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ORPHIC VARIATIONS IN SCENES OF CLERICAL LIFE
By Kenichi Kurata

What shall I do without Euridice? / Where shall I go without my love? / Euridice! Euridice! / Oh god! Answer me! / Yet I am true to you! / Euridice! Euridice! / Ah, I can find no more / help nor hope, / in the world or in the heavens!!

This is from Orfeo’s climactic aria, *Che farò senza Euridice*, in Gluck’s opera, *Orfeo ed Euridice* (1762). That the tune may sound too graceful to suit the desperate words can be explained by Orfeo’s awareness of the means he has ready to hand of being reunited with Eurydice: he can cross the river Styx again by killing himself. At the moment of this declaration, contrary to the original myth, personified Love intervenes and Orfeo recovers Eurydice for the second time.

What I would like to suggest in the following paper is that this myth of Orpheus’ descent to the underworld provides a paradigm that enables us to follow the patterns of desire in Eliot’s early fiction, through the reading of its employment in ‘Mr Gilfil’s Love-story’. Gluck’s Orfeo was originally played by a castrato, and the gender of the role has continued to be treated ambiguously. Therefore it is not unnatural that Caterina in ‘Mr Gilfil’s Love-Story’ should express her feminine desire by singing this aria in the drawing-room of Cheverel Manor: Caterina as Orfeo is lamenting the loss of Anthony as Euridice.

Certainly, *Che farò* is ‘Sir Christopher’s favourite’ (p. 240), but the song he specifically requests (p. 142) and asks for an encore (p. 143) is a different one, *Ho perduto il bel sembiante*, which suggests an emotional investment in *Che farò* on Caterina’s part: it is her personal choice within her repertoire, whereas generally she has to sing to order (p. 171). Moreover, while both songs in ‘which the singer pours out his yearning after his lost love, came very close to Caterina’s own feeling’ (p. 143), it is the *Che farò* which is especially praised, ‘Excellent, Caterina […] I never heard you sing that so well.’ (p. 143) That the aria is sung again later in a significant manner, together with the fact that Eliot shows her recognition in the article, ‘Liszt, Wagner, and Weimar’, that it was Gluck who reformed the opera in order fully to integrate the sung parts into the plot, encourages us actively to read into the aria’s signification within the context of the story.

Singing and playing are Caterina’s *raison d’etre*, as they are for Orpheus. ‘This unexpected gift made a great alteration in Caterina’s position […] Insensibly she came to be regarded as one of the family, and the servants began to understand that Miss Sarti was to be a lady after all.’ (pp. 160-1). It is ‘the one thing in which she ceased to be passive, and became prominent’ (p. 195). Some see the etymology of the name Orpheus as common with the word orphan, which is the status of Caterina herself, and the inheritance of musical talent from her father can be compared to Orpheus’s having received his lyre from his father Apollo. But there is also a superadded meaning to her singing: ‘it was her one point of superiority, in which it was probable she would excel the hightborn beauty whom Anthony was to woo; and her love, her jealousy, her pride, her rebellion against her destiny, made one stream of passion which welled forth in the rich tones of her voice’ (p. 143). Like Orpheus, she uses her power as an artist to rebel against fate.
that deprives her of her object of desire, which in turn intensifies and gives emotive power to the expression of this desire.

In the first scene, the implication of the aria is thus unambiguous, but when the same aria is sung again by Caterina after her flight and discovery, its purport becomes equivocal.

Caterina was singing the very air from the Orfeo which we heard her singing so many months ago at the beginning of her sorrows. It was ‘Che farò’, Sir Christopher’s favourite, and its notes seemed to carry on their wings all the tenderest memories of her life, when Cheverel Manor was still an untroubled home. The long happy days of childhood and girlhood recovered all their rightful predominance over the short interval of sin and sorrow.

She paused, and burst into tears – the first tears she had shed since she had been at Foxholm. Maynard could not help hurrying towards her, putting his arm round her, and leaning down to kiss her hair. She nestled to him, and put up her little mouth to be kissed.

The delicate-tendrilled plant must have something to cling to. The soul that was born anew to music was born anew to love. (pp. 240-1)

Some critics read this scene as a happy one, such as Andrew Thompson in George Eliot and Italy and U. C. Knoepflmacher in George Eliot’s Early Novels. If we look at this scene from Gilfil’s perspective, he himself is a veritable Orpheus, having lost and struggled to find his Eurydice, and true to the original myth, will lose her again. It can be said that at another level he had lost his childhood sweetheart to Anthony, but will finally regain her. Also, it is as if he is regaining a lost Eurydice when he sees Caterina recovering consciousness after having fainted (p. 215). So in the passage in question, he would naturally be identifying himself with Gluck’s Orfeo in the aria, suspended between the loss and recovery of Eurydice. Whether the Caterina whom he encounters now is the once lost or the twice lost Eurydice makes little difference, since Eurydice is none other than the name for the object of desire that is lost, almost found and lost, over and over again, which can be seen as the point that Gluck is making.

