



Ovid's Orpheus – Some Thoughts about Reading Latin Poetry & More

That Ovid, in the first years of this millennium, is as aware of how to read and how to help his audience be readers as any modern critic is most evident in his handling of the story of Orpheus and the story within that story, Pygmalion, in book 10 of his epic poem, Metamorphoses.

That Ovid was not the only ancient artist to have recognized the problems of interpretation is further shown in ancient paintings, as illustrated by a picture, from the Villa of Fannies in Boscoreale. The artist was concerned how his painting would be viewed and anticipated the viewer's response. Behind a seated woman, who plays her lyre looking not at it but at the audience, stands her attendant holding a wine glass, not staring fondly down upon her mistress but looking directly at the audience. The gaze of the women allows us to understand that the painter wanted to capture in his painting another art-

form, music, unheard but still delighting us 2000 years later.

In Metamorphoses 10, 1-297, Ovid tells of Orpheus's song, after the bard's failed trip to the underworld to retrieve Eurydice, of Pygmalion and his statue that came to life. The emphasis is not on a detailed description of the beautiful statue but on the sculptor's involvement with and aesthetic appreciation of his own art work, that he gave "a beauty more perfect than that of any woman ever born" (10. 248-9). Ovid/Orpheus apostrophizes the reader/listener with "you would think [the work a real maiden] living and desirous of being moved", to create the impression for the reader of actually beholding the statue. Pygmalion often caresses the statue to see whether it is flesh or ivory, aesthetic appreciation verging on sexual attraction. He begins to treat the statue not as a work of art but as a living woman, kissing it, addressing it with fond words of love, bringing it gifts. The goddess Venus makes what was merely an illusion now a reality, as "the ivory grew soft to his touch and its hardness vanishing" he embraced it. Pygmalion has not forced meaning upon his statue, but rather, captivated by the life-like quality of the work, he has coaxed the life out of it by treating her as if she were living even when she was not; in his imagination, she was alive even before Venus' intervention.

Pygmalion stands as much as a model artist as a model of aesthetic response – his interpretation of the statue is very human, full of human emotion and longing. yet his interpretation transcends human boundaries. In his hands, art jumps off the statue base because the aesthetic receiver, the "reader" of the artwork has become its lover. Such sensitivity is an embrace of reader and text, the fullest expression of a poetics of embrace.

This story of the greatest artist is found in the song of the Metamorphoses' greatest poet. In books 10 and 11 Orpheus is the exemplar of the poet and his craft, through which he holds sway over nature itself, challenging death, moving inanimate objects. But in Ovid's account of Orpheus' song to Des and Persephone, Ovid depicts the reaction of the spirits of the dead. And beyond this wider audience for the song is the reader, privileged to hear Orpheus sing. In Vergil's version of the same scene (Georgics, 4. 471-2, 481-3) the reader never hears Orpheus' song, only experiences it through the reaction of the dead to it.

Orpheus must define his audience, must convince them of the validity of his argument, so he begins by explaining the reason for his song: "I have not come down to see dark Tartarus... the cause of my journey is my wife." "Eurydice's inspirational role is emphasized. The reaction of the shades of the dead to a visitor to Hades is a topos that goes back to Homer's Odyssey, imitated by Vergil in Georgics 4. But Vergil allows us only to see the reaction of the audience, not to hear the words of the song. Thus, we must infer the merit of Orpheus' performance. But Ovid lets us hear the song and builds a crescendo as the tormented in Hades pause, the Furies weep and the rulers, overcome, summon Eurydice. The dramatic reaction to Orpheus on the part of the shades and sinners symbolizes a reaction to the effectiveness of rhetorical persuasion and the powers of poetic art.

