I

Orpheus and Aristaeus

Immemor heu! victusque animi respexit.

Forgetful alas, or overcome by passion,
he looked back.

—(*Georgics* 4.491)

Orpheus, the figure most important for understanding Virgil's *Georgics*, was many things to the ancient world. He was pre-eminently a singer of songs and a player of the lyre,[1] and this is the general character with which he was invested in all of his appearances in literature from the lyric age of Greece to the Rome of the late emperors. The most frequent story told of him is that he charmed all of nature by the power of his music, changing the course of rivers, drawing the forests after him, enchanting and taming the animals.[2] But Pindar and Apollonius Rhodius also told how he sailed on the maiden voyage of the first ship, the Argo.[3] And Virgil and Ovid told how he descended to the world of the dead, cast his musical spell over Pluto and Persephone, and thereby won back his lost bride, Eurydice, only to lose her again, tragically, by failing to observe the condition imposed on him—that, as he led her out of Hades, he not look back at her till he had reached the upper world of the living.[4]

Virgil, singing of death and rebirth, and Ovid, preoccupied with metamorphoses, went on to tell of Orpheus' dismemberment and death at the hands of the Bacchants of his native Thrace,[5] and later writers adorned this story with fantastic miracles—how the hero's head continued to sing,

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and his lyre to play,[6] how they floated downstream and out to sea to the isle of Lesbos and were eventually turned to stars in the heavens, how the Muses buried the other limbs near Mount Olympus, where to this day the nightingales sing more sweetly than in any other place on earth.[7]

So the stories clustered about the mythic and legendary figure. As the tradition developed, Orpheus was associated with more than music. He was said to have had access to the secrets of all knowledge. Plato, in the *Laws*, included him among the great culture-heroes.[8] Thereafter Orpheus was credited with the introduction of writing and philosophy,[9] of poetry and especially the dactylic hexameter,[10] of agriculture,[11] even of homosexual love.[12] He was said to be a son of Apollo, a religious leader who spiritualized the rites of Dionysus[13]—a figure, then, to reconcile the contrasting impulses of Apollonian and Dionysian.[14] He became both priest and prophet,[15] and the writings attributed to him were preserved as the basis of a mysterious cult called Orphism. His name was associated with special knowledge of the mysteries of life, death, reincarnation, and—to return to the Orpheus who charmed all of nature—with insight into the workings of the world itself.

There seems to have been little doubt in antiquity that Orpheus actually existed, although no one was likely to have thought him responsible for all the innovations attributed to him. It is perhaps a case similar to that of the Spartan Lycurgus (where a hero of the distant past became a convenient sanction for later innovations) or to that of Homer (where the songs of many generations of oral bards were shaped into works attributed to a single author). Virgil himself was eventually thought to be the author of works not his own and became, in the folklore of our Middle Ages, a kind of Stoic saint, the legendary founder of Naples, a prophet and astrologer, a wizard at the court of King Arthur. The ritual practice of consulting Virgil to foretell the future, the *sortes Vergilianae*, extends from the time of the emperor Hadrian to our own century. (For years I have consulted Virgil to predict, always successfully, what team would win the Super Bowl.)

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But whether Orpheus actually existed as one man or many, whether he was once what the mythologists of a hundred years ago seem determined to make him (the sun,[16] the wind,[17] or an earth deity,[18] a "faded god,"[19] the human psyche,[20] or a totem fox[21]), whether or not he introduced the Orphic mysteries and wrote the poems that bear his name—all of these considerations I will for the purposes of this study pass by. The sciences of comparative religion and comparative mythology have little to do with the creations of poets, as the two foremost authorities writing on Orpheus in English attest. W. K. C. Guthrie, who accepted the idea of a historical Orpheus preaching an Apollonian doctrine and destroyed by Dionysians, nonetheless said that the Orpheus myth "can be severed from all connection with religion, and moreover the artist is thinking in every case of his own composition, his poem or his vase, not of the preservation of a consistent tradition."[22] I. M. Linforth, who found no real evidence for a historical Orpheus, added, "It makes very little difference in the history of human thought whether the great and influential personalities ever actually existed in human bodies. Personalities like Zeus, Odysseus, and Zoroaster, and even Hamlet and Don Quixote, have been more important in the world than millions of men who have lived and died. Their reality is the reality of an idea, and the best that we know about them is what men have thought about them. The reality of Orpheus is to be sought in what men thought and said about him."[23]

Let us see what men thought and said in antiquity about the part of Orpheus' myth Virgil uses—the descent to Hades to rescue his wife Eurydice from death. It is a rather curious canon.

