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Virgil's Orpheus Reenacted: Tsvetayeva, Rilke, Pasternak

> „A letter is like an otherworldly communication, less perfect than a dream but subject to the same rules."
>
> From Tsvetayeva's letter to Pasternak, November 19, 1922.[1]

In the fourth Book of his *Georgics,* Virgil became the first poet of classical antiquity to claim that Orpheus failed in his quest to bring Eurydice back from the underworld[2] (*G.* 4. 485—503):

And now, as he was carefully going back
The way he came, and step by step avoiding
All possible wrong steps, and step by step
Eurydice, whom he was bringing back,
Unseen behind his back was following —
For this is what Proserpina had commanded —
They were coming very near the upper air,
And a sudden madness seized him, the madness of love,
A madness to be forgiven if Hell but knew
How to forgive; he stopped in his tracks, and then,
Just as they were just about to emerge
Out into the light, suddenly, seized by love,
Bewildered into heedlessness, alas!
His purpose overcome, he turned, and looked
Back at Eurydice! And then and there
His labor was spilled and flowed away like water.

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[1] Pasternak 2001: 40—41.

[2] On the Orpheus tradition see Lee 1996 who, however, suggests that Virgil might have used a Hellenistic source (now lost) for his version of the story, since tragic lovers have become a popular subject in Hellenistic times (Lee 1996: 12).

> The implacable tyrant broke the pact: three times
> The pools of Avernus heard the sound of thunder.
> 'What was it,' she cried, 'what madness, Orpheus, was it,
> That has destroyed us, you and me, oh look!
> The cruel Fates already call me back,
> And sleep is covering over my swimming eyes.
> Farewell; I'm being carried off into
> The vast surrounding dark and reaching out
> My strengthless hands to you forever more
> Alas not yours.' And, saying this, like smoke
> Disintegrating into air she was
> Dispersed away and vanished from his eyes
> And never saw him again, and he was left
> Clutching at shadows, with so much still to say.
> And the boatman never again would take him across
> The barrier of the marshy waters of Hell.[3]

Thereafter the theme of Orpheus's Underworld journey was inextricably linked with the themes of longing and loss, of love (and memory) being elusive. As a result, Virgil's version of Orpheus' story exercised a tremendous influence on the subsequent poetic imagination, leading sometimes to real-life creative relationships unconsciously reproducing the constellation of mythical heroes.

In summer 1926, the Russian poet Marina Tsvetayeva begins writing letters to the poet Rilke. She falls in love and insists on a meeting. But Rilke is, at that time, affected by a terminal disease and dies during their correspondence, slipping out of her reach. She reacts with a magnificent tragic poem on the subject of the Underworld. When we look at their extant letters and poems, it seems that the poetic trio (Tsvetayeva, Rilke, and Pasternak who introduced them) have mysteriously repeated that summer the pattern of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, albeit with a gender twist: the role of Orpheus falls to the woman poet Marina Tsvetayeva, and that of Eurydice to Rilke.

As has been shown by scholars, a story of a singer descending into the Underworld can be encountered in many cultures, including Japanese and Native American folk-tales.[4] As Owen Lee states:

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[3] *Georgics* 4. 485—503. Trans. David Ferry, in Ferry 2005: 179—180.

> 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.[5]

But, apart from the collective unconscious, the personal unconscious of a poet is certainly a repository of myths and poems that he has read or heard of. And when more than one poet is present, a myth may repeat itself, without any of the participants becoming consciously aware of it.

The story of Orpheus and Eurydice inspired many poets, including Rainer Maria Rilke (1875—1926). In his poem *Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes*, written in 1904, Rilke describes the gloomy, morbid, yet eerily beautiful landscape of the Underworld, with its "mines of souls," unmoving forests, meadows, bridges, gray lakes and pale paths:

> That was the so unfathomed mine of souls.
> And they, like silent veins of silver ore,
> were winding through its darkness. Between roots
> welled up the blood that flows on to mankind,
> like blocks of heavy porphyry in the darkness.
> Else there was nothing red.
>
> But there were rocks
> and ghostly forests. Bridges over voidness
> and that immense, grey, unreflecting pool
> that hung above its so far distant bed
> like a grey rainy sky above a landscape.
> And between meadows, soft and full of patience,
> appeared the pale strip of the single pathway
> like a long line of linen laid to bleach.
>
> And on this single pathway they approached.[6]

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[4] See Lee 1996: 12.

