



Orpheus the Shaman

*In natural magic nothing is more efficacious than the Hymns
of Orpheus, if there be applied to them suitable music, and
disposition of soul, and the other circumstances known
to the wise.—Pico della Mirandola*

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Only in the underworld do East and West finally meet. No maps indicate this fact, but rather only the accounts of travelers. Descriptions of shamanic journeys to the realm of the dead—as documented in Siberia, East Asia, Australia, Africa, and elsewhere—bear an uncanny resemblance to many of the seminal myths and tales of the Western world. Recall that the concept of a heroic descent to the underworld recurs in a large number of classic works of Western literature, from Homer to Dante. The theme is, in fact so common that it has been given a name: scholars call these tales *katabasis* literature after the Greek word *katabasis*, which literally means “going down.” Even after the Renaissance, journeys to the underworld continued to play a role in the literary imagination, although in this case the trip more often is one way, as witnessed by the stories of Faustus, Don Giovanni, and the devilish crew of *Paradise Lost*. (One can only speculate why the more modern sensibility finds solace in the infernal stopping point in the story. I leave this intriguing topic—why moderns prefer *To Hell* over *To Hell and Back*—to other, more perspicacious scholars.) But the accounts found in literary works reflect only a small part of the story: the myths and legends of various cultures, both Eastern and Western, display an even greater familiarity with the obscure terrain of the nether kingdom, as witnessed by the tales of Persephone, Adonis, Attis, Osiris,

Inanna, Tammuz, and above all Orpheus. Can a study of the shaman—the last surviving psychopomp or guider of souls through the underworld—help to elucidate these tales? Even more telling: Can such a study help to identify shamanic practices that influenced the Western classical traditions of Greece and Rome, and through them continue to impact, albeit in hidden ways, our Western thinking today?

Orpheus is of special interest here, not only because the fame of his underworld descent has been the greatest of this group, but because of his particular impact on the musical and healing arts. Over two thousand years after the birth of Orphism—the accepted term for the body of beliefs and practices associated with this enigmatic figure—a scholar such as Fabre d'Olivet could still exclaim, in an excess of emotion: “At this name [Orpheus], to which so many brilliant memories are associated, I feel stirring within me the desire to reenter the fields of history in order to raise there a monument to the glory of the divine man who bore it. Orpheus is the first man among the Greeks who created an epoch . . . Instructed by the Egyptians, initiated into their most secret mysteries, he rose in Greece to the rank of prophet and supreme pontiff.” How odd these words now sound. For most, Orpheus is the name of a mythical figure, the fictional protagonist in an engaging story from long ago, and little more. But for d'Olivet, as well as for many of the thinkers who shaped the Western world—Plato, Ptolemy, Kepler, and Newton, among others—he was much more. Books on medicine, music, and magic were attributed to Orpheus, as were various poems, incantations, and other odd and sundry works. These claims of authorship are perhaps doubtful, yet they testify to the widespread view among many ancients that Orpheus was an authentic historical figure—a view that even some modern scholars have hesitated to dismiss. “Orpheus was a real man, a mighty singer, a prophet and a teacher,” attests Jane Ellen Harrison, the great classicist whose pioneering efforts to combine anthropology, archaeology, and textual exegesis set the tone for modern interpretations of ancient myth making. “Once we are fairly awake to the fact that Orpheus was a real live man, not a faded god, we are struck by the human touches in his story, and most by a certain vividness of emotion, a reality and personality of like and dislike that attends him.”

W. K. C. Guthrie, in his seminal study *Orpheus and Greek Religion*, concurs that “it seems probable” that a historic Orpheus actually existed. What might we say about this “shadowy figure”? According to Guthrie,

the “probabilities are that he was a Greek, that he was a bard and musician, that he was officially a servant of Apollo but distinguished from other worshippers of the god, as indeed from most of his fellow-men, by a type of quiet mysticism rare in any age.” Guthrie also sees Orpheus as a reformer, as a man who took existing belief systems and refined them for the needs of his time—and though Guthrie does not mention shamanism in this connection, this concept of reformation will play a critical role in my later interpretation of the role of Orphism in the evolution of these time-honored practices. But even here, before I begin to examine the details of the Orpheus myth, we can see marked similarities with the shamanic practices described in the last chapter. In many cultures, the shaman also serves as bard as well as musician. Further, the shamans also share Orpheus’s complicated relationship to the religious power structure, both participating in it and standing apart from it. Moreover, the calm intelligence of Orpheus, with its odd mixture of aloof rationalism and fervent mysticism, cannot fail to remind us of the so-called men of high degree, the shamans of Aboriginal Australia, who “work coolly and deliberately,” in the words of A. P. Elkin; who are “superior in knowledge, in experience, in psychic power”; and who are “all-seeing, deep and quiet.” Like Orpheus, the shaman is “an outstanding person, a clear thinker, a man of decision,” but also one “known to possess special magical powers.”

The role is certainly a paradoxical one: Elkin stresses that the shaman is no different from any ordinary man . . . except that he is highly extraordinary. The shaman is calm and collected, but he is also a technician of ecstasy and magic. The shaman’s music unleashes hidden powers but also seeks to control them, recognizing both their malevolent and beneficent potential. The shaman is both healer and victim, often discovering a personal vocation for healing through illness and affliction.