Ibycus

Orpheus' name first occurs in literature in a fragment of this lyric poet from the sixth century B.C. at the court of Polycrates of Samos. Ibycus' isolated phrase, *onomaklyton Orphēn*, "Orpheus famous of name" (fragment 17 Diehl) probably refers, not to Orpheus as husband of Eurydice

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(the tradition for that story begins, as we shall see, a century later) but to Orpheus in one of his other mythic roles, possibly that of Argonaut: one of the metopes on a frieze at the treasury of the Sicyonians at Delphi, contemporary with Ibycus, depicts the Argo readied for its voyage, with the Argonauts Castor and Pollux on horseback in the foreground, and with Orpheus (clearly named) and a second (unidentified) lyre-player in the background.

It is equally possible that Orpheus was "famous of name" in the sixth century because of his association with one or more mystery religions claiming him as their founder and purporting to have been given by him the secrets of life and death. The earliest Orphic writings are ascribed to the very period in which Ibycus was writing. Though we have only a few fragments of these, at least one of them was entitled *Katabasis eis Aidou* (Descent to Hades).[24]

Perhaps we can bring Ibycus, the Delphic frieze, and the Orphic writings together: the story of the Argo voyaging to the Black Sea has been thought a specimen of the archetypal journey of the hero to the land of the dead. Castor and Pollux may have been numbered among the Argonauts because their myth—Pollux sharing his immortality with the mortal Castor—was similarly concerned with life and death. And Orpheus, too, may have been depicted as sailing on that same voyage to the world of the dead because the *Katabaseis* that made him "famous of name" among his followers were already circulating in the sixth century.

Euripides

It is not until Euripides (ca. 480-406 B.C.) that we have what appears to be an explicit reference in literature to Orpheus losing his wife to death and descending to Hades to bring her back. Euripides' earliest surviving play, the *Alcestis*, tells a story that is almost the reverse of Orpheus' descent: Admetus, the king of Thessaly, allows his wife Alcestis to die in place of him. In the dramatic scene where death comes to take her, Admetus declares that, if he had the tongue and the song of Orpheus, so as to move the powers of hell to give him back his wife, he would have

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gone beneath the earth—neither Cerberus nor Charon would have prevented him—and brought her back (*Alcestis* 357-362).

It has been objected[25] that there is no real basis for any Orphean descent in this passage; Admetus does not say that that Orpheus descended, only that he himself would have been ready to do so, had he the eloquence of Orpheus. Other literary references to Orpheus up to this point concern themselves solely with the power of his music. Simonides, in three memorable lines (fr. 27 Diehl), gives us an almost Franciscan picture of Orpheus enchanting birds and fishes with his song. And Aeschylus (*Agamemnon* 1629-30) has his Aegisthus berate the clamoring elders of Argos for having "tongues the opposite of Orpheus, who drew all things by the joy of his voice." Of Orpheus descending they say nothing.

It is possible, then, to say that the myth of the descent developed out of a misconstruing of the passage in Euripides, aided by contemporary representations of Orpheus in art which showed him playing for the dead in Hades (and which may mean only that after his own death he continued to sing and play). Such a painting, a now-lost fifth-century Delphic fresco by Polygnotus, is described in detail by Pausanias (10.30.6).

Nonetheless it seems best to say that the passage in Euripides really does refer an Orphean descent. Admetus seems not to be indulging in fanciful speculation but to be speaking of a story with which Euripides' audience was familiar. What is unfamiliar—at least to us—in the passage from Euripides is its implication that Orpheus was completely *successful* in rescuing his wife from death. Strange as it may seem to those familiar with the tragic Orpheus of countless artists through the centuries, the Orpheus-Eurydice story may, in its original form, have been one of triumph over death, tragicomic along the lines of the *Alcestis* itself.[26]

In fact, with one apparent exception, every writer before Virgil who refers to Orpheus' descent says or implies that the mythic hero *succeeded* in resurrecting his wife.