[5] Lee 1996: 12.

[6] Transl. Leishman in Rilke 1964: 143.

"They" in Rilke's poem is not only Orpheus who is proceeding first, forbidden to turn, but also the god Hermes who is following him and leading Eurydice out of Hades — a constellation of three participants that must have been inspired by the Roman copy of an Attic relief depicting Hermes, Eurydice and Orpheus that Rilke saw in the National Museum in Naples, Italy .[7]

Many years later, after receiving an unexpected letter from Rilke, Marina Tsvetayeva wrote to him (on May 12, 1926) about her reaction to his poetry when in the 1910s she used to hungrily devour Rilke's poems in Moscow:

> The Beyond (not the religious one, more nearly the geographic one) you know better than the Here, this side, you know it topographically, with all its mountains, and islands, and castles. A topography of the soul — that's what you are.[8]

But how did this correspondence come about? What made Rilke, one of the most famous poets of his time, write letters to the much younger Russian poet Tsvetayeva (1892—1941), who at that time was living in exile and was largely unknown to the Western world?

The three-party letter exchange started in 1926, thanks to the poet Boris Pasternak (1890—1960), who, many years later, in 1958, would win the Nobel prize, but would be forced by the Soviet government to decline it. His father, a famous painter, Leonid

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[7] Lee 1996: 134. He also mentions the possibility that that same relief might have inspired Virgil (Lee 1996: 12.). However, as Brodsky remarks, claiming that the relief inspired the poem would be "of self-defeating consequence" (Brodsky 1997: 376), since the poem is not about it, but about estrangement: "On the whole, what lies at the core of 'Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes' is a common enough locution which… goes approximately like this: 'If you leave, I'll die.' What our poet, technically speaking, has done in this poem is simply cross all the way over to the far end of this formula. That's why we find ourselves at the outset of 'Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes' squarely in the netherworld." (Brodsky 1997: 377).

[8] Cited in Pasternak, Yevgeny, Yelena Pasternak, Konstantin Azadovsky (editors), *Letters: Summer 1926: Boris Pasternak, Marina Tsvetayeva, Rainer Maria Rilke*. New York Review Books, 2001:114 This collection of letters of the three poets is referred to throughout my essay as Pasternak 2001.

Pasternak, became acquainted with Rilke when Rilke visited Russia in 1899 with his Russian friend Lou Andreas-Salomé. In 1926, the acquaintance was suddenly renewed when the painter Leonid Pasternak emigrated (his son Boris stayed behind in Soviet Russia). The older Pasternak asked Rilke to kindly write a letter to his son, because Boris was an admirer of Rilke's work. Rilke obliged; Boris Pasternak not only enthusiastically thanked the poet, but asked him to write to his friend and Rilke's fellow admirer Marina Tsvetayeva, who at that time was living in France:

> I dare to wish — oh, please, please, forgive me this audacity and what must seem an imposition — I would wish, I would dare wish, that for her part she might experience something akin to the joy that welled in me thanks to you. I am imagining what one of your books, perhaps the *Duino Elegies*… would mean to her, with an inscription by you. Do, please, please, pardon me! For in the refracted light of this deep and broad fortuity, in the blindness of this joyful state, may I fancy that this refraction is truth, that my request can be fulfilled and be of some use? To whom, for what? That I could not say. Perhaps to the poet, who is contained in the work and who goes through the courses of time by different names.[9]

Anticipating my argument, I would say that in the constellation of the three poets, Pasternak played the role of Hermes Psychopomp, the mediator, the god who brings souls over to their destination, the carrier, the *trans-lator*.

