

MYSTIC ORPHEUS: ANOTHER NOTE ON THE THREE-FIGURE RELIEFS

MISS E. B. Harrison's interpretation of the four three-figure reliefs which Heinz Götze first related stylistically and thematically and which Homer Thompson has attributed to the Altar of the Twelve Gods is, I think, a marked improvement on the *interpretations* of both Götze and Thompson: "The reliefs of the Altar of the Twelve Gods are linked . . . not so much by a common compassion for reversals of human fortune as by a common theme of the quest for eternal good."¹ This view has two distinct merits: it does not oblige us to look for piteous situations where they are not to be found, and in addition it suggests a thematic as well as stylistic connection between the Altar of the Twelve Gods and the enclosure of the Eponymous Heroes.

It is all the more surprising, then, for Miss Harrison to say, "No one could doubt, on looking at Orpheus and Eurydice, that this is an instant of irrevocable separation."² In fact, many have doubted, and on good evidence, that this is the tragic moment when Orpheus turned to look at Eurydice and lost her. Bowra says "the relief displays too little distress for so tragic a catastrophe."³ Guthrie notes that other representations of the descent "show an Orpheus who might well be supposed to be at home in the underworld, without the necessity of any conjugal errand to account for his presence."⁴ More important still is the fact that in every literary reference to the myth antecedent to, contemporary with and for at least three centuries subsequent to the relief, there is no second loss of Eurydice. In Euripides (*Alc.*, 357-362 with scholiast), Isokrates (*Busiris*, XI, 8), pseudo-Heraclitus (*De Incred.*, 21), Hermesianax (Athenaeus, *Deipn.*, XIII, 597b-c), Moschus (III, 115-25), Diodorus Siculus (IV, 25, 4) and the Orphic *Argonautica* (40-42), Orpheus is clearly thought to have been successful in resurrecting Eurydice. In Plato's version (*Symp.*, 179d, a classic example of his bias against musicians and penchant for private myth-making), Orpheus is not given his wife at all; he is shown a phantom and sent away. Not until the *Culex* and Virgil's *Georgics* does the story of Orpheus' backward glance occur in literature. This has been noted many times,⁵ and the philologist is understand-

¹ "Hesperides and Heroes: A Note on the Three-Figure Reliefs," *Hesperia*, XXXIII, 1964, p. 80. See p. 76, n. 1 for pertinent bibliography. I should like to state clearly that I in no way deny the substantial accomplishments of both Götze and Thompson *re* the grouping and placing of the reliefs; it is only their interpretation of the findings I venture to question.

² *Ibid.*, p. 77. That Miss Harrison regards the "irrevocable separation" as consequent upon Orpheus' failure to keep the gods' command is clear from her remarks on p. 80.

³ "Orpheus and Eurydice," *Cl. Quart.*, II, 1952, p. 121.

⁴ *Orpheus and Greek Religion*, London, 1952, p. 30.

⁵ E.g., O. Gruppe, Roscher's *Lexicon s.v.* Orpheus; K. Ziegler, Pauly's *Real-Encyclopädie*, *s.v.*

ably confused when the archaeologist persists in applying what appears to be a first-century or at best Hellenistic interpretation to a fifth-century monument.

It will be objected that the details of the relief will fit only the Virgilian story: Orpheus has turned, he has gently brushed the veil from Eurydice's face; she looks into his eyes and tenderly lays her left hand on his shoulder, while her right is firmly clasped by Hermes, the winged escort of the dead. To this one can reply that the relief may have prompted the story, and not *vice versa*. Let me attempt to trace the evolution of the myth, on the basis of what evidence we have.

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The earliest references to Orpheus, in Ibykos (frag. 17 Diehl), Simonides (frag. 27 Diehl) and Pindar (*Pyth.*, IV, 176), mention only a legendary musician who has mysterious powers over nature. But at the same time, a well-known religious cult was claiming this miracle-worker as its founder, and among its mystical writings were several *καταβάσεις ἐς Ἄιδου*.⁶ We know nothing of these poems beyond their title, but as one of them was ascribed to an Orpheus of Kamarina and as a Delphic fresco of Polygnotos⁷ showed Orpheus playing in Hades (with Eurydice conspicuously absent), it seems reasonable to suppose that some account of Orpheus descending to Hades was known to fifth-century initiates of Orphism. The cult would benefit by the story: its secrets would be sanctioned as having come from the lips of the founder himself, returned from the dead to reveal them. Some indication of the contents of the *καταβάσεις* may be inferred from later Orphic writings such as the tablets found in graves in the South Italian cities of Petelia and Thurii (fourth-third century but, we may presume, in the tradition). These give instructions for the soul on its journey through Hades. They direct it to the Lake of Memory, tell it what to say to the guardians of the waters, and record the greetings it receives there:

Hail, thou who hast suffered the suffering. This
 thou hadst never suffered before.
 Thou art become god from man . . .

These are the words of the soul as it pleads its case before the Queen of Hades:

I have sunk beneath the bosom of the Mistress, the
 Queen of the underworld.

Orpheus, and H. Willrich, *ibid.* s.v. Eurydike; I. M. Linforth, *The Arts of Orpheus*, Berkeley, 1941, pp. 17-20; W. K. C. Guthrie, *op. cit.*, p. 31 and note 6; C. M. Bowra, *loc. cit.*, and most recently P. Dronke, "The Return of Eurydice," *Cl. et Med.*, XXIII, 1962, pp. 198-215. However, J. Huergon, *Mél. d' Arch. et d' Hist.*, XLIX, 1932, pp. 6-60, regards the Orpheus relief as depicting the second loss of Eurydice, and attempts to find other antecedents for the Virgilian tradition.

