

ORPHEUS AND EURYDICE

Virgil

From *The Georgics*, Book 4.

In the golden age of Latin literature, the poet Publius Vergilius Maro published his second work, *The Georgics* in 28 BCE. Purporting to be a work on rural life and farming, it is in reality a complex didactic poem in the spirit of Hesiod and Lucretius. In the Middle Ages, Virgil was considered to be a mystic and mage, and his works were used for divination similarly to how Chinese culture uses the *I Ching*. In the Welsh myth of Taliessin, the Celtic Goddess Cerridwin is said to be reading *The Book of Pheryllt*, (i.e. Virgil). It is no coincidence that Dante makes Virgil his guide through the *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* in his *Divine Comedy*, so great was his reputation as a Noble Pagan and a forerunner of Christian teachers. Medieval mystics combed through his writings for esoteric meanings.

In this section at the end of *The Book of Georgics*, Book 4, Virgil tells the tragic tale of Orpheus and his lost wife Eurydice. Together with Ovid's version, these are the classic sources for all later Western treatments of the archetypal myth, adapted for modern readers.

But Aristaeus, the foe within his clutch,
Scarce suffering him compose his aged limbs,

With a great cry leapt on him, and ere he rose

Forestalled him with the fetters; he nevertheless,

All unforgetful of his ancient craft,
Transforms himself to every wondrous thing,

Fire and a fearful beast, and flowing stream.

But when no trickery found a path for flight,

Baffled at length, to his own shape returned,

With human lips he spoke, "Who bade thee, then,

So reckless in youth's hardihood, affront Our portals? Or what wouldst thou hence?"—But he,

"Proteus, thou knowest, of thine own heart thou knowest;

For thee there is no cheating, but cease thou

To practice upon me: at heaven's behest I for my fainting fortunes hither come An oracle to ask thee." There he ceased.

Whereat the seer, by stubborn force constrained,

Shot forth the grey light of his gleaming eyes

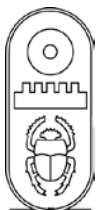
Unlocks his lips to spell the fates of heaven:

"Doubt not 'tis wrath divine that plagues thee thus,

Nor light the debt thou payest; 'tis Orpheus's self,



Virgil between reading desk and a book basket. From a 6th Century Roman Codex written in rough majuscules, containing the *Georgics*, the *Eclagues* and the *Aeneid*. From the Vatican Library



Orpheus unhappy by no fault of his,
So fates prevent not, fans thy penal fires,
Yet madly raging for his ravished bride.
She in her haste to shun thy hot pursuit
Along the stream, saw not the coming
death,
Where at her feet kept ward upon the
bank
In the tall grass a monstrous water snake.
But with their cries the Dryad—band
her peers
Filled up the mountains to their proud-
est peaks:
Wailed for her fate the heights of
Rhodope,
And tall Pangaea, and, beloved of Mars,
The land that bowed to Rhesus, Thrace
no less
With Hebrus's stream; and Orithyia
wept,
Daughter of Acte old. But Orpheus's self,
Soothing his love-pain with the hollow
shell,
Thee his sweet wife on the lone shore
alone,
Thee when day dawned and when it died
he sang.
Nay to the jaws of Taenarus too he came,
Of Dis the infernal palace, and the grove
Grim with a horror of great darkness
came,
Entered, and faced the Manes and the
King
Of terrors, the stone heart no prayer can
tame.
Then from the deepest deeps of Erebus,
Wrung by his minstrelsy, the hollow
shades
Came trooping, ghostly semblances of
forms
Lost to the light, as birds by myriads
hasten
To greenwood boughs for cover, when
twilight hour

Or storms of winter chase them from
the hills;
Matrons and men, and great heroic
frames
Done with life's service, boys, unwedded
girls,
Youths placed on pyre before their
fathers' eyes.
Round them, with black slime choked
and hideous weed,
Cocytus winds; there lies the unlovely
swamp
Of dull dead water, and, to pen them fast,
Styx with her nine-fold barrier poured
between.
Nay, even the deep Tartarean Halls of
death
Stood lost in wonderment, and the
Eumenides,
Their brows with livid locks of serpents
twined;
Even Cerberus held his triple jaws agape,
And, the wind hushed, Ixion's wheel
stood still.
And now with homeward footstep he
had passed
All perils unscathed, and, at length
restored,
Eurydice to realms of upper air
Had well-nigh won, behind him
following—
So Proserpine had ruled it—when his
heart
A sudden mad desire surprised and
seized—
Meet fault to be forgiven, might Hell
forgive.
For at the very threshold of the day,
Heedless, alas! And vanquished of
resolve,
He stopped, turned, looked upon
Eurydice
His own once more. But even with the
look,



Illustration from a 4th-5th Century Roman Codex containing the *Georgics* and the *Aeneid*. From the Vatican Library.