Pasternak's role as a mediator may be reflected in the fact that, not coincidentally, Pasternak became an important translator, in addition to being a poet and a prose-writer. According to Pasternak, the miracle of a translation lies in "the happy recognition of the oneness, the identicalness of the lives of those three and many, many others (eyewitnesses of three epochs; participants; readers)."[10] He started translating Rilke already in his early youth,[11] although it was Tsvetayeva who wrote down, in a letter to Pasternak, a beautiful meditation on the art of translation, eerily echoing the image of a Charon or of a Psychopomp: "But 'translate' has another meaning: to translate not only *into* (into Russian, for example) but also *to* (to the opposite bank of the river). I will translate Rilke into Russian, and he, in time, will translate me to the other world."[12] It must be noted that later in the correspondence, the conversation of the three becomes a dialogue of the two: Tsvetayeva excludes Pasternak from the passionate letter exchange between her and Rilke, despite the fact that, if it were not for Pasternak, Rilke would have never written to her. But Tsvetayeva, in her own words, wants to be Rilke's only Russia,[13] while affirming that "Russia is to me still a kind of Beyond."[14] A third is not needed in this Beyond: it is almost as if Tsvetayeva is making Hermes disappear from the relief in the Museo Nazionale in Naples that Rilke has seen, creating a different version of the encounter, with Orpheus and Eurydice only (as in Virgil).

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[9] Pasternak 2001: 66—67.

[10] Pasternak 2001: 149.

It would seem logical, then, that, given the centrality of the image of Orpheus for his entire oeuvre, a reader or a critic of Rilke might be led to see the great poet as a kind of 'German Orpheus.'[15] For Rilke (as follows from the poem mentioned above, as well as from a later collection of 1922, *Sonnets to Orpheus*), the mythological figure of Orpheus was that of the archetypical poet, or rather, the name of the spirit of poetry — the spirit inherent to each poet experiencing a poetic inspiration.

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[11] "In Pasternak's university notebooks we find, interspersed with his lecture notes, his first attempts to translate Rilke" (Pasternak 2001: 27). Later he publishes his translations of Rilke, Shakespeare, and many other important poets.

[12] Pasternak 2001: 7.

[13] Pasternak 2001: 257.

[14] Pasternak 2001: 110.

[15] Thus, Tsvetayeva calls Rilke Orpheus in a letter to a friend after Rilke's death: "The German Orpheus, that is, Orpheus who *this time* has made his appearance in Germany." (Pasternak 2001: 33). On the importance of the figure of Orpheus for Rilke see Pfaff 1983. John Warden calls Rilke "perhaps the most successful in our century as restating and reintegrating the myth" of Orpheus (Warden 1982: XIII). On the Orpheus motif in Rilke's oeuvre, see Rehm 1950: 379—670.

After he read Pasternak's request, Rilke immediately (and very kindly) sent his two latest poetry collections *Duino Elegies* (1922) and *Sonnets to Orpheus* (1922) to Marina Tsvetayeva. On the edition of his *Duino Elegies* he composed the following verses for her:

"For Marina Ivanovna Tsvetayeva.
We touch each other. How? With wings that beat,
With very distance touch each other's ken.
One poet only lives, and now and then
Who bore him, and who bears him, will meet."[16]

The *Sonnets to Orpheus* were inscribed:
"To the poet Marina Ivanovna Tsvetayeva.
Rainer Maria Rilke.
May 2, 1926."[17]

The action of dedication a copy of the *Sonnets to Orpheus* to 'the poet Marina Tsvetayeva' may be seen — if one believes in the magic of words (and a poet has to believe in the magic of words) — as a symbolic transfer of the title of Orpheus to her, especially since, as Rilke mentioned in his inscription on the *Duino Elegies,* there is only one (prototypical) poet, and the actual living poet is just a vehicle for his spirit.

