. Song, music, and ultimately poetry itself are proven vital precisely in their coiling of suffering upon restoration. Why, then, is poetry said to be a mask? What is it seeking to shield, disguise, or deflect—and does it succeed? Evidently, it is not *this* poem that serves as a mask for the speaker, but only a part of the earlier poem described in the first stanza: *when I wrote of the women in their dances and wildness*. The speaker immediately lifts this mask in the following lines, revealing the exiled *myself* of line 5. Thus, this *myself*, mirroring or embodying the equally divided god, requiring the song 'gone down' in order to be fixed, has evidently lost its poem-mask well before the speaker officially sheds all masks in line 10.

Herein lies the poem's fundamental paradox: its achievement of corrective and restorative voice devolves from its refusal of poetry's prosopopoeic authority, the self-covering (and thus self-displacing) *fiction of making* (prosopon-poiein) that was, in the classical account, perhaps the signal mark of Orpheus's power. Orpheus' wielding of poetry is what ini[23]tially removes the specified mask, allows—even guides—the speaker to reject all masks, and ultimately restores the speaker. From line 5 to line 11, during which the speaker is deprived of music, he is newly able to *hear* his inner workings, or memory, and, in listening to them, to desire an acceptance of the unmasked self. Thus, Orpheus uses music to act as an instrument and conduit of self-knowledge and self-affirmation. He controls poetry—mystically stealing it away and re-implementing it with the benedictory upraising of his hand—in an effort to reconnect the ethereal and corporal fragments of identity.

Rukeyser's progressive, persistent encounter with Orpheus suggests, then, that the tangible presence of *sparagmos* in poetry is potentially redeemable, even if not fully mendable. Ovid's figure of Orpheus, prior to his physical destruction, had played the role of poetic creator in his narration of

other stories in the *Metamorphoses* (including that of the artistic creator Pygmalion (Book 10, lines 243-297)); furthermore, his scattered limbs—as well as his broken union with Eurydice—are ultimately reassembled in death as he is absolved in the Underworld. Thus, while the patron emblem of poetry embodies the threat of fissure, he holds, too, the promise of a multi-faceted restitution.

Indeed, Rukeyser recognizes that *sparagmos* is intrinsic to life itself, which is an ongoing journey during which one, like Orpheus, seeks a rectification that might not be reached even in the seeming finality of death: she cannot suture the threatening gaps but must return repeatedly to the orphic state of instability. Fundamentally, then, Rukeyser's teaches that the myth of Orpheus is cognate with and necessary for the prolongation of poetry. Stretched across the jagged continuum from *Oprheus* to *The Poem as Mask,* her verse suggests that without the precarious chasms of form and meaning, there would be no search for restoration and thus no artistic pursuit. Rejoining Ovid's intrepid if traumatized hero, her speakers tell us that not only does the orphic myth challenge commonplace temporality—arising from the insight that re-vision is itself the place of originality—it feeds off of time and time's denial of human stability.

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[1] Rukeyser (1978: 435).

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[2] P. Ovidii Nasonis, 1976. All translations are my own.

[3] Segal (1989: 64, passim, especially the chapter 'The Magic of Orpheus and the Ambiguities of Language'); Bruns (1974: 207, passim (especially the chapter 'Poetry as Reality: The Orpheus Myth and its Modern Counterparts').

[4] See, e.g., Solodow (1988: 39, 215); Farrell (1999: 137-41); and Wheeler (1999: 48).

[5] Heath (1996: 353-70 [354]; see also Theodorakopoulos (1999: 157-61); and VerSteeg and Barclay (395-420). See also Heath (1994: 163-96, which argues that Ovid essentially consolidates, rather than reverses, the traditional, Hellenistic vision of orphic power as 'temporary and ultimately fruitless' (194)).

[6] Strauss (1971: 12).

[7] Smith (1997: 157-59).

[8] Cf. Theodorakopoulos's fascinating Kleinian reading of the 'fragmented body' in The *Metamorphoses* (1999: 142-48).

[9] On the pervasive use of paradox, antithesis, and contradiction in the *Metamorphoses* see, e.g. Tissol (1997: 12-15); Gildenhard and Zissos (1999:167-170); and Auhagen (2007: 413-24).

[10] On the importance of Ovid's influence on later European culture see Segal (1989).

[11] See Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History.* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

[12] Solodow has analyzed this interplay of 'organization and dis-organization' at the *narrative* level in the *Metamorphoses.* See Solodow (1988: 14-34).

[13] Notably, the 'stupuit' defining Orpheus's power of Ixion's wheel (42) returns as the 'stupuit' of the bard's own stunned response to his wife's doubled death (64).

[14] See Bruns, Segal, and Strauss for illuminating accounts of this intensified orphic focus among Anglo-American and European poets of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

[15] To survey the range of such expressions in the modern era see the following pertinent anthologies: De Nicola (1999); Kossman (2001); and Hoffman and Lansdun (1995).

[16] Among the more sensitive and enlightening of such readings I would include Segal (1989); Flynn (1996: 264-82); Goldensohn (1999: 121-34); Dantrell (1999: 137-48); and Wolosky (2006: 156-71). See also Daniels (1996: 247-63).

[17] Rukeyser (1997: 96-113).

[18] This commonplace of classical culture has been given fresh critical energy in the Ovidian context by Salzman-Mitchell (2005), and Bartsch (2006).

[19] Cf. Segal's biography-inflected reading: '[Orpheus's] musical power over nature is expanded to a sympathetic knowledge of the suffering in the cycles of birth and death'.

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[20] Rukeyser (1949: 52).

[21] See Ostriker (1982: 68-90) and DuPlessis (1975: 199-221). Segal is my one clearest predecessor in arguing for a complex continuity between these poems, but, again, focuses that interpretation on biographical data: '[Ruykeyser returns to the death of Orpheus and identifies herself with the torn god of the earlier poem, but as a memory of her own giving birth' (182).

[22] See Bowra (1952: 113-26); Guthrie (1952); and Marlow (1954: 361-69).