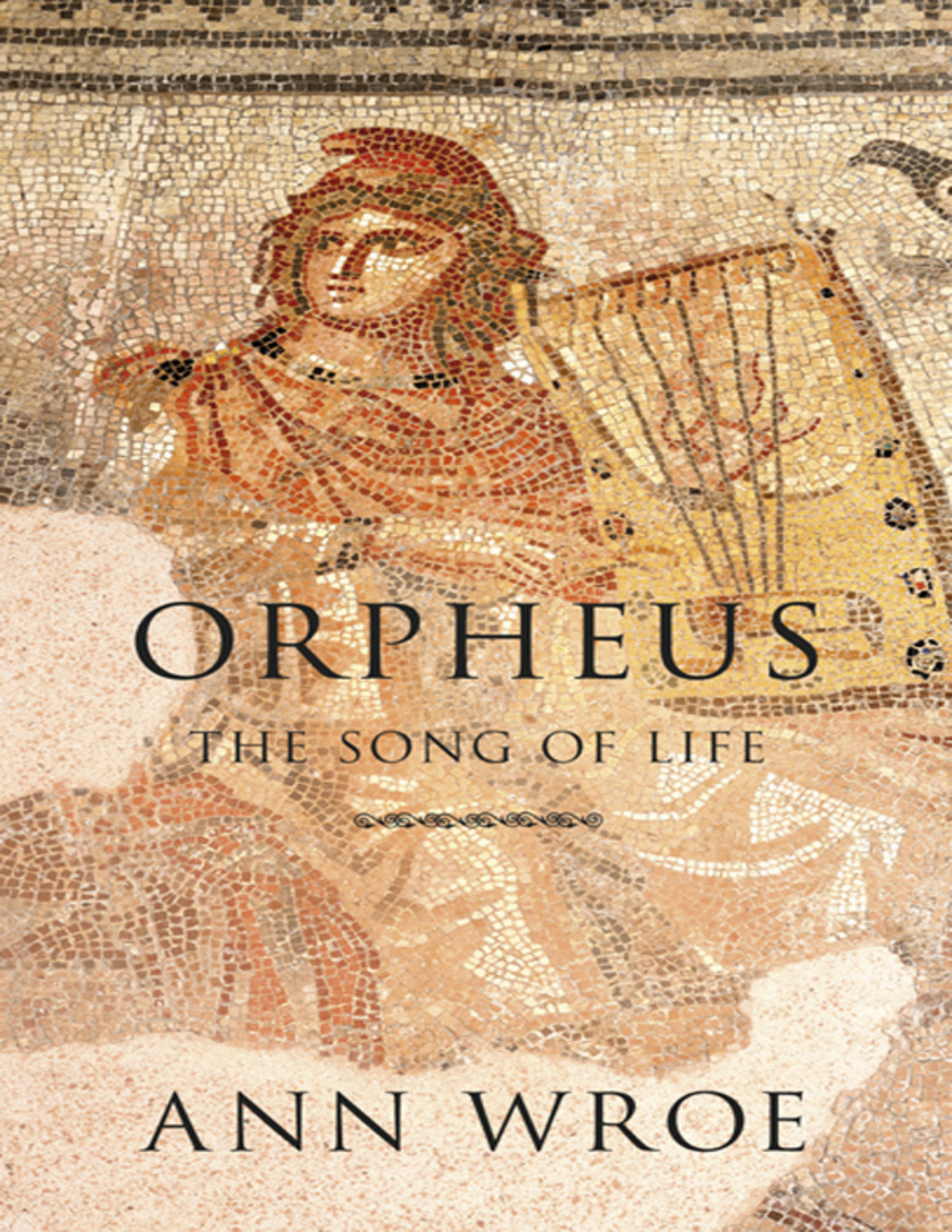


A mosaic depicting Orpheus, a figure from Greek mythology, playing a lyre. He is shown from the waist up, wearing a red and orange patterned tunic. His head is turned slightly to the right, and he has a serene expression. The lyre is large and yellow, with black strings and a decorative frame. The background is a mix of tan and light brown mosaic tiles. The overall style is classical and ancient.

ORPHEUS

THE SONG OF LIFE



ANN WROE

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About the Book

For at least two and a half millennia, the figure of Orpheus has haunted humanity. Half-man, half-god, musician, magician, theologian, poet and lover, his story never leaves us. He may be myth, but his lyre still sounds, entrancing everything that hears it: animals, trees, water, stones, and men.