Tsvetayeva responds with a very enthusiastic and highly poetic letter. Her writing is full of admiration and love for Rilke the poet and Rilke "the spirit." In her very first letter to him, on May 9, 1926, she writes: "…you are the dearest thing to me in the whole world."[18] A few days later she sent him her book with the inscription: "For Rainer Maria Rilke, my dearest on earth and after earth (*above* earth!)"[19]

She writes to him, of course, in German, and German remains the language of their entire correspondence, considering, as Pasternak writes, "the fact that for Tsvetayeva 'German is more native than Russian,' i. e. that German was, on par with Russian, the language of her childhood, which coincided with the end of the last century <19th> and the beginning of the present <20th> one, with all the consequences that nineteenth-century German literature entailed for a child."[20] It must be noted that Rilke, thanks to the fascination with Russia that he experienced in his youth, had learned Russian (had even written some poems in that language), and could still read it at the time he was corresponding with Tsvetayeva, albeit with a dictionary. However, he confessed to Tsvetayeva that reading her poems in Russian was too difficult for him — not surprising, given their complexity even for a Russian reader.[21]

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[16] Written for this occasion; Pasternak 2001: 105.

[17] Pasternak 2001: 105.

[18] Pasternak 2001: 107.

[19] Pasternak 2001: 111.

Nevertheless, Tsvetayeva senses that she may be coming too close to Rilke, and, just a few days later, she suddenly promises not to write, despite her own longing to do so, if he doesn't want her to — almost like the mythical Orpheus promising the gods of the Underworld not to look back, despite his longing for Eurydice:

> Dear one, I am very obedient. If you tell me: Do not write, it excites me, I need myself badly for myself —
> I shall understand, and withstand, everything.[22]

This may sound like a strange promise: in the midst of her passionate declarations of her love for him, she yet promises not to write? It is not so strange if one knows more about Tsvetayeva's attitude to love. Thus, she recalls that in 1911 the poet Voloshin had said to her "When you love a person, you want him to leave you, so that you can dream of him."[23] Let us add: when you love a person, you want to turn him/her into an ungraspable Eurydice, who disappears *ceu fumus in auras* ("like a smoke into the air," *Georg.* 4.499).

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[20] Brodsky 1999: 197—198.

[21] Rilke wrote to Tsvetayeva on May 17, 1926: "…[I] still have relatively little difficulty reading letters in Russian, and from time to time see one in *that* light in which all languages are a *single* language… If only I could read you, Marina, as you read me!" (Pasternak 2001: 128).

[22] Pasternak 2001: 121.

[23] Pasternak 2001: 37.

A reader might object at this point: "Why create an impossibility where a perfectly happy love relationship might have been possible?" It is worth recalling the words of another great thinker, Simone Weil (who was probably not at all aware of these poets): "impossible love equals chastity."[24] This is why the troubadours adored an unreachable lady, and Plato wrote about the necessity for loving a supremely beautiful human being. An impossible love excludes force, excludes possession, and is therefore much closer to the realm of the supernatural. Sadness provoked by the beloved's absence or unavailability reflect the universal sadness of human condition and the inevitable parting at the end of human life. Images of parting appear in Tsvetayeva's letters to Rilke as early as June,[25] and continue into August.[26] In a different context Tsvetayeva wrote to a friend:

> Don't forget that the apparent impossibility of something is the first sign of its naturalness — in a different world, obviously.[27]

But, apart from that inner drive towards impossibility that urges the poet Tsvetayeva to create distance, there was another problem. In the year of their correspondence (1926) Rilke was mortally ill: he would die of leukemia at the end of that year. He might not have been able to write many letters purely out of physical exhaustion. Tsevataeva knew nothing of his illness, and could, therefore, interpret his silence as simply an unwillingness to write. For example, in the letter of May 17th, he wrote to Tsvetayeva about his "natural singleness," about the spaces that he "inhabited alone," but added that even his possible silence should not keep *her* from writing *to him.*

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[24] Weil 1962: 50.

[25] On getting Rilke's photographs: "Those dear pictures of you. Do you know what you look like in the big one? Standing in wait and suddenly hailed. And the other, smaller one — that is a parting. One on the point of departure who casts a last glance — seemingly a cursory one (the horses are waiting) — over his garden, as one might over a page of writing before it is dispatched. Not tearing himself away — easing himself off. One who gently drops an entire landscape. (Rainer, take me along!)" (Pasternak 2001: 179).

