The myth of Orpheus and Eurydice has always been one of the most popular of the classic myths. Virgil's fourth Georgic first immortalized it. In later ages it became a moral lesson, in Boethius, and a romance, in the Middle English poem Sir Orfeo. Later it became a sort of blueprint for operatic composition, in the experiments of the Florentine Camerata and the monumental operas of Monteverdi and Gluck. Among the German Romantics the myth symbolized the poet's attempt to penetrate the mysteries of death—a tradition which was inherited by Rainer Maria Rilke and many modern symbolist poets in France, England and America.

The meaning Orpheus and Eurydice have for the men of any age is largely conditioned by the way in which that age uses myth. The myths of primitive peoples are often re-classified as myth proper (an explanation of natural phenomena), legend (the forerunner of history) and folklore (a purely imaginative narration). It is extremely difficult, however, to categorize Greek myths along these lines, as many of them partake of the nature of myth, legend and folklore at one and the same time. The story of Orpheus and Eurydice is certainly one of these. It has been assigned a number of mythical origins because of its possible connection with the Orphic mysteries, and because it fits well into the general class of underworld descent-myths which express the conflict of day and night, of summer and winter, of life and death. It was treated, even in ancient times, as legend because its hero was one of the legendary founders of Greek civilization. It can safely be classed as folklore because the climax of its action—the backward look—is a part of the folklore of the world.

Thus the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice meant at least three things to the ancient world: it symbolized the eternal struggle of elemental forces; it recounted the legendary power of a great civilizer; it told a tragic love story. Each level of myth had something to contribute to the richness of the resulting whole. And as the story continued to appear in literature, part
myth, part legend, part folklore, it came to grips with three subjects: the mystery of life and death and rebirth; the all-compelling power of poetry and song; the tragic destruction of love and beauty when human emotion is not properly controlled.

The classic treatments of the story in every age have dealt with these themes, balancing and interlaying and undercutting them, as the myth became, in turn, allegory, romance, classic drama, opera, romantic and symbolist poetry. Recently, Orpheus has invaded the liveliest arts. He has found his way to the Broadway stage and the motion picture and television screens, appearing in contemporary guise. Jean Cocteau's Orpheus walks the boulevards of Paris; Jean Anouilh's fiddles in a provincial railway station; Tennessee Williams' haunts the jude joints of Mississippi, and Marcel Camus' drives a streetcar in Rio de Janeiro. How valid, one may ask, are these new Orpheus-figures? Are any of them really related to Virgil's tragic hero? Will any of them, we wonder, stand with the Orpheus-figures of Politian and Gluck as an index to the spirit of an age?

Certainly Cocteau's Orphée will give pause to many a future student of literature. He seems to owe something to the Orphée of the French symbolists: the poet who is master of the secrets of life and death. But Cocteau has complicated the figure by identifying it with himself. And in retelling Orpheus' story (on the stage in 1926 and on the screen in 1951) he has overlaid the myth with his own set of symbols.

Thus, in the opening scene of the play, Orphée is shown detecting poetic messages from the world beyond via the hoofbeats of an oracular horse which he keeps in his house. This infuriates the conventional Eurydice, but to Orphée "la moindre de ces phrases est plus étonnante que tous les poèmes." He seems to be discovering the very meaning of poetry in these messages, and one of them, "Madame Eurydice reviendra des enfers," he enters in the annual poetry competition sponsored by a local women's club called the Bacchantes.

As the play proceeds, the symbols become even more startling. Death comes to claim Eurydike; she is a beautiful young woman who issues orders to two surgeon-like assistants and a set of "infernal machines" obviously meant to suggest the operating room. She accidentally leaves her gloves behind, however, and an angel named Huertebise tells Orphée he can follow Eurydice into the next world by donning the gloves and passing through the mirror: "Je vous livre le secret des secrets. Les miroirs sont les portes par lesquelles la Mort va et vient." In the split second it takes the postman to drop a letter in the mail box, Orphée returns with Eurydice. But he must never look on her again. When, in a quarrel, he accidentally does so, she disappears.

Orphée opens the letter and discovers that his poem "Madame Eurydice reviendra des enfers" has aroused the fury of the Bacchantes because its initial letters spell out "un mot injurieux." "Le cheval m'a joué!" he cries, but by joyfully accepting his martyrdom, he breaks the horse's spell forever. In the closing scenes of the play, Orphée's severed head announces that his name is really Jean Cocteau, and with his wife and guardian angel Huertebise he mounts to heaven.

This outline omits hundreds of details which are undoubtedly significant to Cocteau and his following, but it should at least indicate some of the serious,
comic, analogous and scandalous levels in this modern treatment of the Orpheus myth.