In this extraordinary work Ann Wroe goes in search of Orpheus, from the forests where he walked and the mountains where he worshipped to the artefacts, texts and philosophies built up round him. She traces the man, and the power he represents, through the myriad versions of a fantastical life: his birth in Thrace, his studies in Egypt, his voyage with the Argonauts to fetch the Golden Fleece, his love for Eurydice and journey to Hades, and his terrible death.

We see him tantalising Cicero and Plato, and breathing new music into Gluck and Monteverdi; occupying the mind of Jung and the surreal dreams of Cocteau; scandalising the Fathers of the early Church, and filling Rilke with poems like a whirlwind. He emerges as not simply another mythical figure but the force of creation itself, singing the song of light out of darkness and life out of death.

About the Author

Ann Wroe is the Briefings and Obituaries editor of *The Economist*. She is the author of six previous works of non-fiction, including *Pilate: The Biography of an Invented Man*, which was shortlisted for the Samuel Johnson Award and the W.H. Smith Award. She lives in north London.

Also by Ann Wroe

Lives, Lies and the Iran-Contra Affair

A Fool and his Money: Life in a Partitioned Medieval Town

Pilate: The Biography of an Invented Man

Perkin: A Story of Deception

Being Shelley: The Poet's Search for Himself

This book is dedicated to everyone who protested, 'But
Orpheus isn't *real*.'

ORPHEUS

The Song of Life



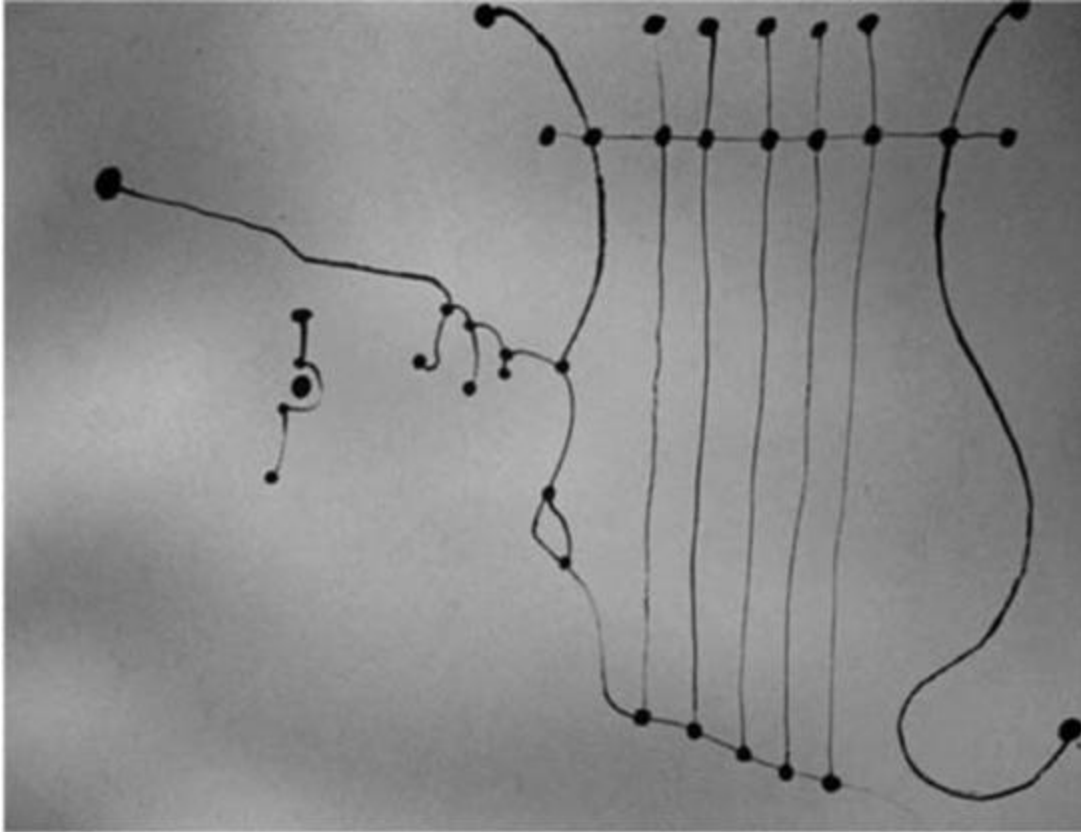
Ann Wroe



JONATHAN CAPE
LONDON

‘That is the essential: to see everything *within* life itself,
even the mystical, even death.’

Rilke



Orphée (title sequence), 1950

First string: Winter

On the morning of February 2nd 1922, Rainer Maria Rilke went up to his study and shut the door.