In the person of Orpheus, these contradictory roles are symbolized by his two patron deities: Dionysus and Apollo. Classicists have often struggled to understand how Orpheus could maintain allegiance to such different masters. Nietzsche went so far as to adopt the names of these two deities in describing what he saw as conflicting worldviews, which he named the Apollonian and the Dionysian. Orpheus somehow transcended the conflict between these opposites: on the one hand, Orpheus was well known in antiquity as an exponent of the religion of Dionysus—the god of intoxication, wine, ecstasy, and of drunkenness bordering on

violence and madness; on the other hand, Orpheus was also described as a devotee (and sometimes even as the son) of Apollo, the deity who epitomized restraint, purity, and orderliness. Orpheus's ability to do justice to these two very different roles was not without difficulty or risk: in fact, Orpheus's death was commonly attributed to the anger of the Maenads, the savage female followers of Dionysus who, by some accounts, resented Orpheus's dedication to Apollo. According to these tales, the Maenads attacked the helpless musician and tore him to pieces, dismembering him in much the same manner that animals were mutilated in the orgies of the wine god.

The story of this seminal figure reflects in dramatic form the philosophical tensions embodied in the Orphic worldview that is his legacy. As I show later, this tension also surfaces in the conflicting views of music and its curative powers. But even here we can reflect that by reforming the religion of Dionysus in the spirit of Apollo, Orpheus attempted the challenging—yet necessary—task of reconciling the primitive with the civilized, the ecstatic with the rational. “The savage doctrine of divine possession, induced by intoxication and in part by mimetic ritual, was it would seem almost bound to develop a higher, more spiritual meaning,” notes Harrison. Do we see in our shadowy figure the linkage between the archaic shamanistic practices of prehistory and the refined religious rituals of the modern day? Was Orpheus the reformer who purified the primitive belief systems of their supposed excesses and made them palatable for a more rationalistic age?

Even Orpheus's choice of musical instruments seems to reflect an odd transition between two opposed paradigms. One might expect that Orpheus would be associated with drums and other percussion instruments, given their prominent role in shamanistic practices in most parts of the world. The drum, after all, is the quintessential healing instrument in the cultures surveyed thus far in this study. Even the ancient Greeks were aware of the linkage between drums and ecstatic states. As M. L. West points out in his study *Ancient Greek Music*, drumming “appears almost exclusively in connection with orgiastic cults such as those of the Great Mother, Dionysus Baccheus, and Sabazius.” For the Greeks, rhythm provided a musical gateway to ecstasy, no different from what we have found in shamanic cultures: in artistic representations, women are often depicted playing frame drums, dancing with abandon, their hair flying about and caught up in the frenzy of the moment. But there are also

notable differences. “In Greece as in the East, the instrument was played predominantly by women,” West attests; “men involved with it were liable to be considered effeminate.” Clement of Alexandria, in his *Exhortation to the Greeks*, lavishly praises a Scythian king for executing a man who was gaining notoriety by “beating a drum and clanging a cymbal.” As Clement remarks: “This king slew him with an arrow on the ground that the man, having been deprived of his own virility in Greece, was now communicating the effeminate disease to his fellow Scythians.”

One almost senses a quasi-instinctive repulsion from drumming among the more stately and restrained members of Greek society. Even in military music, in which drums predominate in most cultures, the Greeks seemed averse to the use of percussion. As Bruno Meinecke has pointed out: “The brave Lacedaemonians march to battle to the accompaniment of flutes, the Cretans to the accompaniment of lyres, and the Lydians to that of panpipes and flutes.” When the Getae conducted negotiations, they did so to the soothing sounds of the kithara. In the war between Sybaris and Croton—the setting of the school of Pythagoras, which, as I show in the next chapter, may have some relevance to the matter—both sides relied on the sound of the flutes in their military actions. In short, everywhere we expect to see a drum we find a wind or string instrument. This puzzling fact, so contrary to primitive or modern practices, demands attention. Even at this early stage in our analysis we must be struck by the oddity that Orpheus—who stood out as a follower of Dionysus and virtually symbolized the transcendental properties of music for the ancients—follows in the pattern of these other manly Greeks and disdains the drums in favor of other, more stately, sounds.

Orpheus played the lyre, an instrument known more for its calming influence than for its hypnotic qualities. The lyre was, above all, the instrument of order and decorum. “In many Greek cities,” Martianus Capella tells us, “laws and public decrees were recited to the strains of the lyre.” Recall that Amphion, according to legend, used his magic lyre to build the walls of Thebes—a story which places it in stark contrast to those less-decorous instruments that destroy rather than construct, such as the trumpet that brought down the walls of Jericho. Even Plato, often deeply suspicious of music, believed that the lyre could play a positive role in education, noting that it inculcated moderation (“*sophrosyne*” in the Greek) in young minds.