⁶ The authors are Prodikos of Samos and Kekrops the Pythagorean (cited in Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, I, 21, 134) and Herodikos of Perinthos and Orpheus of Kamarina (cited in Suidias, s.v. Orpheus). Of these, Prodikos at least lived as early as the sixth century.

⁷ See Pausanias, X, 30, 6.

And now I come a suppliant to holy Persephoneia,
That of her grace she send me to the seats of the Hallowed . . .

Persephone answers :

Happy and blessed one, thou shalt be god instead of mortal . . .⁸

If this is the path once traveled by Orpheus, perhaps Eurydice's original function was thus to welcome and comfort him on his arrival; perhaps she was at first the very queen who conferred immortality on the soul. Orpheus descends to Hades to learn for his followers the secrets of life and death; is Eurydice introduced into the account to represent the vision or revelation given him there?

The tablets suggest the possibility, and there is some literary evidence for it: the name Eurydice (wide-ruling) is one of the names of the Queen of Hades;⁹ Hermesianax calls Orpheus' wife Agriope (she of the wild face), or better, Argiope (she of the gleaming face); even the mocking Plato (of all the authors closest in time to the relief) provides a clue—Orpheus is not given his wife but shown a phantom (*φάσμα δείξαντες*). And what do we see in the three-figure relief? Orpheus turns, after singing his song, and Eurydice is brought to him by Hermes; she comforts him as he looks into her face. The details suggest a scene of tender greeting and revelation, not unlike the description on the Orphic tablets. Thus did Orpheus, in a privileged moment, learn the secrets of life and death.

But Greek myths evolve as they are used by poets, and soon we hear that Orpheus was actually granted permission to take his wife back with him. The new happy ending may have been suggested by other myths which tell of rescues from Hades (Dionysos' rescue of Semele and Herakles' of Alkestis and Cerberus are mentioned by the very authors—Euripides, pseudo-Heraclitus, Diodorus—who now tell of Orpheus). We note that, after Euripides, references to Orpheus' descent become more frequent; it is no longer associated solely with mysteries for the initiate; it has passed into the public domain as a standard tale of rescue.¹⁰

In late Hellenistic and Roman times, the story of Orpheus is affected by those seasonal myths in which Hades compromises, and the dead (Persephone, Castor, Adonis, Protesilaos) are allowed to return to earth only for a time. The three-figure

⁸ Translation from Guthrie, *op. cit.*, p. 173. Tablets with similar formulae were found at Eleutherna in Crete (second century B.C.) and at Rome (second or third century A.D.). Thus the tradition appears to be unchanged for six centuries.

⁹ See, e.g., E. Maass, *Orpheus*, Munich, 1895; Gruppe, *op. cit.*, and Jane Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*, Cambridge, 1908, p. 603. But Guthrie, *op. cit.*, p. 44 and note 19, considers the identification of Eurydice and Persephone "doubtful."

¹⁰ According to Huergon, *op. cit.*, pp. 22-27 and fig. 3, the scene on the fourth-century Santangelo vase, from Southern Italy, represents the moment when Eurydice is restored to the successful Orpheus in Hades. Here it is Eurydice who adjusts the veil and Orpheus who clasps her right hand, while the winged god (Eros?) hovers above. The Attic relief has already been re-interpreted.

relief which originally depicted Orpheus learning the secrets of the dead now exists in copies in various parts of the world and is subject to new interpretations at the very time when the Greeks and Romans establish contact with the folk-tales and legends of other lands. So the myth is given a new ending: according to one of the world's most widely-disseminated stories,¹¹ Orpheus wins Eurydice back on condition that he not look back at her until he reaches the land of the living. But this is the *Culex*, not the Agora of fifth-century Athens.¹²

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Obviously this is a most tentative reconstruction. The evidence is scant, any interpretation of the Orphic tablets is fraught with difficulties, and Greek myths are always, in the end, elusive. But Orpheus the visionary (who was known in fifth-century Athens) fits Miss Harrison's theories as well as Orpheus the tragic lover (who was not). I am not completely convinced that four stylistically related panels need be thematically related as well, but it might be suggested that Götze's four reliefs depict four mythical attempts to penetrate the mystery of life and death: the daughters of Pelias kill their father in hopes of prolonging his life; Herakles descends to the underworld and raises one man to life, leaving another in death; Herakles journeys to the outerworld, the land where the sun sets, to steal life-giving apples; Orpheus, the mystic in quest of the secrets of the afterlife, is rewarded with a vision of Eurydice in Hades.

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¹¹ See, e.g., S. Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, Bloomington, 1934, F. 81.1, C. 331, and A. H. Gayton, "The Orpheus Myth in North America," *Journal of the American Folklore Assn.*, XLVIII, 1935, pp. 263-293. On the Hellenistic interest in tabus, see Guthrie's remarks, *op. cit.*, p. 31, and compare the story of Cupid and Psyche, with its underworld episode and various reversals due to curiosity.

¹² That there were other interpretations given the Orpheus relief is evidenced by the inscriptions on the copy in the Louvre, whereon the figures are identified as Amphion, Antiope and Zetus.