

Two-faced Possibility of Sight and Words: Eurydice from the Perspective of Modern Dramatic Monologue

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Abstract: The common ways of interpreting and re-telling the myth of the Thracian musician Orpheus and his bride Eurydice are similar to the traditional way of narrating the myth: starting with Orpheus and emphasising Orpheus's unilateral output of "love" and the tragic nature of their destiny. This article selects *Eurydice to Orpheus* by Robert Browning and *Eurydice Saved* by Linda Gregg as examples in modern poetry to explore how the legacy and reflection of classical interpretations, such as the tradition of faith in the validity and reliability of Orpheus' love, are portrayed from Eurydice's point of view. The emotional tendencies presented in these two poems are different, but they still have significant ideas in common when it comes to the fact that a visual regime has been established in the relationship between Eurydice and Orpheus. Orpheus can only empower their love by "looking" and losing. This indicates his role as the dominant one while Eurydice is given the status of the object being looked at and shaped.

Keywords: Orpheus and Eurydice myth, poetic feature, visuality, subjectivity

1. Introduction

The myth of the Thracian musician Orpheus and his bride Eurydice has always been one of the most well-known classic myths. Orpheus has a special ability to charm all living things and even stones with his music. When he was allowed to retrieve his wife, Eurydice, from the underworld, he also accepted the condition that he must not turn his eyes beyond him. He failed to resist looking back at his wife and lost her again. According to conventional wisdom, it represented "at least three things" to the ancient world: 1) the never-ending conflict between humans and the force of nature; 2) the fabled might of a great civiliser; 3) a tragic love story [1]. The reason why Orpheus looks back at his wife and irrationally makes her vanish is left as a puzzle, which leaves plenty of room for imagination. To make this moment in time visible to us, those who tell the story exaggerate the instant when Eurydice disappears into a fleeting jumble of fruitless attempts and flitting words [2]. Therefore, the reader's attention will naturally focus on this vacuum of interpretation, which can be clearly seen when many literary texts show a specific interest in re-telling the story and introducing new possibilities.

A common way of re-telling is similar to the traditional way of narrating the myth: starting with Orpheus and emphasising Orpheus's unilateral output of "love" and the tragic nature of their destiny. In the case of such an interpretation, the authenticity and validity of Orpheus's love for Eurydice are usually overwhelmingly approved. At the same time, Eurydice, or a Eurydice-like narrator, often

lacks a voice in her relationship with Orpheus. We do not have access to Eurydice's attitude towards her destiny. In *Metamorphoses* by Ovid, one of the two main sources for the myth, the narrator remarks on Eurydice's stillness and lack of protest before saying one final goodbye to her. "What could she complain about except that she was a victim of love?" he puts it in a rhetorical question dangerously, implying that this is a male narrator at the same time [3]. It seems that at the moment when Orpheus looks back, Eurydice and the reader are kept in passive silence while Orpheus is still used as the only soulful protagonist or narrator until his own death.

Another idea focussed on what this myth implies about the symbolic meaning of poetry itself. For Orpheus' identity as the first poet, a special link between this myth and poetry itself is also established: the story of the first poet should be able to suggest a sense of commonality that works for all poems and poets of later generations. Its opening and conclusion are intertwined with well-known but complex themes regarding the interactions between poetry and death, the body and song, tradition, and immortality [2].

The special emphasis on Orpheus' "look" is also linked to the ancient Greek tradition of visual priority. Ancient Greek thoughts are full of high affirmation of vision, whether in philosophy or art. Vision is given the highest status in the system of senses. The Greek gods were not only visible to humans but were also conceived as observers of human behaviour. Aristotle claimed that it is human nature to desire knowledge. This readiness to use our senses further emphasises the significance of vision in ancient Greek thinking. Even when emotion is not useful, people adore it. Moreover, of the five senses, vision is the most important because it allows us to distinguish between objects and recognise objects [4]. Therefore, it is natural to interpret Orpheus' "look" as his most important and even the only way to concept Eurydice.

In modern texts, especially poems, poets act not only as heirs to these more classical interpretations but also as critics of the traditions they are borrowing, for example, the tradition of belief in love and visual priority. *Eurydice to Orpheus* by Robert Browning [5] and *Eurydice Saved* by Linda Gregg [6] are two representative examples. Both poems use Eurydice's dramatic monologue to give readers a reversed perspective on this tragic love story. Although the emotional tendencies in these two poems differ, they nevertheless share a lot in common with the idea that "look" can also be interpreted as a vehicle for ocularcentrism: in traditional narratives, the so-called "love" between Orpheus and Eurydice may be a visual regime [7] where Orpheus is given subjectivity and Eurydice is seen as a voiceless object.

By portraying the calling of Eurydice, Robert Browning weakens Eurydice's passivity. He points out that the quality of the lovers' desire for each other may be mutual rather than one-way: Eurydice may be intensely longing for Orpheus's sight and being trapped in the desperate belief in their love as well. Several subtle choices of imagery hint at the suspicious nature of their love, this unwarranted belief, and Eurydice's rapturous self-sacrificing vision. In this seemingly charming narrative of devotion to love, Eurydice, as the actual object (compared with Orpheus as the subject), is still governed by the order built by Orpheus with "look." Thus, "love" and how it is expressed can be seen as the foundation and maintainer of such a power relation.