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Plato

The Athenian philosopher (ca. 427-348 B.C.) is the "one apparent exception." In a brief passage in the *Symposium* (179), Plato's Phaedrus, citing Alcestis as an example of a shade released from Hades, says that when Orpheus descended he was given only a phantom, not his real wife, because, being a musician, he did not dare to die for his love, but contrived to enter Hades alive—and for that reason the gods had him die at women's hands. Phaedrus' fellow symposiasts apparently accept this version without qualm, but it cannot be taken by the sober as orthodox. It is a version of the myth never repeated in extant literature, and very likely nothing more than an example of Plato's private myth-making, prompted perhaps by his long-standing suspicion of music, or by an antipathy to some aspects of Orphism, or by the continued popularity of Stesichorus' phantom Helen-who-never-went-to-Troy. Guthrie refuses to take the passage as part of any mythic tradition; for him, the *Symposium* is "a dialogue full of fancies which it would be absurd to regard as simply taken over from existing mythology."[27] All the same, as we shall see, Plato's version contributes something to our understanding of how Orpheus' myth might have evolved.

Isocrates

With the Athenian rhetorician Isocrates (436-338 B.C.), Orpheus once again appears to have been completely successful in his rescuing his wife from the underworld. In an epideictic piece called *Busiris* (11.8), Isocrates criticizes one of the sophists for writing an encomium on the mythic figure of Busiris, who killed shipwrecked sailors, rather than on Aeolus, who saved them, or on Orpheus "who used to lead the dead out of Hades" (*ex Aidou tous tethneotas anēgen*). The use of an imperfect tense and a plural object here need not imply that Orpheus resurrected the dead in more than one instance (Aeolus, so far as we know, rescued sailors only once). In any case, Isocrates gives no indication that Orpheus ever failed in his journey to Hades.

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And the phrase "used to lead the dead out of Hades" leaves us with the suspicion, hard to dismiss, that Orpheus was in the fourth century primarily the founding father of a cult that promised its initiates reincarnation.

Palaephatus

Fragments of a *Peri Ariston* ascribed to a certain Palaephatus and dating probably to the late fourth century B.C., give rationalized accounts of various myths. The story of how Orpheus descended to Hades is quickly dispatched as a mere fiction: "The truth is that whenever someone returns safely from a long and dangerous journey people say that he has been saved from Hades." Myths are no mystery for Palaephatus. But even his rationalizing comment seems to support the tradition of a successful Orpheus.

Palaephatus is also the first to give Orpheus' wife a name—Eurydice, "she who gives justice far and wide." It seems a name more appropriate for a judging queen of the dead than for a woman rescued from death. So this most obscure writer in our canon suggests, as the others do, the possibility that the story of Orpheus descending might originally have been a kind of charter myth for Orphism: the founder claims to have brought from the underworld the secrets of life and death, in the person of hell's very queen.[28]

Hemesianax

The descent of Orpheus gets its fullest treatment before Virgil in a fragment from the *Leontium* of this third-century Alexandrian poet, preserved in the *Deipnosophistae* of Athenaeus (13.579 b-c). Hermesianax's work appears to have been a catalogue of amorous stories dedicated to the courtesan Leontium, presumably with the plea that, if the famous people in the catalogue were smitten by Love's arrows, the humble writer ought to be forgiven his passion. Orpheus is the first lover discussed. In seven elegiac couplets, we hear how with lyre and song he crossed Charon's reedy marsh, came face-to-face with dread Cer-

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berus, persuaded the rulers of Hades to restore his Agriope to life, and brought her back.

The account clearly continues the "successful" tradition. It seems as well to support, once more, the view that the myth began as part of the Orphic cult: it gives Orpheus' beloved the name Agriope, "she of the savage face."[29] Even if, as some have thought, this name is merely a fancy of the author, perhaps metathesized from Argiope ("she of the shining face"), it is a title, again, more appropriate to Persephone than to Orpheus' wife.