How strange that this same instrument should be the tool used by

Orpheus to mesmerize the wild animals, calm the waves and winds, and even charm the spirits of the underworld. Yet it is only when we perceive Orpheus as a *reformer* of traditional practices—as the critical decisive agent in refining and civilizing the more primal magic-musical practices of earlier times (probably coming to him from the East)—only then can we comprehend this otherwise puzzling choice. The “age of Orpheus” thus stands out as the decisive moment at which the healing properties of drums and percussion—part of a venerable tradition coming from Asia—are repressed in favor of a more Westernized approach emphasizing string instruments. In an interesting passage Strabo notes that “those who devoted their attention to the music of early times are called Thracians, I mean Orpheus, Musaeus, and Thamyris.” He then explains further: “From its melody and rhythm and instruments, all Thracian music has been considered to be Asiatic.” Thrace, located in southeast Europe, was a flourishing center of Dionysian rites in ancient times, as well as a cultural melting pot in which Western ways were intimately interwoven with influences from the East. (It is perhaps worth noting that healing dance traditions, of possible Thracian origin, have survived in Eastern Europe until modern times: the *calusari* of Romania, the *kaloushari* of Bulgaria.) In describing the ancient Thracian music, Strabo mentions the flute and stringed instruments but also cymbals and drums. Yet by the time these musical traditions had been assimilated into the figure of Orpheus, the percussion instruments were all but forgotten or, perhaps, explicitly omitted in favor of the lyre.

The lyre was the instrument of Apollo, and as such it symbolized a civilizing and modernizing tendency. In artistic representations, Orpheus and Apollo are sometimes interchangeable and are depicted playing the lyre in similar settings. The drums, in contrast, were played by the wild women who were Orpheus’s antagonists and ultimately his assassins. Indeed, images of women playing the kithara are “a rare sight” in Attic Greece, according to Martha Maas and Jane McIntosh Snyder in their study *Stringed Instruments in Ancient Greece*. Hence we see not only two different types of instruments and the marked contrast in their social status, but also a sharp delineation in the types of individuals who played them—one type best described as masculine, civilized, and refined; the other feminine, primal, and in touch with the ecstatic.

Orpheus alone transcends these distinctions. The lyre retains, in his hands, the same transcendental powers possessed by the drums and per-

cussion in most shamanic cultures. A lost work attributed to Orpheus, called *Lyra*, even attested that souls could not ascend to the heavenly spheres without a lyre. The lyre was further known for its healing and soothing properties: its harmonies seen as akin to those residing in the human soul. “Every soul in the world is allured by musical sounds,” explains Macrobius in his *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*. “For the soul carries with it into the body a memory of the music which it knew in the sky, and is so captivated by its charm that there is no breast so cruel or savage as not to be gripped by the spell of such an appeal. This, I believe, was the origin of the [story] of Orpheus.”

Although some traditional shamans use stringed instruments, these are comparatively rare. The Kirgiz shaman relies on the *kobuz*, a boat-shaped stringed instrument reminiscent of a small cello, to inspire a healing trance. With the Lebed Tartars and some Altaians, a one-stringed bow assumes the part typically played by the drum. Among the Yurak one finds a strange hybrid tradition: the shaman uses a drum but calls it a “bow” or “singing bow.” Perhaps this reflects some earlier overlap—or conflict between—rival musical traditions, one espousing the bow and the other relying on the drum. In any event, these occasional usages are exceptions to the more typical preference for drumming, percussion, and singing in shamanic rituals. But with Orpheus a new era in healing music is reached, at least in the West—one that, as we shall see, continues to this day: drums and percussion, previously dominant forces in the healing tradition, are relegated to a minor role where they are replaced by the more refined string and wind instruments. The main impetus in musical healing will no longer be rhythm, but melody and, above all, harmony—a contrast that becomes especially noteworthy in Orpheus’s spiritual heir Pythagoras. Music’s capacity to soothe now overshadows its ability to mesmerize and excite. This important shift, perhaps the most influential in the history of therapeutic music, may have been demanded by the growing rationalism and conceptual rigor of the age: harmony offered a virtually unlimited field for analysis, for quantifying and codifying. Rhythm, in contrast, was a more opaque element, resisting the penetrating gaze of science. For music to become the foundation of a healing science—rather than the dangerous accompaniment to a shamanic ritual—it needed to be purged of rhythmic intensity, softened, clarified, purified. In the West, this process begins with Orpheus and is solidified by Pythagoras.

As we proceed from considerations of character to a delineation of the skills and talents attributed to Orpheus, the complicated linkages to primitive practices become even more evident. For the ancients, Orpheus was first and foremost a musician, the most celebrated of antiquity. He was a magician, famous for the power of his incantations. He was also a healer of note, but not just an ordinary purveyor of medicines: above all, Orpheus had mastered the rare ability to intercede with the deities of the underworld in order to retrieve lost souls. Each of these attributes has its equivalent in the shamanic tradition. In addition, Orpheus enjoyed an uncanny relationship with nature—he is often portrayed in ancient works of art playing the lyre while animals gather around to listen with rapt attention. Recall that Eliade celebrates the shaman as the last human being to retain the paradisaical ability to communicate with the animal and vegetal worlds, having established an amicable, cooperative relationship in place of the enmity that usually prevailed between man and beast. The disciples of Orphism, as described in ancient documents, demonstrated their affinity with animals in many ways. First and foremost, they abstained from eating meat. Believing that the souls of humans and beasts were essentially the same, they considered reprehensible the slaughter of animals for any purpose, including their use in sacrifices to the gods. Their disdain for animal products also extended to their choice of clothing: the followers of Orpheus refused to wear woolen garments and were known to the ancient world as much by their linen apparel as for their doctrines. Herodotus called attention to this tradition, and linked it also to Pythagoras (who we will discuss in the following chapter), the other paramount ancient source for healing music, who imparted philosophical rigor to the tendencies set in motion by Orpheus.