Linda Gregg appears more pessimistic about their love. She vividly depicts a vacuous and superficial scene of love that demonstrates that a "saved" Eurydice might suffer from a meaningless life as the one who lacks subjectivity in the relationship because of the absence of so-called tragic artistry. When it comes to the myth, readers are used to the preset expectation that it has taken on a tragic inevitability: Orpheus must look back or this cannot be his story any more [2]. The absence of happiness in the secular sense is necessary for Orpheus and Eurydice (especially Eurydice, as the one who receives love expressions) to ensure that they can be art, or they will be left in such an inexplicable vacuum.

2. The Analysis of *Eurydice to Orpheus* and *Euridice Saved*

In *Eurydice to Orpheus*, through the straightforward language style, the narrator Eurydice indicates not only a sense of despair for the fact that her destiny is impossible for her to control but also a firm belief in the power of their love, which might have been found idealised and unwarranted through the implications in several images of the poem. Her yearning is declared in line 1:

*But give them me, the mouth, the eyes, the brow!
Let them once more absorb me! One look now*

The poet puts “give them me” before the objects of the sentence to highlight Eurydice’s desire to possess the image of Orpheus again after being departed by death. It seems that Eurydice here still relies on an expression similar to that of Orpheus in traditional storytelling, which focuses on the “look” of her lover as a carrier for expressing the streams of mind. “One look now” is separated from the rest of the sentence by an enjambment to reinforce such a sense of focus. Her rich and fluid emotions pick up soon in the following lines:

*Will lap me round for ever, not to pass
Out of its light, though darkness lie beyond:*

“Not to pass” indicates that Eurydice is not able to restrain the expectation that the “look” from Orpheus will save her from destined death and bring her back to the world of love and enthusiasm. Such “look” has already become a supreme value of revelation and salvation for Eurydice. In this process of expecting to be saved, she regards the vision of Orpheus as a higher organ of truth knowledge. Although she shows initiative, she still seems to lack subjectivity: the subject to “look” at her is still Orpheus. The word “light” is deliberately placed in the next line to form a juxtaposition with “darkness,” which could symbolize the unbridgeable gap between Eurydice’s wish and the tragedy of fate. “Lie beyond” reinforces the idea that “darkness” is something latent but clinging to Eurydice. She was aware that the obstacles from destiny were irresistible although she is still longing. This ambivalent mental state reached its peak in the last lines:

*Hold me but safe again within the bond
Of one immortal look! All woe that was,
Forgotten, and all terror that may be,
Defied, —no past is mine, no future: look at me!*

She describes the “bond” as something safe, a uniting force, or a promise that is established by the trust between Orpheus and herself. The two separate verbs, “forgotten” and “defied,” progressively show that at this moment Eurydice is immersed in the feeling that the love between them has an “immortal,” unnatural, and overwhelming power that is even able to stand up to “all woe” and “all terror.” However, the idea of a bond as an immortal look could also be a restraining thing linked to bondage. Such a conjecture is close to the mixed feeling of intense love in real life: being in love could be both liberating and constraining. For Eurydice, love with Orpheus appears as her only weapon against the tragedy assigned to her, but it can also be another kind of yoke that she is unable to distinguish or recognize. The narrator Eurydice’s last expressions also provide possible evidence for this interpretation. “No past” and “no future” indicate her deep sorrow of losing control of her own life, and she can only express her desperate desire for Orpheus to “look at me” again. The poet makes Eurydice an angelic suicide, the contented victim of her own morally upright and tranquil infatuation with her spouse. He depicts Eurydice’s death as the pleasant outcome of a passionate exchange of looks, which is eventually finished by Eurydice at the end of the poem [8].

Therefore, it is obvious that in this poem, a visual regime existed between Orpheus and Eurydice for a long time. “Visual regime” means that under the idea of ocularcentrism, the visual object’s presence and unmistakable presentation, or its visibility, serve as the sole valid points of reference. By analogy, the visual centre’s hierarchical dichotomy is expanded to include areas other than

cognitive operations to discriminate between the visible and the invisible [9]. In *Eurydice to Orpheus*, a hierarchical system that places Orpheus as the subject above Eurydice as the object in the operation of ideology is still working. Eurydice herself is also portrayed as a supporter and reveller steeped deeply in such a power relationship. She, as the narrator, may have her voice to some extent, but that voice is still shaped and represented by the subject. In this case, the so-called “love” is not simply Eurydice’s voice of freedom and contending as it might first appear to be. One interpretation of “love” and its manifestations is as the basis and upholder of such a power dynamic.