Moschus

In the "Lament for Bion" attributed to the second-century Alexandrian poet Moschus, the author says (115-126) that he longs to descend to Hades, as Orpheus and others did, to see his comrade Bion once more. He bids Bion play a Sicilian air in Hades, for Persephone is a Sicilian and loves music; therewith he might win his way back to the upper world, for even as Persephone once gave Orpheus his Eurydice, so might Persephone restore Bion to his native land. The "Lament," widely known in the Hellenistic world, once again implies that Orpheus successfully returned from the underworld with his wife. And it restores to Eurydice the traditional name she will in literature henceforth always bear.

Diodorus Siculus

Our last literary passage, before we come to Virgil's *Georgics*, is from the *Bibliotheca Historica* of this first century B.C. antiquarian. After tracing Orpheus' birth and parentage and mentioning the myths of his musical prowess and service aboard the Argo, Didorus tells (4.25.4) how Orpheus dared for the love of his dead wife to descend to the underworld, enchant Persephone, and lead his wife out of Hades, just as Dionysus had done for his mother Semele, changing her name to Thyone. The descent of Orpheus is again a successful one, and the reference to Dionysus might again suggest that the myth originated in Orphic ritual.

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Greek myths are almost invariably older than our oldest surviving literature. But the myth of the descent of Orpheus seems, from the evidence, to have evolved in a literary age—a relatively late one in Greece—and to have been given its definitive version in Rome, as late as the *Georgics*. No extant author before Virgil tells the story of Orpheus' tragic backward look. Not one even hints that any condition was put on Orpheus when Hades restored his wife to him. Virgil appears to have fashioned a new and tragic version of the story, the version that was to become canonical.[30]

There is, however, a familiar piece of Attic sculpture, a marble relief older than most of our passages from literature,[31] which *is* widely thought to depict, and does indeed seem to depict, the tragic moment when Orpheus looks on and loses his Eurydice. In this Attic relief, Orpheus, identifiable from his Thracian fox-cap,[32] has let his lyre sink to his side as he gently brushes the veil from the face of a full-bosomed woman; she looks into his eyes and lays her left hand tenderly on his shoulder, while her right hand is firmly clasped by winged Hermes, come take her back to the world of the dead.

So we come to an impasse. A literary tradition in which Orpheus successfully restores his Eurydice to life seems to be contradicted by a single and very beautiful work of art, as old as the oldest writer in the literary tradition, in which Orpheus appears to be looking on Eurydice and losing her.

There have been few attempts to account for the discrepancy.[33] It seems best, in the light of the literary evidence, to say that the Attic relief portrays, not Orpheus looking on Eurydice and losing her, but Orpheus being granted a vision of immortality, perhaps of Persephone, in Hades. That is what our literary canon implies—that the descent myth was originally a charter myth in which Orphism's reputed founder was given, in some shamanistic experience, a glimpse of the mystery of life after death. The cult's secrets could thus be sanctioned as having come from the lips of the founder himself, returned from the dead to reveal them.

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Some idea of the contents of the earliest, and now lost, Orphic *Katabaseis* may be inferred from third-fourth-century A.D. Orphic tablets found in graves in the South Italian cities of Petelia and Thurii. These give instructions for the soul on its journey to the afterlife. The soul first pleads its case before the queen of Hades:

> I have sunk beneath the bosom of the Mistress,
> the Queen of the Underworld.
> And now I come a suppliant to holy Persephoneia,
> That of her grace she send me to the seats of the
> Hallowed.

And Persephone answers:

> Happy and blessed one, thou shalt be god instead of
> mortal.[34]

If this is the path once traveled by Orphism's founder, perhaps Eurydice, "she who gives justice far and wide," was at first the very queen who judged the soul after death. Perhaps initially Orpheus descended to Hades to bring back for his followers the secrets of that afterlife, and Eurydice was the revelation given him there.

The tablets, though of course much later than the original *Katabaseis*, certainly suggest the possibility of this being the case. And unexpected support for the case is provided by the scornful Plato, of all the authors closest in time to the Attic relief: his Orpheus is shown a *phasma*—a phantom or, possibly, a vision—in Hades. What do we see in the relief itself? Orpheus removes a veil from a beautiful woman as she looks into his eyes; he is already turning to depart, and she is held firmly by Hermes, the escort of souls. The relief seems designed to say: thus did Orpheus, in a privileged moment, learn the secrets of life and death.