Various artistic representations of Orpheus testify to the power of his lyre, as well as to the mutability of his legend. Orpheus and his lyre show up in ancient works of art covering a vast geography: on wall paintings from Pompeii; in a mosaic from the Isle of Wight in Britain; on a sculpture from Delphi; on coins from Thrace and Alexandria; even on Christian-era paintings from the catacombs. A puzzling seal in the Berlin Museum depicts a figure nailed to a cross, below a crescent moon and seven stars and above the words “Orpheos Bakkikos.” In the Christian age, Orpheus also becomes conflated with the Good Shepherd. Early wall paintings and sarcophagi show him surrounded by wild animals, attracted and subdued by his preternatural music; these are replaced in a famous Ravenna mosaic

with a flock of sheep, the transition from paganism to Christian imagery all but complete. Perhaps even more interesting are the ancient vase paintings where, in lieu of animals, Orpheus is surrounded by humans who are transfixed by the magical influence of his lyre. A vase discovered at Gela, now in the Berlin Museum presents a striking image: Orpheus sits playing a lyre with his face lifted up to the heavens, evincing an altered, almost trancelike state. Four listeners surround him, sharing in varying degrees the hypnotic reverie of the musician. Although Orpheus wears Greek attire, the others are dressed in primitive Thracian garb with long cloaks and fox skins. The intensity of the image, with its striking realism, its primal overtones, and above all its subject matter, recalls the shamanistic tradition. Orpheus the charmer of animals has now become the musical seer of men.

Were the ancient Greeks familiar with shamanism? On the face of things, such a connection might seem doubtful. “The idea of trying to bring someone back from the dead was, in the framework of normal Greek morality, almost unthinkable,” writes Peter Kingsley. Yet puzzling references in a variety of texts raise the tantalizing possibility that shamanic-type rituals were known and also stirred controversy. Certainly the Greeks were aware of many of the key phenomena associated with these practices. The concept that the soul could wander away from the body during a trance is attested to in legends about Aristeas of Proconnesus and Hermotimus of Clazomenae. Aristotle took an interest in the ability of the soul to leave its corporeal shell, and he may even have attended a mediumistic ritual in which a boy’s spirit was drawn from his body with the use of a magic wand. E. A. S. Butterworth sees echoes of shamanic initiations in the myths of Tantalus and Pelops, but also notes that these tales suggest that “their shamanism was not unopposed.” Indeed, our best knowledge of these mysterious healers comes from the fervent attacks of their adversaries. An ancient work on epilepsy, “The Sacred Disease” (attributed to Hippocrates), denounces a group of “people we now call witch-doctors, faith-healers, quacks and charlatans” who use incantations in order to heal as well as to alter the weather and motions of heavenly bodies. These practitioners claim to be able to influence the gods in achieving these ends, yet the author is unwilling to call them priests, or even to associate them with proper religious practices; indeed, he accuses them of impiety and assures his readers that they are “hateful to the gods.” The term “shaman” is, of course, nowhere found in

these documents—it is of recent derivation—but the role described is essentially a shamanic one. The same can be said of an unusual passage in Plato's *Laws*, where the philosopher is irate at “that class of monstrous natures” who “in contempt of mankind conjure the souls of the living and say that they can conjure the dead.” Like the author of “The Sacred Disease,” Plato emphasizes that these practitioners are impious and are “bringing guilt from heaven upon themselves.”

Who were these “monstrous natures” and “witch doctors”? Other surviving texts seem to connect Orpheus with ceremonies of this sort. A book from the second century BC that is now lost—Apollonius of Aphrodisia's *Concerning Orpheus and His Rites*—would have helped to resolve many scholarly debates had it survived, but numerous other ancient sources stress the role of the legendary musician in the origination of various cult and ritual practices (which are sometimes described as acquired by him in Egypt). Diodorus explicitly links Orpheus to “mystic ceremonies” that were “brought from Egypt,” and he notes Orpheus's role in mapping out the landscape of the land of the dead. But perhaps our strongest piece of evidence is also among the most recent to fall into our hands, although it may be the oldest in date of origin. This document, the famous and controversial Derveni papyrus, was discovered in 1962 from a grave site near Thessalonica. Dating from between 340 and 320 BC, it is the most ancient surviving literary papyrus that has yet come to light. But it is important not only for its antiquity but even more for the striking nature of its contents. In the words of one scholar, the Derveni papyrus is “as important for the origins of Hellenic philosophy and spirituality as the Dead Sea Scrolls have been for the Judaeo-Christian tradition.” The text, pieced together from more than two hundred fragments, is incomplete—and interpretations of it are still disputed—but even in its current form it demands our attention. Here we find prominent references to Orpheus who, the papyrus claims, said “great things in riddles” and was the exponent of a “holy discourse.” The same papyrus also refers to many shamanic themes—the terrors of the underworld, the meaning of dreams, rituals involving initiates, the powers of *magoi*—and it discusses explicitly certain incantations that keep away demons. These tantalizing pieces of evidence offer substantial confirmation of my view not only that the main elements of shamanism were known to the Greeks but that Orpheus was the reformer who took the prehistoric practices of healing songs or chants used to intercede with the spirit world and brought them within the

mainstream of acceptable methods, changing them along the way but retaining core elements of their original meaning.