Similarly, in *Euridice Saved*, the narrator is trapped in the vacuous nature of love and life. She appears like a modern Eurydice, living a lifestyle we are familiar with but still putting particular emphasis on “all things seen:”

*I am filled with all things seen
for the last time. He lays with me gently
in the unfamiliar house and kisses me. When he holds
my head in his hands and arms, I dream of the real world.*

“Filled” suggests that the things seen in her memory have already become too much, too heavy, or too hard to understand for her. Her partner seems to have done his best to be characteristically gentle and affectionate. However, his performance still becomes disturbing as our sense of security will be eroded in an “unfamiliar house.” “Hold” usually means some possession, illustrating his attempts to fit the narrator into such an order of warmth. It is obvious that although the narrator seems to accept her behaviour, a distance between the false appearance and reality is established: the “real world” even becomes something she needs to dream about.

*I look from the mirror to the light on the floor.
I am happy with him eating bread and coffee.*

The poet attributes the superficiality of her present situation to the relationship between the “mirror” and “the light on the floor.” Given that “look” occupies a significant place in the unequal relationship between Orpheus and Eurydice, looking at images in the “mirror” can be interpreted as a hint of the mirror phase and an attempt for the narrator to identify herself. According to Jacques Lacan, the proposer of this concept, what takes shape at the mirror stage “will be the root stock” of later identifications. Briefly, in such a phase, a newborn will discover mastery by “jubilantly assuming” the upright position when she sees herself in the mirror. She will truly only learn later “already there” in the mirror image. The subject’s relationship with itself will always be mediated by a totalizing picture that has originated from outside after the mirror stage as a turning point. One such totalizing ideal that organizes and orients the self is the mirror image [10]. The narrator here appears to be someone who lacks such subjectivity: she seems to be trapped in the position of “the body in bits and pieces” which corresponds to a *primaeva*, polymorphous auto-erotic condition [10] and has no access to achieve a position of autonomy in her relationship with her partner. She can’t produce a future through anticipation or a past through retroaction. As mentioned, she is struggling with her memory. By looking in the mirror with this desperate hope (“light” being used as a symbol of hope again), she is trying to earn the power of looking and becoming a subject, which is usually reserved for an Orpheus-like character. But she is too weak to make a difference. She still should provide fake responses to superficial love expressions (claiming to feel “happy” in a questionable way). Here the poet also marks a subtle transition, after which the next few lines shift the focus from the description of her relationship with her partner to the description of her world.

*I noticed I held it in the air before me
for some time. I looked at it without perception.
When I let it fall, it did not make a noise.*

How the narrator loses her sense of reality, or how perception leaves her, is portrayed grimly. If we think of sight as the absolute dominant factor in the stories of Orpheus and Eurydice, then the other senses can only become appendages and gradually weaken until they are completely dissolved.

*Art, I was thinking, is the imitation of what
we called nothing when we lived on the earth.*

She directly points out that we organise “art” as imitating what we may not be able to achieve, acknowledge, or admit in real life. It should not be ignored that Orpheus, in the traditional myth, is often seen as the first poet (an artist, of course) because of his special ability to create through his music. Therefore, Eurydice’s emptiness perhaps questions the fact that the pivot of their love is dependent on its artistic tragedy. If they are freed from the story of “love but not own,” they (especially Eurydice, as the one receiving love expressions) will lose enthusiasm for themselves, each other, and their entire lives. Such disappointment will be particularly evident for Eurydice as the object of the exertion of dominant power.

3. Conclusions

In conclusion, common ways for literary texts to re-telling the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice inherit many of the traditions of the myth itself, including approval of Orpheus’s unilateral output of “love” as the subject, lament over such tragedy, the revelatory symbolic meaning of poetry itself and the special emphasis on “look.” This paper selects *Eurydice to Orpheus* by Robert Browning and *Eurydice Saved* by Linda Gregg as examples of deviations from these traditional perspectives. It explores how these two poems express the legacy and reflection of classical interpretations, such as the tradition of faith in the validity and reliability of Orpheus’ love. Although the emotional tendencies presented in these two poems are different, they still have significant things in common when it comes to the fact that a visual regime has been established in the relationship between Eurydice and Orpheus. Orpheus can only empower their love by “looking” and losing. This indicates his role as the dominant one while Eurydice is given the status of the object being looked at and shaped.

In *Eurydice to Orpheus*, although Eurydice is granted a small voice to communicate her feelings in this poem, she continues to use Orpheus’ “look” as a vehicle to demonstrate her extraordinary adoration, unwavering fanaticism, and commitment to this kind of love. The reliability of love and the good things we usually expect from it become suspicious in such a case. As the real object in this ostensibly endearing story of commitment to love, Eurydice continues to be subject to the structure that Orpheus created with “look.”

In *Eurydice Saved*, for the Eurydice-like narrator, expressions of love from her partner become vacuous and superficial. She is unable to overcome the situation of only being the body in bits and pieces and is unable to develop autonomy within her own identity. This demonstrates how a “saved” Eurydice might experience a meaningless life as the one who lacks subjectivity in the relationship due to the absence of purported tragic artistry. For Orpheus and Eurydice (especially Eurydice), the lack of happiness in the traditional sense is essential to their ability to be approved as art.

The focus of this article is still limited. Considerably more future studies can be done to explore the motifs of love and power relations that other modern texts present, as well as other motifs that can be extended from the myth itself. For example, whether Orpheus (as the first poet) and his songs still have implications for poetry and poets today.

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