[26] "A train is howling. Trains are wolves, wolves are Russia. No train — all Russia is howling for you." (Pasternak 2001: 252).

[27] Pasternak 2001: 38. Her addressee was Anatoly Steiger, a young poet who was very ill with tuberculosis which would soon kill him. Like Rilke, Steiger became an addressee of Tsvetayeva most passionate love letters and poems ten years later (1936—37). Like with Rilke, they have not physically met (until later, and only once), and, like with Rilke, Tsvetayeva seemed to be calling back to life, Orpheus-like, somebody not only physically separated from her, but also slipping into the Beyond.

> All this about *me,* dear Marina, pardon me! And pardon also the opposite, if all of a sudden I should turn incommunicative — which ought not to keep you from writing to *me.*[28]

But Tsvetayeva misunderstood these words as a rejection. "Now," she wrote to Pasternak about Rilke in a letter dated May 25th,"I am suffering the tranquility of the complete loss of the divine countenance — rejection. It came of itself. I realized it suddenly."[29] Here, indeed, the beloved (the beloved known from letters and poems only, never face-to-face) disappears for the first time, and this disappearance is understood by Tsvetayeva as a complete loss, a loss akin to the beloved's death (like the death of Eurydice, and Orpheus' longing for her in the upper world).

In the same letter to Pasternak, Tsvetayeva discussed the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice on several pages. Tsvetayeva, daughter of the famous Russian classicist and archeologist, Ivan Tsvetayev,[30] was well-acquainted with classics classical mythology from her childhood, although she never studied it systematically. As Zara Torlone states in her book "Russia and the Classics":

> …Tsvetayeva's use of classical sources… was limited, by her own assertion, to the didactic moralizing adaptation of Greek myths by Gustav Schwab, *Die schoensten Sagen des Klassischen Altertums,* published in 1837, which targeted German children of the Victorian era [and which Rilke probably read as a child as well — M. R.] …Her denial of any

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[28] Pasternak 2001: 127.

[29] Pasternak 2001: 154.

[30] See Torlone 2009: 92.

> knowledge of ancient sources must be taken with a grain of salt. (…) Tsvetayeva's interest in Greek myth and tragedy was not scholarly; it was… personal, strongly related to the circumstances of her life, and intertwined with the rest of her poetics.[31]

She interpreted the Orpheus-myth, however, in a really unusual way. According to Tsvetayeva, it was Eurydice's fault that Orpheus turned:

> [Orpheus's] turning was Eurydice's fault, a fault that echoed down all the corridors of Hades. Orpheus' turning was the result of either the blindness of Eurydice's love, or her impatience.[32]
>
> Oh, how I would love to describe Eurydice: waiting, leaving, fading away in the distance.[33]

From both Virgil's and Rilke's versions of the myth we know that it was Orpheus's fault that Eurydice was lost to him: he turned, distrusting the divine word and longing to see Eurydice. In Rilke's poem *Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes*, Eurydice had barely any agency at all: all she (her shade) did was follow the god Hermes, and then return to the Underworld, obedient to the gods' word. In Virgil's version, however, she did pronounce the words of woe before disappearing forever (*Georgics*, 4. 494—8, in David Ferry's translation:

> 'What was it,' she cried, 'what madness, Orpheus, was it,
> That has destroyed us, you and me, oh look!
> The cruel Fates already call me back,
> And sleep is covering over my swimming eyes.
> Farewell; I am being carried off into
> The vast surrounding dark and reaching out
> My strengthless hands to you forever more
> Alas not yours.'[34]

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[31] Torlone 2009: 94.

[32] Pasternak 2001: 153.

[33] Pasternak 2001: 157.

[34] illa 'quis et me' inquit 'miseram et te perdidit, Orpheu,
quis tantus furor? en iterum crudelia retro

Tsvetayeva imagines that Eurydice must have *done* something, or *felt* something, that compelled Orpheus to break his word and therefore lose her in the Underworld. Since Tsvetayeva was writing at the time when she was hurting from Rilke's perceived rejection — and was associating Rilke with the figure of Orpheus, it was almost natural for her to think of herself as a Eurydice; and because she was convinced that she must have done something herself to bring about Rilke's decision to stop writing to her, she projected her guilt onto Eurydice: like her, Eurydice, too, must have done something (or loved too much, too impatiently) to provoke the rupture. As a woman, she instinctively identified with Eurydice, thus misunderstanding her actual role in the relationship.