The key roles played by healing and music in the Orpheus legend begin literally with the facts of his birth. By most accounts, his mother was Calliope, the muse of dance, music, and song—her name means literally the “fair-voiced”; while his father was often said to be Apollo, god of both music and medicine. These two disciplines play a prominent role in many of the tales related about Orpheus. As a member of the Argonauts, his song overcomes the mesmerizing music of the Sirens. In some of the accounts of this legend, his music also subdues the waves, calms the Clashing Rocks, soothes the tempers of contentious crew members, and puts to sleep the dragon guarding the Golden Fleece. In the museum at Delphi, a sculptured metope from the sixth century BC clearly depicts Orpheus with his kithara standing in front of the Argo—it is perhaps the oldest surviving image of the ancient musician.

Yet the fame of these seafaring exploits pales beside the best-known instance of Orpheus's magico-musical powers: his descent to the underworld to recover his dead wife Eurydice. The most common version of the story tells how one day, shortly after her marriage, Eurydice encounters the shepherd Aristaeus while wandering through the meadows with her companion nymphs. Overcome by her beauty, the shepherd makes unwanted advances and Eurydice flees from him. During her retreat she is bitten by a snake, whose venom proves fatal. A painting from the sixteenth century by Niccolò dell'Abate, now in the National Gallery of London, depicts the scene in striking detail. In the distance Orpheus sits playing his lyre, surrounded by an audience of animals, unaware of the drama taking place. In the foreground, Eurydice runs away from her companions—who like Orpheus seem distracted, ignorant of the calamity about to happen. Eurydice is followed by the naked, muscular figure of Aristaeus, his arms reaching out for her, just a few paces behind his prey. Each group is caught up in its own concerns, none aware of the snake lurking in the grass ready to strike. Only the god Proteus looks on, cognizant of the full implications of the situation.

After the death of Eurydice, Orpheus wanders in despair, singing of his grief to any person or creature who will listen. By means of a cave situated on the side of the promontory of Taenarus, the disconsolate lover descends to the realm of the dead, where he implores the deities of the underworld to restore Eurydice to him. As he sings and plays his lyre, a

crowd of spirits gathers around Orpheus, weeping as they listen. Even the relentless and vengeful Eumenides are softened by this music, and for a moment Tantalus forgets his thirst and Sisyphus pauses from his labors. Hades, the king of the underworld, is overcome by the plaintive strains—calling for Eurydice he restores her to Orpheus. There is, however, one condition—Orpheus must refrain from turning to look at her until they have returned to the realm of the living. With Orpheus in the lead the pair ascends the path to the upper world—but, almost at their goal, Orpheus turns back to reassure himself that his beloved is still behind him. Alas, he has only one last glimpse of Eurydice before she disappears, carried back to the land of the dead. In the version of the myth related by Ovid, Orpheus tries once more to follow her, only to be blocked by the ferryman of the underworld, Charon, who refuses to grant him passage.

This descent to the underworld to recapture a lost soul through music—so similar to the practice of shamans—is more than just a legend for the ancient world. The tale of Orpheus appears to have been linked to rites and beliefs in communities where his influence was strongly felt. Golden leaflets, found in tombs near ancient Croton, a major center of Orphic thought, include the following description of the realm of the dead: “In the dwelling of Hades you will find a spring on your left, and near it a white cypress; be careful not to approach this spring. You will find another from which flow cool waves from Lake Mnemosyne (lake of memory). Before you are guardians. To them you will say, ‘I am the child of Gaea and Uranus (the earth and sky) and thus belong to a celestial race, as even you must know.’” What we have here is nothing less than a written guide, enabling a follower of Orpheus to emulate his journey to the underworld. Vittorio Macchioro, in assessing such passages, asks: “Now how are we to consider these descriptions of the after-life?” Here he sees parallels to Native American and Australian Aboriginal traditions of the vision quest, stating: “In my opinion, the starting point of the Orphic ideas of the after-life was in visions.” Macchioro, who expressed these views during a series of lectures given at Columbia University in 1929, saw the possible conclusion that “behind the traditional Orpheus stood a primitive shaman.” Yet he ultimately felt that this view needed to be rejected because “shamanism is too intimately associated with unintelligent superstition.” Even raising this possibility in the 1920s was a daring move, given the paucity of knowledge of shamanism at the time, and Macchioro’s discomfort in making the connection is a reflection more on

his limited understanding of shamans (who as we have seen embody a more systematic and coherent worldview than he perhaps realized) than on any misinterpretation of the Orphic material.