Poured out was all his labor, broken the bond
 Of that fell tyrant, and a crash was heard
 Three times like thunder in the seas of hell.
 “Orpheus! What ruin hath thy frenzy wrought
 On me, alas! And thee? Lo! Once again
 The unpitying fates recall me, and dark sleep
 Closes my swimming eyes. And now farewell:
 Girt with enormous night I am borne away,
 Outstretching toward thee, thine, alas! no more,
 These helpless hands.” She spoke, and suddenly,
 Like smoke dissolving into empty air,
 Passed and was sundered from his sight; nor him
 Clutching vain shadows, yearning sore to speak,
 Thenceforth beheld she, nor no second time
 Hell’s boatman brooks he passed the watery bar.
 What should he do? Fly whither, twice bereaved?
 Move with what tears the Manes, with what voice

The powers of darkness? She indeed even now

Death-cold was floating on the Stygian barge!

For seven whole months unceasingly, men say,

Beneath a lofty crag, by thy lone wave,
 Strymon, he wept, and in the caverns chill
 Unrolled his story, melting tigers’ hearts,
 And leading with his lay the oaks along.
 As in the poplar-shade a nightingale

Mourns her lost young, which some relentless swain,

Spying, from the nest has torn unfledged, but she

Wails the long night, and perched upon a spray

With sad insistence pipes her dolorous strain,

Till all the region with her wrongs o’erflows.

No love, no new desire, constrained his soul:

By snow-bound Tanais and the icy north,
 Far steppes to frost Rhipaeon forever wed,

Alone he wandered, lost Eurydice
 Lamenting, and the gifts of Dis ungiven.

Scorned by which tribute the Ciconian dames,

Amid their awful Bacchanalian rites
 And midnight revellings, tore him limb from limb,

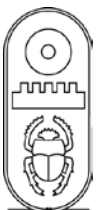
And strewed his fragments over the wide fields.

Then too, even then, what time the Hebrus stream,

Oeagrian Hebrus, down mid-current rolled,

Rent from the marble neck, his drifting head,

The death-chilled tongue found yet a voice to cry



“Eurydice! Ah! Poor Eurydice!”
 With parting breath he called her, and
 the banks
 From the broad stream caught up
 “Eurydice!”
 So Proteus ending plunged into the deep,
 And, where he plunged, beneath the
 eddying whirl
 Churned into foam the water, and was
 gone;
 But not Cyrene, who unquestioned thus
 Bespoke the trembling listener: “Nay,
 my son,
 From that sad bosom thou mayest
 banish care:
 Hence came that plague of sickness,
 hence the nymphs,
 With whom in the tall woods the dance
 she wove,
 Wrought on thy bees, alas, this deadly
 bane.
 Bend thou before the Del nymphs,
 gracious powers:
 Bring gifts, and sue for pardon: they will
 grant
 Peace to thine asking, and an end of
 wrath.
 But how to approach them will I first
 unfold—
 Four chosen bulls of peerless form and
 bulk,
 That browse today the green Lycaean
 heights,
 Pick from thy herds, as many cattle to
 match,
 Whose necks the yoke pressed never:
 then for these
 Build up four altars by the lofty fanes,
 And from their throats let gush the
 victims’ blood,
 And in the greenwood leave their
 bodies lone.

Then, when the ninth dawn hath
 displayed its beams,
 To Orpheus shalt thou send his funeral
 dues,
 Poppies of Lethe, and let slay a sheep
 Coal-black, then seek the grove again,
 and soon
 For pardon found adored Eurydice
 With a slain calf for victim.
 No delay:
 The self-same hour he hies him forth
 to do
 His mother’s bidding: to the shrine he
 came,
 The appointed altars reared, and thither
 led
 Four chosen bulls of peerless form and
 bulk,
 With cattle to match, that never yoke
 had known;
 Then, when the ninth dawn had led in
 the day,
 To Orpheus sent his funeral dues, and
 sought
 The grove once more. But sudden,
 strange to tell
 A portent they espy: through the oxen’s
 flesh,
 Waxed soft in dissolution, hark! There
 hum
 Bees from the belly; the rent ribs over-
 boil
 In endless clouds they spread them, till
 at last
 On yon tree-top together fused they
 cling,
 And drop their cluster from the bending
 boughs.¹

Endnotes

¹ Virgil, *Georgics* 4:443-558, from *Bucolics, Aeneid, and Georgics of Virgil*. Translated by J. B. Greenough, Boston: Ginn & Co., 1900.