In the film the horse, the poetry contest and the severed head are gone. The tone is almost unrelievally serious. The scope of the motion picture camera enables us to enter the world beyond the mirror, and the central character seems to be less Orphée than the death-bringing young woman, who is now a Princess escorted by two motorcyclists. Huertebise is now her chauffeur, and the poetic messages from the other world come over the short-wave radio in her Rolls-Royce.

The Orphée of the film is a celebrated Parisian poet who has lost his inspiration and is seeking a fresh approach to poetry. In the opening scene, he is drinking at a sidewalk cafe when a popular young writer named Cégeste is run down and killed by the Princess and her cyclists. Both Orphée and Cégeste are carried off in the car, and Orphée learns that the young man's poetry has actually come to him through the Princess, from the world of the dead. He longs to receive the same poetic secrets, which he hears crackling over the car radio. But he awakes to find himself restored to ordinary life. Then his unloved, pregnant Eurydice is carried off by the Princess, and, as in the play, Orphée is told by Huertebise to recover her by donning the gloves and passing through a mirror. But he realizes that he is making the journey, not to regain his wife, but to renew contact with the Princess and her poetic world of death.

The judges of the world of the dead—three blue-serged businessmen—are angered that their two agents have fallen in love with mortals—the Princess with Orphée and Huertebise with Eurydice. The agents are to be punished, and Orphée may have his Eurydice once more, provided he never look on her again.

As the film ends, Eurydice dies a second time when Orphée accidentally glances at her image in a mirror, and Orphée is shot down by a mob of young poets, who think he is responsible for the death of Cégeste. Then, strangely enough, both of them are restored to life again: the Princess and Huertebise appear to say they are ready to die in the place of the poet and his wife. Poetry has wrung the heart of death itself.

In both the play and the film, logic and convention are scorned in an attempt to surround the story with an atmosphere of unreality—ironically achieved by the introduction of the most realistic, even mechanical devices. But the deliberate shock element of the play has been replaced, after twenty-five years, by the marvelous and the picturesque in the film. The theater audience is startled into accepting the story; the cinema audience is drawn to do so by curious, evocative images.

Cocteau's attitude towards the myth has changed as well. In the play it is the power of poetry that is central: because he is a poet, Orphée can contact the unknown regions beyond; these communicate with him in ways malevolent (the horse) and benignant (Huertebise); they bring his destruction and his apotheosis. To an extent these ideas are also present in the film, but the emphasis has switched from the poet and his powers to the world of death, which is seen no longer as contrasted good and evil, but as a terrible world which reaches out to claim its mortal victims. The true poet (Cégeste) must contact this world; the immortal poet (Orphée) must conquer it by winning its love.

These themes, the power of poetry in
the play, the mystery of death in the film, are traditionally Orphean themes. But Cocteau seems to evoke them, not through the Orpheus-Eurydice story itself, but by imposing a mythology of his own upon the classic myth. By his own admission he uses Orpheus because he feels "quite naturally drawn to a myth in which life and death meet face to face." Orpheus and Eurydice. The mythical figures are obscured, almost submerged, in the concentration on the two worlds between which they are drawn. The details of their story, even the crucial backward glance, are irrelevant to Cocteau's purposes. They tend only to get in the way of his fantastic vision, and are fitted in carelessly and halfheartedly. Doubtless both of these works will survive as long as Cocteau himself: Orphée is his first important play, and the film Orphée is a compendium of his screen technique. But they owe less to the classic Orpheus than to Cocteau's strangely evolving sense of the theater and his fascination with the mysteries of poetry and death — themes he conveniently finds in the Orpheus myth.

Anouilh's play Eurydice retells the myth in the drab settings of a provincial French railway station and a shabby Marseilles hotel room. Orpheus and his father are itinerant musicians, and Eurydice and her mother actresses in a down-at-the-heel theater troupe. Between trains the young people meet and fall in love. They escape from their parents for a few hours, in which the whole world and all the people in it seem transformed. But the sweetness in life is impermanent: Eurydice's scandalous past pursues her; she leaves Orpheus and is killed in a street accident. Then a mysterious M. Henri (Hermes) arranges for the two to meet again in the deserted railway station; Orpheus may win her back provided he does not look her in the face before dawn. But now Orpheus is curious about Eurydice's previous lovers. He faces her and has the truth out. Eurydice fades into the night, as all the characters in the play assemble to speak of her essential goodness. In the final scene, Orpheus is told by M. Henri that he must not hope to find happiness in this life; he must join Eurydice in death. And while his father blandly extols the crude pleasures of bourgeois society, Orpheus runs out into the night to die with Eurydice.