He was a slight man with large blue eyes that seemed, on cold days, to brim continuously with water. With a handkerchief, he dabbed the tears away. Neatness was in his nature. He wore a perfectly knotted tie; for his morning walks along empty country lanes, a homburg carefully brushed, and a cane in hand; well-shined shoes. His drooping moustache was meticulously clipped, hiding a sensual mouth above a weak, timid chin.

For his first five years his parents had named him and dressed him as a girl. They had then dispatched him to a

brutal military academy. The damage was lasting. Against the odds he had become an Austrian poet of distinction, whose books by 1914 sold in thousands and went into several editions. But he retained a certain delicacy, an air of shyness, that hid his steel resolve and drew protective and passionate women into his life. One of them, Merline Klossowska, had helped him find this place to work in: a small, square fortress called the Château de Muzot, without electricity or running water, in the foothills of the French Alps.

The study looked out on the pretty woods and vineyards of the Valais, now winter-bare. It answered his longing for 'a room of my own, with a few old things and a window opening onto great trees'. Dark oak beams spanned the ceiling, low enough to make him duck instinctively as he paced about, though he was not tall. Beside the window was a standing-desk, made exactly to his specifications, at which he always wrote. In this room, as he had pledged in 1906, he would 'kneel down and stand up daily', alone, 'and keep holy all that befalls me.'

All was in order. He was ready. The candlestick on the bookcase, the new glass-lidded box for tacks and pens razor-straight on the table, the porcelain vase standing exactly where it had stood before, though it held no roses now, for those were past, or yet to come. Somewhere on the bookshelves lay a French prose version of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, recently reread. Rilke had been steeping himself again in the story of Orpheus, the magician-singer of the ancient world, his love for Eurydice and his descent to Hades to rescue her. A Renaissance engraving of Orpheus by Cima da Conegliano, reproduced on a postcard, was also pinned over his desk. Merline had spotted it in a local shop. It showed a young man in page's clothes, under a spreading tree, singing sadly to a *lira da braccio* while two deer listened. It reminded Rilke, though he needed no reminding, of his mission as a poet.

It also helped preserve the memory of a young friend, Vera Knoop, who had died two months before. She was nineteen, and had suffered from a baffling glandular disease. For years she had astonished people with her dancing and her 'dark, strange, fiery loveliness' until, at the end of childhood, she suddenly told her mother that she would not dance any more. In her last weeks Orpheus had begun to haunt her: invisibly playing music to which she raised her tired, wasting arms, gently pushing the pencil with which she tried, wearily, to draw.

But Rilke would not think of her this morning. He was trying to finish a great symphony of poetry, his *Duino Elegies*, which sang of the sublime, violent interaction between angels and men. After ten years of neglecting it, inspiration was beginning to stir again. He dared not risk losing or unsettling it.

Consciously empty yet anticipating something, 'wrapping myself more and more closely round my heart', he took up his station at the standing-desk.

And suddenly, Orpheus was there.

The singer of singers. To Rilke he needed no introduction; to us, perhaps, he does. We demand a curriculum vitae, a flyer or a calling card. Instead he brings music and the wind with him, and no information.

His origins are lost. In the beginning he was perhaps a vegetation god, a deity of growth, death and resurrection. Hence 'Orpheus', by one derivation: dark, obscure, out of the earth. But godhead gradually slipped away from him, leaving only a sense of election and the power, through his music, to change landscapes, seasons, hearts.

To the Thracians, among whom perhaps he really lived thirty centuries ago, he was a king, a shaman and a traveller through the realms of the dead. To the ancient Greeks he was the first singer of holy songs and the founder of their mysteries, an enchanter who could make

the stones skip, the trees dance and birds waver in the air. (He still can; ask him.) He was the companion of the Argonauts and their priest on the voyage to find the Golden Fleece: a teacher of beauty and order who was eventually torn apart, in Thrace, by followers of the wine god Dionysus and devotees of chaos.

By the fifth century BC he had acquired a wife, Eurydice, and when she died he went down to Hades, armed only with music, to bargain for her with the rulers of the Underworld. But the Greeks hardly cared for this part of his story. It was the Romans, especially Ovid and Virgil in their poetry, who made of him a lover so ardent that he challenged death. Both his love and his art were pitted against annihilation, and though he failed, they became immortal. That is mostly why the world remembers him.