Then, we may suppose, the myth evolved as it was taken up by the poets in our canon (and almost surely by others whose writings we do not have). Prompted by details in other mythic descents to Hades—our authors actually

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refer to Dionysus' rescue of Semele, and Hercules' rescue of Alcestis—poets told of Orpheus bringing back from Hades, not some revelation of its secrets, granted by its queen, but rather bringing back a woman he loved. Orpheus, no longer associated solely with revealing mysteries to his initiates, became a lover and a hero who rescues his wife.

But Orpheus' story had still further possibilities.

Virgil wanted a symbolic postlude for his *Georgics*. Orpheus must have seemed the mythic figure best suited to his purposes. Orpheus' songs, like Virgil's own, were sung for trees and animals. His rituals were, like Virgil's poem, concerned with both agriculture and the mysteries of life and death.[35] Only one element seemed lacking. In other myths that told of the seasons, of the crop cycle, and of the annual death and rebirth of the land, the dead person—Persephone, Castor, Adonis—is allowed to return to earth only for a time. Orpheus' wife, in the tradition, was restored on no such terms. To turn the Orpheus-Eurydice myth into a story suited to his purposes, Virgil needed more than his predecessors had provided. Did he dare to change the Orpheus myth?

A great artist never touches on myth without developing, expanding, sometimes even radically changing it. The Greek tragedians appear to have changed their mythic materials every time they adapted and re-adapted the stories of Orestes, Oedipus, and Medea. Goethe radically changed, for his special purposes, the Faust legend: defying centuries of tradition, he saved the man who had irreversibly damned his soul. Wagner, adapting Norse and Germanic sagas for his *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, reconsidered and reordered his materials, conflating them with Greek myths, changing the ending of his world-destruction myth five times. Virgil seems also to have changed the myth he chose for the ending of his *Georgics*: his Orpheus is no longer successful in bringing Eurydice to the upper world. Breaking a taboo imposed on him by Hades, Virgil's Orpheus looks back on his Eurydice on the return journey to the coasts of light, and loses her.[36]

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Virgil may have derived this new version from some Hellenistic source now lost to us.[37] Romantic lovers in classical myth are by and large an invention of Hellenistic times. (Jane Harrison assured us long ago that "it may be taken as an axiom in Greek mythology that passionate lovers are always late."[38]) But Virgil's new version of the Orpheus myth is more than a romantic love story; it corresponds to a widely disseminated folk motif,[39] found in widely different cultures, from classic Greece to medieval Japan to—in an astonishing number of versions—the native tribes of North America. Jungians will say that a story which surfaces so many times in such widely different cultures was not disseminated but is archetypal: it corresponds to impulses felt in the collective unconscious of all cultures. Small wonder that the new, tragic version of the tale of Orpheus' descent has superseded all the previous versions and fascinated poets, artists, and composers through the intervening centuries.

I like to think that Virgil derived the idea of a tragic Orpheus, looking on his Eurydice and losing her a second time to death, from seeing, in some Roman copy, the Attic frieze. (Rainer Maria Rilke was moved to write his poignant *Orpheus, Eurydike, Hermes* after seeing the copy of the frieze in Naples in 1904.) The three figures so strikingly etched in stone might well have suggested to the poet who had written Eclogue 5 (about the death and rebirth of Daphnis) and Eclogue 8 (about the destructiveness of human passion) an ending to the myth that would express his concerns in a new and beautiful way. There is of course no way of proving any of this. There is only the fact that, in many cases, the definitive versions of myths have been fashioned by great artists.

Virgil also seems, if we except the curious account of Plato, to have been the first to have added to the myth of Orpheus' descent the quite separate tradition, long familiar in art, of Orpheus' dismemberment and death at the hands of Bacchantes. His Apollonian hero meets a Dionysian end and combines in himself aspects of both contrasting divinites. Apollo's lyre had, ever since Homer, been

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emblematic of nature's harmony. Dionysus' dismemberment and death, and the scattering of his limbs, had long symbolized for his initiates the divine power in nature that brings annual rebirth to the world. The slaying of the young and beautiful king to give fertility to the land was one of humankind's oldest and most mysterious rituals.[40] These strands would be part of Virgil's new Orphean poem on agriculture and illustrate one of its major themes—that in nature creation and destruction are held in immutable balance.