This is the disillusioned Anouilh of the years of the German occupation of France, savoring the sweetness of life, but convinced that it can never survive in a sordid world. The play seems to touch on two Orphean themes — the impermanence of love, the finality of death. But critics have dealt harshly with it, and on two counts; they have judged it morally shabby in its treatment of love and human relationships, and artistically unsound in its pseudo-existentialist approach to serious problems. It would seem that one Orphean theme dissolves in self-pity and the other in mawkish death-wishing. Perhaps this is because the third theme is left untapped: Orpheus' musicianship means nothing to the play. He has no hopeful, persuasive song with which to win back his Eurydice. Instead he casts his art aside and runs into the face of death. No doubt the possibility of triumph amid tragedy would not have suited Anouilh's pessimistic thesis. He may have chosen to ignore it; or he may have been unaware that the myth he was adapting was a complexus of opposed but balanced mysteries. He touches on only part of the complexus — and his play is only partially successful.
TENNESSEE WILLIAMS’ Orpheus Descending, which recently appeared on the screen as The Fugitive Kind, tells how a guitar player from New Orleans descends to a decadent southern town. Because he is one of “the fugitive kind . . . the kind that don’t belong,” he rouses the ire of the local demons, who abide by a rigidly conservative code of immorality, and he drives three local Eurydices to the diversified extremes of mysticism, nymphomania and embittered hope. In the end, the favored heroine is shot by her invalid husband, and the hero himself is burned to death by the sheriff and his chorus of brutes.

Williams’ Orpheus-figure may be a valid symbol for the modern poet, who is an outsider in a hostile and incomprehending world. He is given some expressive poetry to speak to his Eurydices, and invariably prompts the reaction, “Take me out of this hell.” But this is precious little Orpheus for a play which calls itself Orpheus Descending, a play in which music has no power over hostile forces, love is never tested, and death means only a final curtain and an end to a succession of brutal scenes.

The Orpheus-themes are not to be found in Williams’ play because Orpheus Descending is actually a rewrite of an early, unsuccessful work, Battle of Angels, which had no connection whatsoever with Orpheus. It is no credit to Williams’ art that he has been able to invest an old play with “classical significance” merely by changing the title and equipping his hero with a guitar.

The myth is more explicitly dealt with in another recent film, Orpheus Negro (Black Orpheus). This is a colorful work, almost a ballet, based on a play by the Brazilian diplomat Vinicius de Moraes and filmed in Brazil by the French director Marcel Camus. The myth of Orpheus and Eurydice is here re-enacted by the under-privileged negroes who live by the thousands in shacks made of cast-off oil cans and perched on the steep cliffs overlooking the bay of Rio de Janeiro. Among their number is the trolley-conductor Orpheus; he it is who makes the sun rise every morning, as he sings and strums his guitar. Newly come to the settlement is a country girl named Eurydice; she is followed by a rejected lover who is intent on killing her. The harried girl meets the carefree minstrel and together they descend to Rio to dance at the carnival, he costumed as the sun and she as the night. Here amid bizarre figures and frenzied, whirling rhythms they are separated, and Eurydice is trapped in a power plant by her pursuer, who is masquerading as death. Ironically it is Orpheus who unwittingly kills Eurydice when he turns on the power switch to look for her. The hells in which Black Orpheus then seeks his lost love are the bureau of missing persons, the rituals of the Macumba sect and, finally, the morgue, where he finds her body and carries it, at dawn, through the aftermath of the carnival to his home high above the city. Here, as he sings that happiness is only an illusion, he is struck by a rock thrown by a jealous “bacchant” and, with Eurydice still in his arms, he plunges over the cliff to his death. One of the children picks up his guitar to play as the sun rises on another day.

Camus’ film is most effective in its fantastic array of color, rhythm and sound. Indeed, the visual and aural rhythms seem to propel the story and sweep it on to its climax. But there is some disparity between this heady atmosphere and the fragile Greek myth. At first we warm to the discov-
ery that the handsome boy and the lovely girl are called Orpheus and Eurydice; we are impressed when Eurydice, to disguise herself from the mysterious specter who pursues her, must dress as night—for Orpheus is to dance as the sun; we even accept the accidental electrocution as a modern counterpart of Orpheus' backward glance. But as the film proceeds, the mythological details are more arbitrarily fitted in, and the context begins to resist them. Thus the caretaker of the power plant must be named Hermes; the diabolic rituals must be guarded by a ferocious dog named Cerberus; during the incantation Orpheus must be tricked into believing he hears Eurydice's voice behind him, telling him not to look back. These devices are clumsy enough, but what eventually wreaks havoc with the myth is the social commentary introduced by Camus:

One of my themes was the denunciation of apathy: apathy in religion (as shown in the religious sect of the Macumba); apathy in public office, symbolized by the advance of red-tape bureaucracy; apathy in the face of distress which rules those white hells of the hospital and the mortuary.13

While Camus has something important to say, the Orpheus myth hardly seems the appropriate vehicle in which to say it. For the myth obscures the message; instead of adding an extra dimension to the social theme, it makes abstract types of what should be sympathetic characters. And on the other hand, the message is never related to the myth; the problems of Orfeu Negro are not those of Orpheus of Thrace. The Orphean themes—the mysterious power of music over death, the problem of the control of human passion, the loss of beauty won by song—these are submerged in a swirling mass of color and then dismissed in the hard light of social indignation.

I do not feel that any of these modern dramatists succeed in retelling the myth as completely, and as beautifully, as have Virgil or the poet of Sir Orfeo or Politian, Monteverdi and Gluck.

Cocteau's identification of himself with Orpheus the poet is perhaps his most powerful and durable symbol. But his Orphée, on both stage and screen, lacks the stuff of greatness because what it has to say about poetry and about death is irrelevant to the myth it uses: its themes and symbols are part of the mythology of Cocteau, not of Orpheus. The myth does not reveal itself in either Orphée; it is only a convenient vehicle for the author's flights of fancy.

Anouilh, I think, sincerely attempts to reveal the meaning he sees in the myth. If his findings are negative and defeatist, it is because he has explored only two of the myth's three themes: love is bittersweet, and death alone can give it permanence. But music and art, indeed all human endeavor, these have no place in Anouilh's pessimistic scheme of things.

Williams, like Cocteau, has a valid Orpheus-symbol. But he cannot bring the myth to life when he uses it to piece together bits and scraps of material that bears no relation to Orpheus.

Camus sounds the themes of the Orpheus myth, but in a too exotic context. And he introduces a modern commentary that applies to the context but not to the myth.

Taken together, the four modern adapters attest the abiding popularity of the myth. They also serve to illustrate the basic problem involved in making such adaptations. Any serious treatment, however modern, must grasp the sources—ritual, legendary, dramatic—of the myth it uses; it must
then present the same mysteries, ask the same questions, outline the same triumph and tragedy. It may not be gratuitous for Anouilh’s Eurydice to go out for the groceries or for Williams’ Orpheus to sell dry goods andumble obscenities. These may be essential to their modern context. But they cannot substitute for insight into the myth itself. The story of Orpheus and Eurydice is more than a workable plot which may be effectively updated; it is a beautiful and powerful expression of age-old mysteries and truths. These are what gave it birth, and these no adapter can afford to ignore.

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2 See Boeth. Consol. 3, metrum 12 and anon. Sir Orfeo. Other notable treatments through the Middle Ages are Fuig. Myth. 3.10; King Alfred’s translation of Boethius 35.6; Ovide Moralise 10.1-577; Guillaume de Machaut, Confort d’ami 2277-2674 and Robert Henryson, Orpheus and Eurydice.

3 Other Renaissance treatments of the myth are Ronsard, L’Orphée; Juan de Jáuregui, Orfeo; and Milton, L’Allegro 145-50, Il Penseroso 105-106.

4 These are Peri, Euridice; Caccini, Eurydice; Monteverdi, Orfeo; Gluck, Orfeo ed Eurydice. Among the many other composers who wrote operas on the subject are Lully, Haydn, Offenbach and Milhaud. There are cantatas on Orpheus by Charpentier, Rameau and Pergolesi, symphonic poems by Liszt and Hovhaness, and a ballet by Stravinsky.


6 See Rilke, Orpheus, Eurydike, Hermes and Sonnette an Orpheus; Pierre Emmanuel, Orphiques, Tombeau d’Orphée; Edith Sitwell, Eurydice; H. D. Eurydice.


8 Ibid. p. 58.

9 Ibid. p. 74.

10 Jean Cocteau and Andre Fraigneau, Cocteau on the Film (London, 1954) p. 101. Cocteau’s new film, Le Testament d’Orphée, yet to be seen in the United States, is a nostalgic review of Cocteau’s past films. Some of the characters from Orphée reappear to bid farewell to their creator; this is to be Cocteau’s last film.

11 Entitled Point of Departure in Canada and Great Britain and Legend of Lovers in the United States.

12 Orfeu de Conçeceo. The new title may have been suggested by Jean-Paul Sartre’s Orphée Noir (Paris, 1948), a collection of French negro poetry.