Six years later, the Swiss scholar Karl Meuli published an influential article showing how Asian and northern traditions of magical healers and seers, learned from Scythians and Thracians, influenced the ancient Greeks and their culture. E. R. Dodds, in his 1951 book *The Greeks and the Irrational*, drew on Meuli in presenting a compelling case that the Greeks knew and practiced shamanic techniques. Dodds’s influence went far in legitimizing this view among later scholars. But even Dodds dismissed the shaman as a “psychologically unstable person,” and his account minimizes the role of Orpheus, suggesting instead that the Pythagoreans may have received the concept directly from “the North.” The linkage of ancient Greek culture to shamanism remains an embarrassment even today, as witnessed by the defensive tone taken by the eminent scholar Peter Kingsley, in his discussion of these connections—no doubt because he senses hostility from the community of classicists to this line of thought. This hostility is no recent invention, he points out, but rather an inheritance from the Greeks themselves, who, as we have already seen, looked with fear and suspicion upon the seers and diviners who promised to raise souls from the dead. In fact, Kingsley sees the historical antipathy to shamanism among the Greeks as the reason why Orpheus fails in his attempt to bring Eurydice back from the dead: “To be sure,” he writes, “Orpheus would seem originally to have had the power to fetch the dead back to life; but exposure to the influence of Greek moralizing appears to have guaranteed that his success would be suppressed and converted into a tragic story of failure.”

The final chapter in the Orpheus legend also recalls the shamanic tradition, evoking both the seerlike role of the shaman as well as the tales of mutilation and dismemberment that are so commonly related in stories of initiations. After the final loss of his wife Orpheus shunned the company of women, and so angered the maidens of Thrace that they conspired to kill him. Their motive varies in the different versions of the story: some accounts stress that they were angered by his indifference to their charms; others suggest that they resented his association with their husbands, who neglected hearth and home in their devotion to the celebrated musician; perhaps the most interesting and revealing explanation tells how the women were inspired by Dionysus, who was angered at

Orpheus's devotion to Apollo. All the stories agree, however, on the frenzy of the women and the fierceness of their attack: they tore Orpheus limb from limb, just as the disciples of Dionysus did to animals at their Bacchic orgies. Yet much as the shaman recovers from the dismemberment of his initiation, Orpheus was not silenced by this bloody assault. His decapitated head, still singing, floated down the river Hebros, and eventually came to rest on the island of Lesbos. There it remained, gaining widespread fame as a giver of oracles. In ancient works of art the head is depicted lying on the ground, surrounded by listeners intent on hearing its prophecies and enchanting songs. Finally, Apollo put a stop to the proceedings, demanding that Orpheus be silent. Only the gods, and above all Apollo himself, were allowed to foretell the future. A mortal such as Orpheus, no matter how inspired, must refrain from such divine prerogatives. A temple on the island was said to have been built on the spot where Orpheus's head was finally laid to rest.

The complexity of gender roles in the tale of Orpheus is noteworthy, and it is reminiscent of the similar delineation between male and female roles outlined above in the discussion of the drum and the lyre. A growing body of evidence suggests that women played a critical part in the practice and transmission of the oldest traditions of healing music. The Egyptologist Geraldine Pinch notes that "while male magicians in Ancient Egypt generally seem to act alone, where we have visual evidence for the involvement of women in magic they are usually in groups. The nurses, "protection makers," and Hathor dancers involved in fertility magic are shown in small groups, nearly always holding some kind of simple musical instrument, such as clappers, a sistrum or a tambourine." Scholars often treat magical healing and musical healing as though they were identical, yet we have already seen striking differences between the two—notably that magic is a solitary and secretive act, while musical healing is communal—and the historical tension between them may very well be linked to the conflicting roles of men and women in society and ritual. A female role with clear linkages to a goddess cult appears in the first written account of a journey to the underworld: *The Descent of Inanna* from ancient Sumeria, which dates from somewhere between 1900 and 3500 BC, and is thus over 1500 years older than the Derveni papyrus with its Orphic references. Before embarking on her journey, Inanna tells her servant Ninshubur: "If I do not return, set up a lament for me by the ruins. Beat the drum for me in the assembly places"—which

Ninshubur eventually does to assist in bringing her mistress back to life. By the time of the Orpheus tale, the drum is replaced by the lyre and the genders are reversed. But both in the mythic accounts and the later real-life accounts of shamanic practices, the prevailing feminine ethos never fades entirely from view. Even Eliade, who tends to downplay the role of women in shamanism, is forced to admit the puzzling frequency with which male shamans wear feminine attire and adopt cultural patterns associated with women.

The story of Orpheus reflects these tensions and conflicts both in its details as well as in its later uses. Recall that Orpheus is both the enemy of the women, who as we have seen are linked to drumming and ecstatic practices in ancient Greece, as well as the proponent of the healing music and the Dionysiac rituals associated with females. Orpheus is also described as linked to the Bona Dea rites celebrated only by women in ancient Rome. Other ancient accounts of Orpheus stress his effeminate qualities. Once again, we seem to find in Orpheus the compromise between two antagonistic traditions, in which both masculine and feminine sensibilities (and practices) find resolution. This is reminiscent of the conflict between Dionysus and Apollo, between rhythm and harmony in healing music, between ecstatic rituals and a more civilized, philosophical religion—in short, of all the various tensions that seem to find a resting place in this complicated individual.