In this guise of sweet singer, lover and loser, Orpheus has wandered through history. Poets, artists and composers have constantly evoked this figure, and still do. But the teacher and philosopher was not forgotten by Renaissance Florence or the nineteenth-century theosophists; the magician and spell-binder, familiar to the Greeks, was remembered by alchemists until Newton's time; his adventure in Hell was allegorised as the journey of the soul by Boethius in the sixth century AD, as well as by Freud and Jung in the twentieth. For at least sixteen centuries Christians easily imagined him, with his miracles and parables, his redeeming power and his bloody, sacrificial death, as a forerunner of Jesus, though preaching with song in the forests of ancient Greece rather than the deserts of Judaea.

To some degree you could argue that each age revisits him. Yet none puts its stamp on him definitively, because the young man with the lyre is different for everyone who meets him. Each encounter makes him anew, until it is clear that the vulnerable human figure still conceals his

most primal incarnation: the pulse of creation, the song of life, then, now, always.

Perhaps you have heard his footstep – perhaps Rilke heard it. But it is rare to do so. His feet are bare, or strapped in light sandals, or cased in boots of soft fawn-skin turned over at the top in the Thracian style. The leather is thin because he needs to tap the ground, or feel it, as he plays. And it is thin because he has journeyed so far towards us.

Greek Orpheus is naked but for a *chlamys*, a short cloak, which usually drapes him from the waist. It has no certain colour, though poets think it blue. His head is uncovered, his long dark ringlets held back with a wreath of laurel, or ribbon, or gold thread. In his eastern guise he wears a striped dalmatic over baggy trousers and a gold *tiara*, or Persian turban, the mark of a prince. Thracian Orpheus wears leggings stitched along the side-seam, a warm, thick cloak clasped at the right shoulder and a cone-shaped Phrygian cap, proper to wanderers, countrymen and radicals, that is often revolutionary red and sometimes sown with stars.

The first mention you will find of him, and the earliest certain painting, date from the sixth century BC. The painting, in black-figure on a Greek vase, shows him stepping up to a platform with pointed toe, dancing, in a pleated robe and with a huge lyre that seems to be part of him. The lettering around the figure cries 'Hail, Orpheus'. The written fragment, by Ibycus, calls him 'famous'. As far back as we can trace Orpheus he is celebrated, a star. In fact, he may have been pictured long before he was named: on a clay vase from Crete of the thirteenth century BC, and on a plaque of the same age from Syria-Palestine. On each his lyre was oversized, denoting divine power; on both, charmed birds flew to his playing, as if drawn down by magnets from the sky. The Cretan vase showed him crested and beaked, a bird himself, or an avatar of song.

He has never left men's consciousness since. But it is a strange sort of haunting. The evidence for him lies in tiny fragments: a line here, a mention there, *dubia vel spuria*, as the scholars say. Orpheus roams Western civilisation much as balladeers, hurdy-gurdy men, pipers and storytellers used to travel the back roads of America and Europe. Possibly he has come even further, from ancient India, where a god of hunting or fishing spread a net that became a lyre of enchantment, to catch men's souls. He has no certain roots, but keeps returning, as if he has something urgent to transmit to us.

Inevitably, his home is out of doors. He needs, as Rilke put it once, 'the open country, wide ways, barefoot wanderings on soft grass, on hard roads or pure snow, deep breathing, listening, silence and the hush of evening'. He never stays. He is a shadow in the doorway, a face outside the window in the night rain, begging not for bread or coins, but for attention. When we hear him, time stops and for a moment everything is changed; but then he moves on.

Homer's epics never included him. Aristotle said he had never lived. Cicero wrote as though he agreed, calling Orpheus's hymns 'fairy stories'. 'Now how', he added, 'can I form a mental picture of someone who has never existed? Yet Orpheus, or the image of him, often enters my mind.' Socrates, about to drink the hemlock, mused joyfully on the possibility of talking with him in Hades. It was precisely because Orpheus was a proper, flesh-and-blood man 'and not a wind', wrote Claudio Monteverdi, that people were moved by his story. Hard proof was always lacking. But in truth he existed – he exists – wherever he is thought of, believed in or imagined. Chaucer saw him in his House of Fame, sitting in a niche in a turret of pure beryl, playing 'ful craftely'; Wordsworth saw him in 1806 in Oxford Street, his back to a sooty wall, playing the violin to a crowd of apprentices, cripples and bakers' boys, 'twenty souls happy / As souls in a dream'. As Rilke was to write of the unicorn,

at Orpheus's dictation, 'It was not, but love / brought it to be, and men always left space for it.' They left space for him.