She expresses how heartbroken she is in a letter to Rilke of June 3rd:

> My love for you was parceled out in days and letters, hours and lines. Hence the unrest. (That's why you asked for the rest!) Letter today, letter tomorrow. You are alive, I want to see you. A transplantation from the always to the now. Hence the pain, the counting of days, each hour's worthlessness, the hour now merely a step to the letter.[35]

To console her, Rilke writes her an elegy about falling stars:

> Oh those losses to space, Marina, the plummeting stars!
> We do not eke it out, wherever we rush to accrue
> To which star! In the sum, all has been ever forereckoned.
> Nor does he who falls diminish the sanctified number.
> Every resigning plunge, hurled to the origin, heals.
> …
> Not in a waning phase, nor yet in the weeks of versation
> Would there be ever one to help us to fullness again,
> Save for own lone walk over the sleepless land.[36]

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fata uocant conditque natantia lumina somnus.
iamque uale: feror ingenti circumdata nocte
inualidasque tibi tendens, heu! non tua, palmas! (*Georg.* 4. 494—8).

[35] Pasternak 2001: 162.

[36] Rilke, *Elegy for Marina (Tsvetayeva)*, in Pasternak 2001: 164—6, transl. by Walter Arndt (also publsihed as *Elegie — an Marina Zwetajewa-Efron*, in Rilke,

Not only does Rilke begin his elegy with the most distant image of all — a star, — he also says that he wrote it while sitting on a wall (which in the mind of a reader immediately invokes a division) among the lizards. He says that he is back, but, given the image of a wall and the mention of reptiles (let us not forget the snake that bit Eurydice!) in his letter, he is back with Tsvetayeva from some kind of a half-Beyond:

> I wrote you today a whole poem between the vineyard hills, sitting on a warm (not yet warmed enough for good, unfortunately) wall and riveting the lizards in their tracks by intoning it. You see I am back.[37]

Tsvetayeva is stunned. She does not sense the somewhat distancing tone of the elegy about stars, nor does she read anything into the imagery of the letter. She has no means of knowing that the person writing her is critically ill. Possessively, enthusiastically, and forcibly, in her letters to Rilke she keeps insisting on a meeting.

Rilke, in turn, in his letter of July 28th, is trying to create a bigger distance, by calling her "a great star" ("Du grosser Stern!") on which he is looking as through a telescope that Boris Pasternak placed in front of him.[38] He is also talking about his "immovable state of soul" ("unverschiebbares Gemüth"[39]) and that "the world is like a sleep" ("die Welt ist wie ein Schlaf"[40]) around him, similar to the image of the Eurydice in his own poem, who, full of her death and turned deeply into herself, walked beyond with Hermes not noticing anything that they passed.[41] It also, coincidentally or

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Werke, Frankfurt am Main / Leipzig, 1996 and 2003, vol. 2, p. 405).

[37] Pasternak 2001: 164.

[38] Pasternak 2001: 248. In German: "Aber Dich, Marina, hab' ich nicht mit freiem Aug' gefunden, Boris hat mir das Telescop vor meinen Himmel gestellt…" (Pasternak 1983: 230).

[39] Pasternak 1983: 230.

[40] Pasternak 1983: 230.