The question of the relative role of matriarchal and patriarchal institutions in ancient societies is outside the scope of this book; but some reflection on this matter will aid in understanding the larger social upheavals that may have influenced the Orphic revolution that, as I propose above, permanently altered the scope and nature of healing music in Western culture. A debate over the role of matriarchy in preclassical times has been simmering for 150 years, and it is unlikely to be resolved anytime soon. Nineteenth-century scholars who attempted to emphasize the role and influence of women in prehistoric kinship structures, religious practices, and other areas of society—most notably Johann Jakob Bachofen, John Ferguson McLennan, and W. Robertson Smith—were sharply criticized for their views, and only in recent decades has this line of thinking again gained credibility. Erich Neumann's *The Great Mother*, published in the mid-1950s, helped to rehabilitate this unfashionable perspective, with even more momentum coming from the work of archeologist Marija Gimbutas in the 1970s and 1980s. This new approach to an ancient sub-

ject proposed that starting around 5000 BC a male-dominated warrior culture made inroads in preexisting matriarchal institutions by gradually replacing them with patriarchal ways in the period before the dawn of written history. Lingering traces of this earlier state of affairs survived into later periods, according to Gimbutas and others, and can be detected in archeological finds, ancient art, and the persisting influence of goddess cults and worship during the classical period—although by this stage it is often shrouded in secrecy and hidden within the confines of fringe cults and their rituals.

These issues of matriarchy must be left for debate by others, but it is worth pointing out that the particulars of the Orpheus legend and the rituals associated with it seem to be marked by the memory of a conflict between matriarchy and patriarchy, as well as by overtones of goddess cults. Along with the shamanistic elements of the story, these aspects strengthen the position presented here: namely that the historical elements of the Orpheus tradition draw on very old belief systems that predate by many centuries the classical worldview of the ancient Greeks. In our attempts to trace the history of healing music, the study of Orpheus seems to take us far back to an age in which myth and music, not history or philosophy, served to preserve the core beliefs and defining events of human societies. E. A. S. Butterworth, in his study *Some Traces of the Pre-Olympian World in Greek Literature and Myth*, writes: “The attack on the matrilineal clans destroyed the power of the clan world itself, and with it its religion. It was the task of the rising cult of Apollo to form a new society of individual households, headed by a man and consisting essentially of himself, his wife and his children.” Butterworth does not mention Orpheus in his study, yet his remarks cannot fail to remind us of this supposed son of Apollo, and his symbolic or actual role in the transition that Butterworth describes. Whether Orpheus was, in fact, a historical figure may never be resolved satisfactorily. But we seem to be dealing with real historical forces, even if the supposed protagonist eludes our grasp. This is true even if we put aside speculations on the prehistoric roots of Orphism and concentrate on its later manifestations. No matter where we look, the Orpheus tale leaves a legacy that prevents us from dismissing it as a mere myth.

Indeed, for the next thousand years the story of Orpheus proved to be every bit as hypnotic as the lover’s legendary lyre. An entire body of literature grew up around the legend—not just additional tales but didactic and

practical guides in a wide range of disciplines. The magico-religious elements of what has come to be called “Orphism” spread throughout the ancient world—with philosophers and priests claiming him as their source of inspiration—and maintained tremendous longevity. In his *Republic*, Plato associates the followers of Orpheus with “charms and binding spells,” while some eight hundred years later the patriarch Athanasios denounces the still-prevalent pagan custom of selling the spells of Orpheus.

During the Renaissance, the image of Orpheus continued to cast its shadow over the leading thinkers, primarily artists, but also on occasion exercising an influence on the healing arts. F. Alberto Gallo notes a dramatic resurgence of interest in Orpheus during the fifteenth century and documents numerous examples in his book *Music in the Castle*. “In the fourteenth century,” Gallo writes, “listening to music still inevitably suggested images of performing angels, of inner rapture. But the orators of the fifteenth century had a completely different field of reference: in listening to music, they thought only of Orpheus, Amphion and Apollo.” Marsilio Ficino, one of the greatest and most wide-ranging intellectuals of the Italian Renaissance, sought to assume the roles of doctor, musician, and philosopher, and as such stood out as something of a latter-day Orpheus. He translated the so-called *Hymns of Orpheus* into Latin and was even known to perform them while accompanying himself on a lyre decorated with an image of the legendary Greek musician. In his writings on medicine, he exhibits great confidence in the healing properties of music. Around this same time, Pico della Mirandola asserts: “In natural magic nothing is more efficacious than the *Hymns of Orpheus*, if there be applied to them suitable music, and disposition of soul, and the other circumstances known to the wise.” Yet the musicians themselves were perhaps even more fascinated by Orpheus than either philosophers or healers. The impact of this influence could at times be surprising: for example, the three earliest composers of opera all turned to the Orpheus legend for their subject matter, resulting in *Euridice* by Jacopo Peri; *Euridice* by Giulio Caccini; and *Orfeo* by Claudio Monteverdi. (This linkage is all the more interesting given Gilbert Rouget’s insistence that the closest Western counterpart to the shamanic ritual is the operatic performance.)

But even more important for our interests, written accounts of tales drawn from a far distant culture, the first examples of which appear around this time, bear an uncanny resemblance to the Orpheus legend. Researchers would eventually document dozens of stories from various

Native American tribes describing a hero who travels to the underworld to bring back a loved one. In 1935, A. H. Gayton identified over fifty different tribes that possessed some variant of the tale, and though later scholars have debated the inclusion or exclusion of particular narratives, no one has disputed the wide geographic scope and prominence of the tradition. From the Navajo and Zuni in the Southwest to the Micmac and Seneca of the Northeast, from the Cherokee and Yuchi of the Southeast to the Kwakiutl of British Columbia, the story spans the continent—serving as testimony both to its probable antiquity as well as to its intrinsic appeal. The Jesuit missionary Jean de Brébeuf first noted the story among the Hurons in 1636, although almost two hundred and fifty years would transpire before the linkage with the Orpheus myth of Greece was noted by a scholar.