A final innovation of Virgil's—at least it is a detail never used by the predecessors in our canon—is the initial death of Eurydice by snake bite. The serpent as the cause of evil is of course another archetypal symbol, and Virgil was not unaware of its symbolic uses. In the "theodicy" prominently placed near the beginning of the *Georgics* (1.125-45), Virgil includes the serpent as part of a divine dispensation: when Jupiter ended the Golden Age on earth, he put poison in the serpent, so that man, rising to the challenge, might learn to survive. Earlier, in his fourth eclogue, Virgil predicted the birth of a boy who would restore the Golden Age when the serpent would die (4.24); the new, idyllic age would be one of, in Tennyson's phrase, "summers in the snakeless meadow."

Virgil was fascinated by reptiles: serpent imagery pervades the scenes of the destruction of Troy in Book 2 of the *Aeneid*, and in Book 3 of the *Georgics* (414-39) the description of the Calabrian water snake runs on for fifteen lines: he is a lurking menace to be killed before he poisons the flock. The serpent that attacks Eurydice is described much more briefly—he is a hydra secretly guarding the riverbank—but his symbolic significances are clear enough: the mythic world in which Orpheus and Eurydice are wed is an image of our own, not-yet-perfect world, a place in which unforeseen and lethal dangers threaten disease and death.

Though the Virgil who had written the *Eclogues* was already skilled in the use of such symbols, he attempted something more at the end of the *Georgics*—an extended narrative that would interlay his symbolic ideas and con-

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trast them. His predecessor Catullus and (perhaps even more, but the loss of the works makes it impossible to say) his close friend Gallus had shown him how such a symbolic narrative might best be written. They had used the Alexandrian form we now call the epyllion, a hexameter poem that elaborately structured a myth within a contrasting myth.[41] Virgil had in Orpheus his central, tragic myth. He now needed an outer story—an optimistic story, preferably new and somehow connected with agriculture—in which to set his new Orpheus myth.

He found the hero for his outer story in Aristaeus, the demigod who tended crops, sheep, and bees and helped country folk when they called on him in need.[42] And here again Virgil seems to have made significant changes for his new purposes. He made Aristaeus an immature hero, still on his way to godhead. His Aristaeus might almost be the boy he sang of in the fourth eclogue, grown to adolescence, with much still to learn. Virgil had said of the boy (*Eclogues* 4.48-49):

> adgredere o magnos (aderit iam tempus) honores
> cara deum suboles, magnum Iovis incrementum!

> Pass on to your great honors—the time will soon
> be here—
> beloved offspring of the gods, grown to greatness
> under Jove.

For the hero of his outer story, Virgil had a fair amount of material to choose from. Aristaeus was the son of Apollo and the nymph Cyrene.[43] Pindar's ninth Pythian ode, honoring a victorious athlete from the city of Cyrene, tells of Aristaeus' parentage and birth at some length. His mother Cyrene was the daughter of the king of the Lapiths, with a river god (Peneus) and a naiad (Creusa) for grandparents. Cyrene, uninterested in womanly concerns, preferred to protect her father's herds by hunting wild beasts with arrows, sword, or whatever weapon came to hand. When Apollo saw her wrestling with a lion on Mount Pelion,

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he called the wise centaur Chiron, asked who the marvelous maiden might be, and wondered whether it would be right for him to lie with her. Chiron smiled, for he knew Apollo had every intention of winning the girl. He then told Apollo: "You will bear her over the sea and gather island people around her and make her queen of a city on a hill. Libya will give her lands filled with all kinds of fruits and animals. And she shall bear you a son who shall feed on nectar and ambrosia, and have the names of immortal Zeus and sacred Apollo and Agreus and Nomios, for he shall shepherd flocks. And others shall call him Aristaeus."