His face may be a man's or a boy's; you cannot tell. It bears a youthful fuzz of stubble, the cynosure of male beauty for the Greeks, but also the lines of grief and experience. His eyes are deep as pools, and watchful; his eyebrows thick, his nose straight. You will notice his hands, fine, strong, long-fingered, as a pianist's are: the nails trimmed squarely, the knuckles tested and flexed, and with a sense of fluttering movement in them, even at rest. A quick pencil line will catch him, as Jean Cocteau drew him for the opening frames of his film *Orphée* in 1950, joining dot to dot to make his profile, finishing with a star. Or a thin brush will snare him, moistened with spittle and dipped in black paint, on the curve of a terracotta vase. Near the Temple of the Winds in Athens is a shop with dozens of such vases, of every size, stacked among the Acropolis T-shirts and the football flags that stir in the breeze from the hot, dog-wandered street. You may buy a perfect Orpheus there, and then a better and still better one, his bent black head outlined with white, his dark eye serious, and with strange heart-shaped laurel leaves garlanding his hair. In a smoke-filled room not far away, men and women are painting more, on an oilcloth-covered table under a flickering TV screen. Brow, nose, chin, the singing mouth, the hands, the lyre.

That face was drawn throughout the Roman Empire, on door jambs and tympanums, in bedrooms, on garden walls. Philostratus the younger, walking through a gallery in Naples around AD 240, paused to admire a painting of him:

Orpheus sits there, the down of a first beard spreading on his cheeks, a *tiara* bright with gold tall on his head, his eye tender, yet alert and divinely inspired as his mind ever reaches out to divine themes. Perhaps even

now he is singing a song; indeed his eyebrow seems to indicate the sense of what he sings, and his robe changes colour with his movements ...

Orpheus with a charmed stag was painted in the Domus Aurea, Nero's palace, and his face was on the red-gloss trays; Hadrian had a mural of him captivating Cerberus, the three-headed dog-guardian of the Underworld. But he was also on the beechwood cups carved for the shepherd Damoetas in Virgil's *Eclogues*: cups far too fine to drink from, offered as a singing prize, kept under lock and key in a smoky cottage in the hills. His image was on rings, wine vessels, mirrors, plates and medallions. It appeared on coins struck in Thrace, his supposed country, and in Alexandria, where some thought he had studied.

Most of all, from the mid-second century, it was laid in villa floors. His face was made of tiny tesserae piled, arranged and grouped by colour: black for the outline, red for the open, singing lips, white and brown for the eyes that stared on divine things. At Arae Flaviae (now Rottweil, in south-western Germany) 750,000 tesserae were ordered to make his long white robe, his cloak clasped at the shoulder, his pale hands plucking the lyre and his glance, tender, passionate and surprised, at the raven listening to him. The workmen whistled; Orpheus appeared. Though long ago he had been dismembered, he was reconstructed and he lived. In mosaics at Brading on the Isle of Wight, Palermo, Jerusalem, Woodchester on the Welsh borders, Paphos, Hanover, Tarsus, Sparta and Vienna he plays still, the plectrum in his right hand, the strings set ringing with his left, while animals circle around him. He is so ubiquitous that it would be no surprise, taking the path through a little wood near Sudeley in Gloucestershire where Roman floors still lie beneath the brambles, to find in a timber cloche, under a tarpaulin, the leaves dark and crowding overhead, his singing face.

His eyes seldom look at you. When he sings, he stares heavenwards; at rest, his glance is elsewhere. Rilke, though gradually possessed by Orpheus – unable to leave his standing-desk for that pressure, that presence – feels and hears him, rather than endures his gaze. Atheneus called him a ‘semi-god’, but he seems too shy for that: polite but removed, by choice a loner. No vanity is in him, as far as appearance goes. He does not look in mirrors, though he knows what they show is true: the self and the world seen from the other side, by clear-eyed Death. Mirrors belong on his altars, objects of ritual and respect. He wears no ornaments, save perhaps a ring of agate engraved with a tree, which, by his own account, will make him pleasing to the gods. He can never be too pleasing, never too close.

Little seems essential to him. He carries no provisions for his wanderings, and if they are offered he will probably refuse them. A piece of sooty, flaky barley-cake, fresh out of the fire, and a cup of water are all he requires. Food impairs the voice, obstructs the throat; he prefers to sing and practise fasting, with just a swallow of milk and honey, holy food, to give the smoothness he needs. He abstains from the eggs of birds as ‘living things’, though his imagery of the beginning of creation is the cloudy membrane of an egg breaking, spilling out light. Wine he sips only as a cautious, meditative act, since the mixing of wine and water in the bowl is a metaphor for the creation of mortal things; or because it represents the cup of wisdom and self-surrender offered to souls, if they will drink. Hand him an apple, as Rilke was to do, and it will become – as if by magic – a totem of invisible things: a tree at the edge of the Libyan desert, and a nymph’s raised white arms; a memory of a table, a bowl, the play of the light, in another place; a shiver of *Tod und Leben*, death and life, as the hard flesh is crushed into sweetness. He turns it into mind-food, as

poets do. Only after this, which is the work of a moment, will he eat it in the ordinary way.