An example taken from a painting found in Herculaneum further shows how the audience's role may be defined. A woman, assisted by a young child or attendant and observed by two other women, paints a picture of a statue (a herm), itself a work of art. She thus crosses several boundaries: between one artist and another, embracing the work of a fellow artist and incorporating it into her own work; between genders, since all the participants in the scene are women while the herm is a symbol of male sexuality; between cultures, since herms are Greek in origin but this is a Roman woman, in a Roman house, attended by Roman friends; between the genres of sculpture and painting. For this latter, compare Pygmalion's statue or the inclusion of the song in the painting from Boscoreale. Including architectural forms in Roman frescoes is not unusual, but a precise rendering of a work of art within the wall-painting is, and in this painting we see the herm and the painting of it, a kind of triple layering of the artistic process.

So, also, Orpheus' song in Ovid crosses the boundary between poetry and prose with its persuasive features taken from a rhetorical set speech. And Orpheus too has multiple audiences, from Dis and Persephone, through the shades and on to the reading audience, just as we, looking at the painting, have our attention focused by the onlookers depicted as watching the painter. Just as the real viewing audience is represented here by the peering women, in terms of artistic role, the actual fresco-painter appears in the guise of the woman painter of the picture. The herm triggers this sequence by graphically delineating one layer, the central layer of the intricate artistic process, even as Orpheus' song occupies the center of Ovid's account. The combination of poetic artistry and power to persuade achieves the goal of rescuing Eurydice, and links art and life as in the Pygmalion story: Pygmalion is symbolic of Orpheus and Orpheus is symbolic of Ovid himself.

By bringing into his song Hades' rape of Persephone, instigated by Amor, Orpheus reminds the pair that they are "human" too and thus brings the shadowy world of hell into the living world of Roman elegiac poetry. Orpheus' address to Persephone and Dis ("you were joined in love") calls them into the story by making their experience part of the text. Unlike Vergil, who does not give us the words of Orpheus' song, Ovid privileges the reading audience to the ballad, thus empowering the reader and permitting the reader to share in the role of listening audience. Orpheus' descent to Hades was not for the epic purposes of Vergil's Aeneas but for love - and Amor is the god of Ovidian love elegy. Ovid tells us that he once tried to sing epic themes but was prevented by Amor (Amores 1 and 2). By referring to Amor's role in the union of Persephone and Dis, Orpheus recalls the story of Persephone's rape, which his mother, Calliope, the patron Muse of epic, had told in Met 5. In that story itself, Ovid recalls Vergil's epic opening of "Arms and the Man" (*arma virumque*) with the words he has Venus say to her son, Cupid, when she asks him to hit Hades with one of his love-inspiring arrows: *arma manusque* ("Arms and the Hands"). Calliope and her son, Orpheus, parallel Venus and her son, Amor/Cupid. Both overcome the ruler of the underworld in their own

ways, arrow and song, and both lovers obtain their beloved, only to lose them again (Persephone for part of each year, Eurydice permanently in this life). Everything is subject to Love.

Love and lament, the two most important stimuli for Orpheus' ballad, are the constituent elements of Roman elegiac poetry. Orpheus, the son of epic inspiration, is in the awkward position of being an elegiac poet in the epic situation of descent to the underworld and rescue. He must do what he can: rely on his persuasive skill, including the use of direct address to the royal pair about the universal experience of love, just as the poet who employs apostrophe to make the text immediately relevant to the reader. So Ovid is blurring generic boundaries of epic and elegy in the song of Orpheus, the master of audience manipulation.

Ovid knows about art and the interpretation of art and includes in the pages of his grandest poem Orpheus and Pygmalion, models of a poet and how he captivates his audience with his text and an artist and how he brings his artwork to life through sensitive interpretation. Similar is the lyre player from Boscoreale. Her companion seems to be staring straight ahead, but the musician, who is still playing, seems to be making the quick upward glance of a person slightly startled out of her absorption in her musical creation. Since the companion seems to be staring intently at the viewer, the musician may just now have noticed what the companion has already seen, namely us the uninvited interrupters of their leisure. The glance of the companion draws us into the painting and in so doing has brought out of the forever deaf painting, into the room where the viewer stands, the sound of her mistress' cithara from 2000 years ago. We are drawn to agree with Keats that "heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard/ are sweeter..."