Our sympathy towards Gilfil would prompt us to think that Caterina, too, comes to see herself as a Eurydice and assume her position as Gilfil’s object of desire. Nevertheless, the story as a whole seems to reject this interpretation. It is impossible to believe in the narrator’s claim here that the aria brings back to her ‘all the tenderest memories of her life, when Cheverel Manor was still an untroubled home’, and that ‘The long happy days of childhood and girlhood recovered all their rightful predominance over the short interval of sin and sorrow’. Firstly, it must be impossible for Caterina at this stage to sing this aria without recalling what she had felt the last time she sang it with an intense emotional investment. It may take her back to the time before ‘the short interval of sin and sorrow’, or rather the point from which it started, but it is hard to imagine that it could take her beyond that. Moreover, just as Maggie’s childhood was far from golden and contained all the germs of her future troubles in The Mill on the Floss, Caterina’s childhood can hardly have been ‘happy’ or ‘untroubled’. Her difficult position as a foreign orphan girl, adopted but not as a daughter to be given the foster parents’ ‘rank in life’ (p. 152), would have deeply troubled her identity construction as she grew up, which probably
found expression at first in ‘a certain ingenuity in vindictiveness’ (p. 158), and later in music. This would have lain at the heart of the ménage-à-trois, which has its roots firmly in her ‘childhood and girlhood’. Though Caterina only met Anthony ‘Once or twice in [her] childhood’ (p. 163), while Gilfil had spent his vacations with her ever since she was ‘no more than seven’ (p. 161), the heir of the manor would have struck her at a very early stage as the one who could redeem her from this indeterminate position. After the first Che farò in the drawing-room, Caterina looks ‘like the ghost of some former Lady Cheverel come to revisit the glimpses of the moon’ (p. 144). The possibility of becoming a future Lady Cheverel is constantly haunting her, and when that possibility is terminated by Anthony’s death, it is as if her failure to complete the work of mourning for it virtually haunts her to death.

Caterina’s later rendition of the aria, too, can be seen as a surrender to this haunting desire, since her figure there is described in terms of ‘A genie soaring with broad wings out of [little Ozzie’s] milk-jug’ (p. 240). Her Orphic song is itself a spectre of her unattained desire. This image of letting out the content of a vessel can be related to the series of her childhood gestures which can be seen as protests against the confinement of her position: ‘She held an empty medicine-bottle in her hand, and was amusing herself with putting the cork in and drawing it out again, to hear how it would pop’ (p. 151) when her father died, and she poured ink (probably from an ink-pot) and threw down ‘a flower-vase’ (p. 158) at the manor. She never had ‘her say out’, for she never found a voice to speak, but only a voice to sing, and the only chance she gives herself to confront Anthony (p. 210) is lost by his death.

If Eurydice stands for the unattainable object of desire that one finds and loses repeatedly, the actually twice-regained Eurydice would be nothing comparable to that unattainable object. We can look ahead to Hetty’s disenchantment in Chapter 34 of Adam Bede when she learns that Arthur has left her, and comes to feel that there is nothing left in her life but to marry Adam. Caterina’s regained Eurydice in the sun, Gilfil, is no way comparable to the Eurydice she had lost in the darkness, Anthony. She cries because she regains consciousness of the loss of her object of desire, of ‘something to cling to’, for which Gilfil is an available substitute. While certainly Caterina cannot do without Gilfil, and has nowhere to go but to him now, the aria is still haunted by Anthony who has descended to the underworld. On their marriage, in contrast to the beaming Gilfil, ‘there was a subdued melancholy in [Caterina’s face], as of one who sups with friends for the last time, and has his ear open for the signal that will call him away’ (p. 241). We may not read too much into the male gender here, but this does suggest that she figures as an Orpheus who is ready for his own death in which he will be reunited with Eurydice, rather than as a Eurydice who is about to be dragged back to death: it would not be appropriate to compare Eurydice enjoying Orpheus’ company to a man ‘who sups with friends’. Caterina’s eyes in the miniature probably made after her marriage still speak of sadness (p. 130).

I would like to point out in addition that there is also a strategically seductive side to Caterina’s second rendition of the aria: she is inviting Gilfil to identify himself with her desire for an object that is irrevocably lost and therefore impossible to obtain, and moreover, withdrawing herself as the object of desire for Gilfil by confirming her primary desire for another in the same gesture. This complex strategy of seduction I believe is what ultimately makes the scene so emotive.
Though there are no direct references, other early works by Eliot can also be read in relation to the Orphic myth. ‘Mr Gilfil’s Love-Story’, which tends to be slighted as the kind of romance by silly women novelists that Eliot herself criticized, should be re-evaluated as an important piece that sets the paradigm for her early works.