Meat he refuses, both as food and offering, because the gods do not need blood sacrifices – and because meat-eating, like flute-playing, binds a man to the sensual world. While others slice meat on bread, he prefers a little thyme, or cress, or saltwort. He stays cool, while others are heated or excited by eating flesh. Beans he abominates, believing that they corrupt the breath of the body (turning it into a hollow, trumpeting pipe of filth) and seeing them, with their twisting stems and white moon-flowers, as ways for the ancestral dead to climb back to the upper world. He does not wear wool, because it is the coat of something living. His taboos seem as capricious as a teenager's, or as those of some Pacific islander who will not sleep beneath the breadfruit tree because of some ancient, half-remembered curse. But he has barricaded them behind philosophy, and he holds fast to them.

Above all he carries his lyre, a hollow shell with curved arms and a cross-bar, strung with seven strings. It is perhaps the very one first made by Hermes, the trickster-god, its mottled shell shiny with use and the dark gut strings mellow to his touch. Or it is Apollo's, the sun god's own instrument, of gold fretted with ivory, as the Greeks imagined. It contains all poetry and all songs. It is engraved, with broken strings, on the tombstone of Keats; it decorated the box that held Haydn's skull; it represents all poets, all trees and the world itself, when the divine wind plays. With this cradled in his arm or hanging from its travelling strap, he needs no eye contact and no words. He may play softly even as you talk to him, too absorbed for ordinary chatter. Music feeds him. His lyre has grown into his body like another layer of the heart. They beat together.

This would have been the first sound he heard: his mother's heart, deep and regular, through the walls of the womb. By tradition she was Calliope, 'beautiful-voiced', the

loveliest and first of the nine Muses, Memory's daughters. She was a singer of epic poems and creation-hymns whose melodies, too, he would have heard in the blood. After the cataclysm of his first breath, the slap on his back, the swift singer's baptism of honey smeared on his lips, those songs would surround him again, closer and louder now, as he nuzzled the breast. They pulsed in his ears with the first sweet flow of milk into his softly plugged mouth. In fifteenth-century Scotland, Robert Henryson imagined it:

Quhen he was borne schoe set him on hir kne
And gart him sowke of hir twa palpis quhyte
The sweit licour of all musike parfyte.

Afterwards, laid down in some womb-dark cave or chamber of an enchanted mountain, he heard more. The fire hissing; the creak of his cradle; a caged bird above him, whose swirl of notes caused his tiny body to jerk, clench and start. Round the entrance of the cave the wind blew with a sound as solicitous as breathing.

Exactly where this happened was unknown. It was assumed to be in Thrace, north of Greece, in that inhospitable region of plain and mountain wedged between the Danube and the Aegean: on Mount Pangaion, or Mount Helicon, or the Pierian heights where the Muses lived, all peaks on the Greek side of the Rhodope mountains that were linked to inspiration, and to him. Yet the south-central region of the Rhodopes, now in modern Bulgaria, claims him most passionately. To the people here – the man with a hoe on horseback, tickling his steed with a leafing branch, the girl in glasses driving a dirt-spattered cow, the old woman in a sunhat, pausing on a forest road with her arms full of roses – these are 'Orpheus's mountains'. On road signs, his lyre is shorthand for him. Here a cobbled Orpheus Street runs up the hillside among rusty Ladas and wild cats; there an Orpheus Restaurant tempts you, with

drifting wood-smoke and a new Coca-Cola sign; there, at the Orpheus Resort and Spa, he plays beside an ornamental pool that is domed and blue-tiled like a Persian palace. At Shiroka Luka he sings from the wall of the music school, while at Kardzhali his lyre, in angular steel tubing, stands at the main crossroads. But it is tiny Gela, four miles from Shiroka Luka up a steeply winding road, that claims the honour of his birthplace. Perhaps eighty souls live here, in a handful of houses in high alpine meadows rimmed by castellated mountains. Every year they hold a bagpipe-playing contest in which satyr-music swirls again round the slopes of Mount Orpheus, named in his honour. And at the highest point of the village, in a grassy playground with a tyre-swing, low football nets and an abandoned Soviet army truck, Orpheus's lyre made from logs and string catches the wind from the valley, while the Bulgarian flag flaps behind it.