[41] "But hand in hand now with that god she walked,
her paces circumscribed by lengthy shroudings,
uncertain, gentle, and without impatience.
Wrapt in herself, like one whose time is near,

not, reminds us of Virgil's description of the vanishing Eurydice, after Orpheus has turned, that we have mentioned earlier: she complains that "sleep fills (my) swimming eyes" (*conditque natantia lumina somnus G.* 4. 496), before she is carried off "surrounded by enormous night" (*feror ingenti circumdata nocte*, *G.* 4. 497). [42]

But it seems that Tsvetayeva heard only one word that he was saying — sleep — and proclaimed, in her letter to Rilke dated August 2nd, that she wants to sleep with him:

> You are what I'm going to dream about tonight, what will dream *me* tonight. (Dreaming or being dreamed?) A stranger, I, in someone else's dream. I never await you; I always awake you. When somebody dreams of us together — that is when we shall meet…[43] Sometimes I think: I must exploit the chance that am I still (after all!) a body. Soon I'll have no more arms…[44] 'I love you and I want to sleep with you' (…) But I say it in a different voice, almost asleep, fast asleep (…) Everything that *never* sleeps, would like to sleep its fill in your arms.[45]

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she thought not of the man who went before them,
nor of the road ascending into life.
Wrapt in herself she wandered. And her deadness
was filling her like fullness.
Full as a fruit with sweetness and with darkness
was she with her great death, which was so new
that for the time she could take nothing in."

(Rilke, *Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes*, in Rilke 1964: 145).

[42] The preceding lines in Virgil that describe Orpheus turning are, as it seems to me, reminiscent of waking-up: *restitit, Eurydicenque suam iam luce sub ipsa / immemor heu! victusque animi respexit* (*G. 490—1),* "he stopped and, already under the very light [of the upper world — M. R.), oblivious (alas!) and vanquished of his spirit, he looked back at his Eurydice." Maybe this is the source of the ubiquity of this myth among different cultures: the experience of waking up from a pleasant dream, in which we were in the company of those we used to love — and realizing, upon awakening, that it was but a dream, unable to hold on to the beloved ones any longer.

[43] Pasternak 2001: 210.

[44] Pasternak 2001: 210.

[45] Pasternak 2001: 252.

And, a few letters later, on Aug. 22, she insists even more decisively:

> Rainer, quite seriously: if you want to see me, with your eyes, *you* must act — "In two weeks I'll be at such-and-such place. Are you coming?" This must come from you. Like the date. Like the town. Look at the map. […] Oh, yes, one more thing: I haven't any money… I wonder if you'll have enough for both of us.[46]

Rilke did not respond. Most probably, he was too ill to write letters. One could also imagine that the very insistence with which Tsvetayeva urged him to a meeting might have prevented further correspondence, like Orpheus' inability not to turn made Eurydice stay forever in the Underworld.

Interestingly, in the same letter that Rilke never answered, she made a request to him that would remain unfulfilled — just before ending the letter, she asked him to send her a book on Greek mythology:

> Oh, yes, a big request. Make me a present of a Greek mythology (in German) — without philosophy, quite simple and detailed: myths. I think in my childhood I had a book by Stoll. My *Theseus* is coming out soon (…) and I need a mythology. Aphrodite's hatred — that is the leitmotif. What a pity you cannot read me! I before you — deaf mute (not deaf, really, but mute!)
>
> Do give me the myths by Stoll, and with an inscription so that I'll *never* part from the book. Will you? I take you in my arms. M.[47]

Tsvetayeva sent him one more letter on November 7, 1926. It was a photograph of her neighborhood. She wrote:

> Dear Rainer,
> This is where I live.
> — I wonder if you still love me?[48]

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[46] Pasternak 2001: 258.

[47] Pasternak 2001: 259.

[48] Pasternak 2001: 260.

Rilke died on December 29, 1926. Tsvetayeva only learned of his death when receiving an invitation to a New Year's party. Heartbroken, she wrote a poem on his death called *A New Year's* (*Novogodnee,* a adjective with no noun characterized by it: a message or a letter might be meant). In it, she described herself wondering about the topography of the other world, the world that Rilke is now inhabiting. She was imagining it similar to a mysterious Cavern of the Winds,[49] a hilly place, a place shaped like an amphitheater, or similar to a spa.[50] However, there was no way of knowing. The only thing she could do was to keep writing to him — and so she concludes the poem with an address:

> Wondering, on the school bench, times past counting:
> What would rivers there be like? And mountains?
> Are views finer — free of tourist blight?
> Eden's hilly, Rainer, am I right?
> Thund'rous? Not the widows' bland pretentions —
> Eden II, above the first's dimension?
>
> Eden — terraced? Take the Tatra chain:
> Eden *must* be amphitatra-shaped,
> Yes! (on someone is the curtain drawn…)
> Rainer, I was right, no? God's a *growing*
> Baobab tree? Not any Roi Soleil.
> Not just one God? Over him holds saw
> Another?
>   How is writing at your spa?
> You and verse are *there,* of course: you *are*
> Verse! (…)
>
> Let's not miss each other — drop a card;
> Here's to your new sound-recording art!
> Stairs in Heaven, downward the Host is pointing…
> Here is, Rainer, to your new anointing!
>
> With my hand I shelter it from damp.
> Past the Rhone and the Rarogne banks,
> Right across that plain and sheer expanse,

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[49] Pasternak 2001: 284.

[50] Pasternak 2001: 290.

This to Rainer — Maria — Rilke's hands.[51]

Joseph Brodsky remarked on these lines: "The main element of the line — and of the entire poem as well — is the effort to hold someone back — if only by voice alone calling out a name — from nonbeing…"[52]

But this letter-poem — written as if it were a continuation of their correspondence, even with an order to be delivered "into his hands" at the end of it — was meant to be left definitively without an answer. Tsvetayeva was imagining Rilke continuing the poetic existence in the Beyond, and therefore able to receive a message from a poet left behind on Earth. It is unclear, however, which answer — in the Beyond — Rilke might have given her. In Rilke's own poem *Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes,* Eurydice, in her dead state, is so far removed from Orpheus' existence, that, when Hermes informs her that her husband has turned, she cannot even understand who he is talking about:

> And when, abruptly,
> the god had halted her and, with an anguished
> outcry, outspoke the words: He has turned around! —
> she took in nothing, and said softly: Who?[53]

Rilke's Eurydice, unlike Virgil's Eurydice says only one word. Ovid in his *Metamorphoses* (10. 62) made his Eurydice pronounce one single word: *vale* ("farewell"). But Rilke's Eurydice is even more estranged in her death, even more lost to Orpheus: when her husband is mentioned, she cannot even understand and asks: "Who?"[54]

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[51] Tsvetayeva, *A New Year's* . Translation by Walter Arndt in Pasternak 2001: 290—291 (first published in *Versty,* Paris, 1928, #3).

[52] Brodsky 1999: 266.

[53] Transl. J. B. Leishman in Rilke 1964: 147. The original text: "Und als plötzlich jäh / der Gott sie anhielt und mit Schmerz im Ausruf / die Worte sprach: Er hat sich umgewendet — ,/ begriff sie nichts und sagte leise: *Wer?*" (Rilke 1964: 146).

[54] As Joseph Brodsky writes in his essay about Rilke's poem, "Ninety Years Later," this question, "who?", uttered by a lost love, is one of the most painful

A poet's art cannot bring back the dead, nor can art capture the fleetingness of love. Poems are powerless when dealing with death and love; yet it is death and love, the universal sense of loss and mourning that inspires poetry and propels poems into being. A personal tragedy that inspires great art does not cease being a tragedy; nor does a broken heart cease to compose poems.

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questions imaginable: "…Put yourself in any rejected lover's shoes and imagine yourself, say, on a rainy night passing after a protracted hiatus the all-too-familiar entrance of your beloved's house, stopping and pressing the bell. And imagine the voice coming over, say, an intercom, inquiring who is there, and imagine yourself replying something like, "It's me, John." And imagine the voice, familiar to you in its slightest modulation, returning to you with a soft, colorless "Who?" You would assume then not so much that you'd been entirely forgotten as that you'd been replaced. This is the worst possible interpretation of "Who?" in your current situation, and you may go for it. Whether you're right is a different matter. But if eventually you find yourself writing a poem about alienation or the worst possible thing a human being can encounter, for instance, death, you might draw on this experience of being replaced to add, so to speak, local color. All the more so because, being replaced, you seldom know by whom." (Brodsky 1997: 424).

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