‘The Sad Fortunes of the Rev. Amos Barton’ is the prototype of ‘Mr Gilfil’s Love-Story’, in so far as Amos as Orpheus comes to lament the loss of Milly as Eurydice. Also the sullying of his reputation is compared to ‘the rapid spread of Stygian blackness’ [my italics] (p. 88); he sinks together with his wife, but they are redeemed at the cost of her loss. Parting from Shepperton thus becomes twice-losing his Eurydice: ‘To part from that grave seemed like parting with Milly a second time’ (p. 112).

‘Janet’s Repentance’ too can be seen as a variant of ‘Mr Gilfil’s Love-Story’: just as Caterina loses Anthony and is saved by Gilfil, Janet loses Dempster and is saved by Tryan. But Tryan, the sound of whose name, together with his past, suggests his underlying capability to be a tyrant, is but the double of Dempster or Anthony. The episode from Tryan’s youth is also Orphic: he re-encounters his lover, only as a twice-lost corpse. Before Tryan dies, he looks onto the Christian world of death: ‘I shall not look for you in vain at the last’ (p. 410). Like Orpheus he will finally be reunited with his Eurydice in the afterlife.

‘Worldliness and Other-worldliness: The Poet Young’, an essay which was conceived before ‘The Sad Fortunes of the Rev. Amos Barton’ and finished before starting on ‘Mr Gilfil’s Love-Story’, can be read as a comment on what I am bringing together here as the Orphic variations in Eliot’s early fiction. The main theme of *Night Thoughts* is the Orphic lament at the loss of the poet’s wife. Eliot sees it as tainted by Young’s appeals to the patron (worldliness) and pompous didacticism (other-worldliness), which are tendencies not unfamiliar to Amos. The following passage can be seen as none other than what Eliot actually makes happen in her first piece of fiction.

In a man under the immediate pressure of a great sorrow, we tolerate morbid exaggerations; we are prepared to see him turn away a weary eye from sunlight and flowers and sweet human faces, as if this rich and glorious life had no significance but as a preliminary of death; we do not criticise his views, we compassionate his feelings. And so it is with Young in these earlier Nights. There is already some artificiality even in his grief, and feeling often slides into rhetoric, but through it all we are thrilled with the unmistakable cry of pain, which makes us tolerant of egoism and hyperbole [...].

*Adam Bede* can also be seen as an extended version of ‘Mr Gilfil’s Love-Story’ in which its tragic side is given stress. Adam’s setting out in search for Hetty recalls Gilfil in his search for Caterina. It can be said that Adam both finds and loses Hetty at the same time by finding out that she has been arrested. Figuratively speaking, he loses her again when he later accepts the fact that she is guilty, but regains her through Dinah’s pastoral care and the meeting on the morning of the execution. Moreover, he recaptures her in the form of Dinah, who had all through the novel been presented as Hetty’s ghostly double, or her ‘lovely corpse’. Arthur too can be seen as an Orphic figure when he rides at full speed to obtain a pardon, recapturing her from death. That Hetty is deported beyond the waters to Australia and is irrevocably lost just
when she is coming back to England is directly suggestive of the Orphic myth. Like Caterina, she is successively lost and found and lost, over and over again. If we reverse the picture and see the story from Hetty’s point of view, drawing it nearer to ‘Mr Gilfil’s Love-Story’, we can see an analogous and aggravated situation of the aspiring Hetty who, like Caterina as Orpheus, wanders in search of Arthur, who is like Anthony as Eurydice. As is the case with Caterina, the regained Eurydice is nothing comparable to the glory that had seemed to have been offered by the original Eurydice.

‘The Lifted Veil’ too can be seen as an alternative version of ‘Mr Gilfil’s Love-Story’, where Bertha like Caterina attempts to kill Latimer, whose heart is weak like Anthony’s, out of jealousy. On the other hand, that Latimer figuratively loses Bertha as a mystery by his insight might be compared to Gilfil’s literal loss of Caterina: the ménage-à-trois can thus be seen as being reflected onto itself and compressed into a dual relationship. Mrs Archer’s resurrection is a terrible caricature of the Orphic myth: she is called to life and is lost again, only to reveal the murderous intentions of Bertha, and the impossibility of repairing their relationship. The sequence which started out with the loss and mourning of the angelic Milly as Eurydice has thus come full circle.

While I do not claim that Eliot must have consciously had the Orphic myth in mind in the course of writing these stories, I believe it can be said that the structure of the problematics in her early works can be best described with reference to this myth in ‘Mr Gilfil’s Love-Story’. The theme can be seen as having developed into a prominent feature in the later works, the theme of suspended desire, which I am in the course of analysing in my PhD thesis entitled ‘Desire and its Vicissitudes in George Eliot’s Fiction’, drawing on theoretical elaborations on the nature of desire by G. W. F. Hegel and Jacques Lacan.

Notes