So much for where. But when his childhood happened was even more mysterious. According to one of Orpheus's 'own' books, *Lithica*, or *On Stones*, in which (Diodorus said) he 'revealed a little about himself', he seemed to have been born about a generation before Homer, around 800 BC, though when Homer had lived was also cloudy. In the age of the heroes Orpheus sang alongside them, teaching Heracles and sailing with him on the *Argo* to fetch the Golden Fleece. Plato, in his *Laws* of 350 BC or so, thought Orpheus's 'discoveries' had been made 'one or two thousand years ago'. That sort of date, around the thirteenth century BC, was favoured centuries later by Bulgarian archaeologists who felt sure he had really lived. But it was never quite as simple as that. His name, with its ending in -eus, suggested that he belonged to an age the Greeks considered mythical. Both the Sibyl and Moses were said to be old when he was born; but then both music and language seemed to be very young. Time slipped and slid around him, unanchored by any fact that could be

verified. Perhaps it did not matter. 'Where does our story take place, and when?' asked Cocteau at the start of *Orphée*. 'It's the privilege of legends to be ageless. *Comme il vous plaira*. As you please.'

Nature taught him in his earliest days, with sounds he alone seemed to hear. To his child's ears, everything was amplified. A drop of water, trickling in a grotto, made a note shriller and sharper than a drop falling to the earth. The stream beneath the banks, half-caught in overhanging stems, sang more noisily than the open water. He described the nymphs swimming, 'oblique' and 'swift-soaring' in the chanting current, with light cascading through their bodies: light he could not catch, although he tried to. More nymphs haunted the grass, where a small child could find them, or flickered in damp openings in the rocks, 'visible and invisible'. He saw the dew that clothed them and heard their high, faint song before they vanished, 'travellers of the winding roads', white limbs into white air.

Above him the firs of the forest sent out high, sighing complaints, while the broad oaks sang leafier and low. Rain and thunder made colossal battle-music, grey doves the sound of sleep, the owl of the night-shades one keen, swooping interval that pierced his heart. It was generally believed, said Theophilus, that Orpheus learned his music from the birds. His small voice, piping after theirs, filled with all the secret stories of the earth. In summer the invisible cicadas sang their two-note dirge, surviving from the time before music came into the world. He could also hear the spider spinning notes higher and further as its web stretched out between the thistle stalks, pulled from its own innermost heart, diamonded with dew. At the edge of the grasslands, music passed from tasselled reed to reed as the wind sighed through them. He heard fruits rounding on the branch, flower-stems unsheathing from the soil; the creak and tinkle of ice feathering across a pool, and the fall, note by hushed note, of the snow. Beneath it all hummed the

tone of the mountains in their jagged majesty, the bass-line of his life.

He was given his lyre when he was still a child, barely taller than the frame. Calliope, steadying him, showed him how to chant like her as he played. All his poet's art, and much of his mystic wisdom, was apparently learned from her. Her hair was loosed from its dark wreath of ivy as she sang, falling over him in waves like the long, silvered leaves of the willows by the river. Music was also mother-comfort, enfolding him in the soft thrill of the mother-voice. By her singing, he knew, the nine daughters of Pierus had been turned into chattering magpies, flashing white, blue and black in the garden before they flew into the bowl of the sky.

In particular (Homer thought) Calliope sang of Apollo, god of song and the sun: his eyes alight beneath his golden helmet, his face and hair radiating glory, bright Aether robing him in fire. With Aether's golden chains, Orpheus sang later, Apollo bound the world as Zeus bound all creation. It was not the usual small child's rhyme; but he was no ordinary child.

Apollo may even have taught him, as the god himself had been taught by Hermes. The little Thracian boy, twirling joyously in some patch of forest sun, held up his arms to the song god, who gave him an instrument that thrilled with his own brightness. Rainbows clung to it, breaking out of the white glare. Rays became strings, with sacred song encoded in them. A golden hand seized his fingers, crooking them the right way around a plectrum edged with light. Mysteries were passed down, as well as music. But this he was to understand later.

Some thought Apollo was in fact his father, and he a sun-child. This was the earliest story of his origin. If it was true, he may have learned from him the giving of oracles, the taming of eagles, the luring of wild beasts, and how to heal. In his *Lithica* Orpheus was explicitly Apollo's son, leaping

always and instantly to his command to 'sing a poet's song out of my breast'. But Apollo had human failings too, and even human experience. For a year, as a punishment, he had tended sheep for a human master. He loved unwisely, was frightened, raged, wept. Orpheus often came across his tears, streaking the petals of wild larkspur or shining as beads of amber on far-away shores. The sun god wept over the world to which he had been forced to descend. But, like a mortal, he could do nothing to change the Fate that had been spun for him.