So Apollo carried Cyrene off in a golden chariot to the north coast of Africa, where in time a great city overlooking the sea came to bear her name, and where she gave birth to Aristaeus. The boy, like many other young heroes, was given a special education far from home. In Apollonius Rhodius (2.500-27) we read that Apollo, after rewarding Cyrene with the status of nymph and the gift of immortality, took the boy back to the centaur Chiron to be reared in his mother's Thessaly. There Aristaeus learned Chiron's arts of healing and prophecy, while the Muses made him shepherd of their flocks. He also discovered the care of the olive tree and—this is important for Virgil—the art of beekeeping (4.1132-33).

The fullest account of Aristaeus' myths is found in the *Bibliotheca* of Diodorus Siculus. In addition to many of the details provided by Pindar and Apollonius, we read in Diodorus (4.81-82) how the oracle of Apollo sent Aristaeus on an errand of mercy: the peoples of the Cyclades were suffering from a plague caused by the onset of Sirius, the Dog Star. The boy traveled to the island of Ceos, sacrificed to Sirius, and raised an altar to Zeus, who sent the Etesian Winds for forty days, then and every year thereafter, to refresh the islands. The plague was lifted. For this miraculous deed, and for teaching men the arts of husbandry, Aristaeus was given honors equal to a god's. And in time the young demigod did become a god. His further travels, although dimly sketched in the sources,[44] clearly represent the spread of a cult: with the help of his mother he

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journeyed from Lybia to Sardinia, Sicily, Arcadia, Corcyra, Euboea, and (in the entourage of Dionysus) Thrace, where at last he disappeared in the Haemus mountains and was never again seen by humankind.

Before Virgil used him for symbolic purposes in the *Georgics*, Aristaeus was best known for having married Autonoe, a princess of Cadmus' royal family in Thebes. The outcome of this was tragic: their hunter-son Actaeon was turned into a stag as punishment for having looked on Artemis when she was bathing and was torn apart by his own dogs. It is certainly ironic that the father who averted the onset of the Dog Star should have a son so ill-fated, but that—for we must end this somewhere—is another story.

In art Aristaeus is usually represented as a young shepherd, often with a young sheep in his arms.

In this minor but very attractive figure, Virgil had for the outer story of his epyllion an adolescent hero, protector of flocks and trees, famed for averting plague, associated (like his father Apollo and his mentor Chiron) with healing and prophecy, and eventually worshipped far and wide for his benefits to mankind. Small wonder then, that, without naming him explicitly, Virgil invokes Aristaeus as one of the twelve gods in the long prayer at the start of the *Georgics* (1.14-15):

> et cultor nemorum, cui pinguia Ceae
> ter centum nivei tondent dumenta iuvenci.

> And I invoke you, too, cultivator of groves, for whom three hundred snow-white steers graze Cea's rich thickets.

But as with Orpheus, so with Aristaeus Virgil makes surprising changes in the traditional mythology. Although no crime had apparently been associated with Aristaeus before, Virgil would make him guilty of one and have him atone for it. And while his new Orpheus was to fail in his attempt to bring Eurydice back from the dead, his new Aristaeus would meet, out of *his* failure, success in restoring life to nature.

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If, as I hope to show, Virgil's new Orpheus, deeply aware of human failure, was to become a figure for Virgil himself, the new Aristaeus—repentent, credited with revivifying powers, a hero on his way to godhead—was meant as a figure for a man who had to atone for his past, restore to life a fallen republic, and move onwards to become Divus Augustus.

Can we say that Virgil's Aristaeus is thus emblematic of young Octavian? Didorus Siculus had said:

> Men of old have handed down to later generations two different ideas about the gods. Some, they say, are everlasting and immortal, such as the sun and the moon and the other stars in heaven, and the winds and all else that shares in a nature similar to theirs. For each of these the generation and the life are everlasting. But other gods, they say, are earthly beings who became gods. Because of their good services to mankind they attained to immortal honor and glory—men such as Heracles, Dionysus, and Aristaeus. (6.1.2)

Diodorus singles out three culture heroes who became gods. Virgil, when he came to write the *Aeneid*, would compare the mature Augustus to the first two of these. And possibly he would do so because, in the earlier *Georgics* he had made the third, Aristaeus, a figure for the young Augustus—Octavian, on his way to godhead.

It is to that historical personage that we now turn.

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