It is hard to account for this time lag given the striking similarities between the two traditions as well as the popularity of the Orpheus story at the time; indeed, Brébeuf was still living in Europe during the period in which the three Orpheus operas mentioned above were legitimizing this new type of musical theater.

Åke Hultkrantz summarizes the most common details of the Native American Orpheus tale as follows:

A young man has lost his wife, and in his grief he resolves to follow her to the land of the dead and bring her home again. She is at first unwilling to let him accompany her on the journey, but finally yields. As a living person he finds it difficult to keep up with her, but with her help he at last reaches the realm of the dead. Here he is met with sympathy by the chief of the dead (or other higher being), and with the latter's direct help or good will Orpheus is permitted to return with his wife. The dead are active at night-time, when they devote themselves above all to dancing. The wife is seized during the dance and conducted to the land of the living, although she is reluctant and unwilling. A taboo, however, has been imposed on her husband which is valid during the journey home or for the period immediately thereafter. He unintentionally breaks the taboo and loses his wife, who must once more set out for the realm of the shades.

The Orpheus of this Native American tradition, much like his counterpart from ancient Greece, often relies on music to overcome the various obstacles encountered during this trip to the land of the dead. In the Yakima version of the legend, the Orpheus figure manages to cross the lake of the dead by summoning the boatman with his singing. Among the

Wishram, a similar crossing is made, only in this case Orpheus calls a boat by playing on a flute, one end of which is placed in the water. In the Tsimshian tale, he overcomes the guardian to the underworld by use of a magical song. The Chehalis story tells how the visitor to the spirit world relies on the power of music to put out flames in the burning prairies that must be crossed during the journey. In the Shasta story, the traveler sings the magical song only when he has reached the land of the dead.

Once arrived in this realm, the North American Orpheus frequently encounters the festivities of the dead, and here too music plays an important role. "The dance of the dead," Hultkrantz points out, "occurs in the majority of the Orpheus traditions all over the continent." The dance typically provides the opportunity for Orpheus to seize the Eurydice figure before returning to the realm of the living—a telling detail that reminds us of the shaman's ecstatic dance to retrieve lost souls. In the Huron version of the story, the healing properties of the dance are made explicit: it takes place to cure the ailing earth goddess Ataentsic. In other instances, the dances are brought back to the living by Orpheus, where they can be used to cure the sick.

Much as Harrison argued that the Greek Orpheus was a real historical figure, Hultkrantz has asserted that the prevalent Orpheus tales of North America probably reflect, to some degree, actual events. "I am much inclined to see an indication that the prototypes of the main persons [in the tales] did long ago exist as historical personages, whose names have been lost as the narratives of the original events in which they took part have been fictionalized." Nor is it surprising, given the particulars of the various tales, that Hultkrantz explicitly links them to shamanistic practices. Numerous details of various North American Orpheus stories point in this direction: the recovery of the lost soul; the obstacles encountered on the way; the prominent role of song and dance in the retrieval of the departed; the use of a special receptacle, the so-called "soul catcher" to bring the spirit of the dead back to the land of the living; the process of restoring the victim back to consciousness. In short, the "origin of the Orpheus narrative" in North America most likely resulted from "a memorable occurrence which actually took place: a shaman's bold attempt to bring his deeply unconscious wife (or possibly some close relative) back to life." Hultkrantz also speculates on a similar origin for the European Orpheus tradition: "The points of resemblance between the two traditions are so striking that the explanatory hypothesis advanced here [with

regard to North America] becomes meaningless unless it can also be applied in the Old World.”

Yet I would go farther than Hultkrantz. The Orpheus of the ancient Greeks did more than just codify shamanistic practices, translating them into the language of myth. Orpheus was above all a reformer. He sanitized and purified primitive healing traditions, making them palatable for the more rationalistic orientation of the Greeks of his day. To a certain extent he also diluted the tradition, replacing the intensity of ecstatic healing with a more subdued meditative frame of mind. For this same reason, Orpheus needed to replace the drum, the quintessential instrument of passion and excess, with the more orderly sounds of the lyre. The impact of these shifts in attitude and behavior can hardly be overestimated. Before Orpheus, music therapy in the West was mostly spiritual and magical and only partly medical; after his influence was felt, the opposite became true. The power of music to cure ailments was now conceptualized as just one more type of medical intervention and susceptible to scientific explanation. The magic of the incantation was replaced by the technology of sound and vibration; the ecstatic force of rhythm was supplanted by the analyzable, quantifiable properties of harmony. And as this new orientation took root, harmony became even more than a body of knowledge; it also emerged as a dominant metaphor, used and abused but inevitably drawn on in attempts to conceptualize music as a change agent in individuals, groups, communities, and societies.

In short, the figure we know as Orpheus did as much to kill the shamanistic tradition of the West as to preserve it. And for almost three thousand years, we have struggled to recover this tradition’s potency—recover it, yes, but also reconcile it with our even more deep-seated rationalism, our chief inheritance from the culture that gave birth to Orpheus and that has so pervasively influenced our concepts of healing and wellness.