As commonly, Orpheus's father was said to be Oeagros, King of Thrace. His name meant variously 'the hunter', 'the sheep-herder' or 'the lone dweller in the fields'. The incongruity of this boorish, rustic father was caught by Jean Anouilh in his play *Eurydice* of 1942: he made Oeagros a second-rate travelling harpist totting up his receipts in a railway café, while his elegant, high-minded son played the violin beside him. Somehow, a Muse had taken a human for a lover. No physical evidence firmly connected Orpheus to the country that Oeagros ruled over; he might more plausibly have been, as *The Sandman* graphic series made him in the 1990s, the son of Oneiros or Morpheus, the god of dreams. But in sixth- and fifth-century Greek imaginations Thrace was always his, the strange and distant 'other' place, the winter-land.

From the end of the sixth century BC – just as Orpheus himself emerged by name in the world – a royal house and a warrior aristocracy had come into existence there, drawing their wealth from the wide eastern plains. Gold vessels and masks of astonishing beauty, some traded, some looted, some home-produced, were buried with Thracian kings in towering earth mounds. Contacts with Greece brought in bronze and silver wine-vessels, wine itself, Greek fashion in dress and ornament, and the use of written and spoken Greek at court. Fifth-century Athenians made Orpheus something like this, half-Thracian and half-

Greek. According to Iamblichus, he spoke Doric, the oldest and best of the Greek dialects, with ringing enharmonic tones that coloured both speech and music. But he could equally be imagined, with a northern twang, playing with boys called Tralis, Skindax or Tokes, ruddy-faced and red-haired, like most Thracians. As a boy of noble birth he was branded, though in Greece that was the mark of slaves; whether or not he was the sun's son, he might wear a wreath of delicate gold leaves and tattoos of sun-discs on his arms.

His father's subjects lived in one-room huts or chambers underground, the walls lined with clay or wolf-skins. Rough hemp made their clothes; their leggings chafed them as they moved. They used grey pottery, with high looped handles and zigzag patterns, and fastened their cloaks on the shoulder with double-looped bronze *fibulae*, or safety-pin clasps, as Orpheus usually wore his. Their diet was mares' milk and barley-bread, greyish and full of chaff. They worshipped Ares, the war god, Artemis, the moon goddess of light, and Dionysus, the god of growth and vines, whose cult had started either in Thrace or in Crete. They loved war, and were given to drinking sessions where barley-beer or unmixed wine was quaffed out of horns in a single breath, 'Thracian-fashion'.

The Odrysians and Bistonians were the tribes that Oeagros traditionally ruled over. He taught them mystic rites, Diodorus said, and passed these on to his 'quite exceptional' son. But he was also at times a wine god, at times the god of the sorb-apple tree, and on occasion the god of the River Hebrus that flowed through his own cold kingdom, past the green swan-haunted banks where Orpheus played.

That son may have been the only good thing to come out of Thrace. Virgil and Ovid both agreed that there was nothing worth praising in the grassy plains and the cold,

lowering mountains. 'The cattle are kept in the stalls there,' shivered Virgil:

Not a blade of grass appears on the plain, not a leaf on
the trees;
But as far as the eye can reach the earth lies, her
features lost
Beneath snowdrifts and ice to a depth of seven fathoms.
It's always winter, always the cold nor'-easter blowing.
And worse, the sun can never break through the wan
gloom there -
Not when his horses draw him up to the height of
heaven,
Not when his chariot brings him to bathe in the blood-
red sea.

The Pirin and Rhodopes ranges, which bordered the immense steppe, were crusted half the year with snow. Firs, pines and hornbeam covered the northern slopes of the mountains, pines and oak the southern. Six varieties of oak grew in the forest: the broad-leaved *Quercus pubescens*, with leaves easily twisted into garlands, became Orpheus's sacred tree. Thyme perfumed the barer places. At times clouds lay below the pine-clad peaks, misting off them in bright white plumes as though they were on fire. Hermits and wanderers also lived in the forest, 'walkers on smoke' who kept to a diet of cheese, milk, honey and narcotic plants, and who knew healing charms. They sang as they wandered the stone-strewn paths. Thracian shamans were famous before Orpheus, linking the worlds of the living and the dead and surviving beyond the grave as *anthropodaimones*, man-daemons. They observed the stars, knew their names and courses, and could predict their effect on men. When the gods possessed them they could fly through the clouds, and dive under the sea; they could charm wild beasts and birds,