Had Orpheus Not Looked Around

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AT THE LITERARY EVENING in "The Room with the Fireplace" at Coffman Union, a woman asked me which books had been important, or still were important, in my life. I mentioned several, explaining what it was in them and in their authors that had influenced a part of my development, growth, and thinking about everything that each individual, in his or her humble being, can hope to achieve.

"But all the books you have mentioned were written by men," added the woman in the audience. There was no aggression, or surprise, in her tone, it was just a simple statement of fact.

Why had I not mentioned a single book written by a woman? I had first intended to include Tsvetaeva, Akhmatova, Woolf, and Yourcenar, but it seemed to me that what the questioner had in mind was general cultural development which I had considered from a conventional point of view: philosophy, psychoanalysis, linguistics, and sociology, a certain cliché of general culture, in other words.

I had probably been mistaken in my judgment of the individual scope offered by a literary evening, but in America discussion of the European acquisition and consumption of cultural experience imposes itself quite unconsciously, and so my reply could be taken as representing expectant, established values.

Anyway, what does it mean to say that you like one book or another? To define oneself by the book's consciousness, but also by the way it stimulates one to break away? Perhaps that is what I was unconsciously thinking of, as I made up my inconstant top-ten.

I had understood all my basic ideas about the place and role of the world in the cosmos, with all of its "dreams of battle," or "autonomy of truth," and adopted them first from the methodically ordered reading we are guided through at school, then from things chosen at random, and finally from books sought and found according to my own tastes and loves.

There is no doubt that the landscape of everything literary I inherited from my childhood and youth belongs to the "universal-male." Conse-

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quently, I do not have to emphasize that this frames just about everything, both practical and theoretical, in a world knowledge that I confirm in my activity as well. But do I, as a product of that world, send it back only a mirror image, in which a historical female anaesthesia may be clearly seen, or do I illuminate a place of my own which is opening up its inner creative purpose—not against men—but in the mutual dependence laid down for us by the logic of nature?

I shall have to go back a bit. I can only speak here in the language of personal experience, which, in the chronological-analytical form of "applied" literature, does not seek to suggest potential egocentrism or the discovery of warm water, but a meditation on the realm of the personal subject which is filled, among other things, with reading and writing.

In conversation with many writers I have discovered a common aspiration towards the sublimation of what is today called "women's writing." And, as I think about this, I cannot avoid a certain skepticism towards various interpretations, but also agreement with some theoreticians whose definitions are based on the breaking-up of the historically founded "One Universal," and therefore, on the right to multiplicity and the expression of difference. But, does there exist a creative, female simultaneity for all these projects? I don't know, not because I doubt the articulation of woman as a historical and political being, but because I don't yet know a language which men could understand and accept as a parallel discourse. I can only hope that one day this language of *multiplicity* and *difference* will extend communication and reflect the splendid ambivalence which women contribute to it.

I shall start from books. In all systems of thought they are symbols of the world, divine pronouncement, cosmic wisdom, etc. whose meaning was bequeathed to men by a metaphorical god. Books come into the hands of a woman as objects in which she too, as a woman, is inscribed, but as the "meaning" in the life of a man, and not as an author who is herself expressing her sense-for-its-own-sake, as Luisa Muraro roughly says in her analysis of the work of Luce Irigaray. No girl reader is aware of this fact in her early youth, and no doubt many are not later, or indeed, ever. The universal starting point of reading is the *event* which discloses the measure of the writer's particular truth, articulated through the intellectual curiosity and courage required in order for the value system and creative micro-

cosm of the birth and survival of the book to be fulfilled. Each individual recognizes those truths according to the measure of his or her own spirit, and the reader's cooperation with the book goes along with her or his greater or lesser identification with the main character, and with the writer, of course.

As a child, that is, a being unconscious of the world of substitution, I was led through books by the main character. Identification with his actions was absolute, and, as is well known, the stories that succeed in keeping children awake longest are precisely those stories of olden times, where the violence of the action coincides with the fantastic. That is why in Greek mythology it was Orpheus who excited me most, while Eurydice was simply a *conditio sine qua non.* The singer who tamed the furious natural elements with his lyre was worthy of the admiration and adoration of someone (me) who in herself, however dimly, heard poetry as the distant rhythm of her own being. And Eurydice? Poor thing; her tragic destiny was passed over as though it were Orpheus's, and not her own personal tragedy at all. Because whoever dies, ceases, vanishes, is only momentarily aware of his final departure. But, regardless of any speculation about physical relief, nonetheless that is a moment of absolute terror at the cessation of belonging to the only reality a person has known and which has known him. We never hear clearly the last thoughts of the dying. Or almost never. The exceptions are those people who have returned to life from so-called clinical death. But the plausibility of their experience generally seems to others, on the whole, at the very least the stuff of fairy tale, so that those areas of "life after life" are counted as literary reminiscences. I say this because I often think of the fact that Eurydice vanished without a word. To whom or to what were her last inner words directed? But, more of that later. The weave I am unravelling is still in the realm of the childish, unconscious; focused on Orpheus without Eurydice. Identification with his destiny formed my first idea of the ambivalence of the singer, the poet: someone who speaks, sings about his own capacity to experience. The singer or poet is hidden by his song and I still could not see, could not distinguish him from the image of the poem itself. In fact, it seemed to me that the poem wrote itself, that myth was created according to the principle of an invisible messenger. That invisible messenger would accompany me later as well, when, in collusion with growing, I would

demand something or someone, the function of whose psyche would draw me towards human, and not inhuman action. I was immediately given *The Prince and the Pauper, The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, Through Desert and Forest, David Copperfield, Oliver Twist, Nicholas Nickleby,* etc. The thematic plots and main characters of these novels are well-known. My following of the endurance and moral qualities of these heroes was transformed into a conscious identification with "real" literary characters: the accessibility of the impossible in the possible was achieved. These romantic heroes could walk through reality. And let me not forget: they were all young men. My following of their behavior, reactions, and thinking, of course within the confines of the possible, was a stimulating transfer between my own reality and the isotopia of the brave hero. That is, the female characters who appear in these and similar novels are completely ineffective in the sense in which every young person is permeated with the force of individuality. Poor-girls-with-no-family, good-but-powerless-mothers-from-poor-homes, fatuous-drawing-room-ladies, giggling-young-ladies-with-plump-little-hands, wicked-old-women-witches, then good-fairies-invisible-girls, all were surrogate female beings in these novels, and their roles and characters, without place, time and action, rarely arouse in any reader, female or male, anything other than tears, anxiety, and pity. What is more, they do not offer any of the potential personal or imaginative development which the main, male characters set up in the reader's imagination. Consequently, they exist as attributes through which our main character will demonstrate his own strong psychological definitions. Obviously, all this is familiar. That is why it was with the "heroic" roots of main, male heroes that I logically entered so-called adult literature. At fifteen or sixteen a person begins to understand the greatness of the defeated. But these defeated people are no longer "poor in spirit." On the contrary, they lose consciously in order to show that victory is not the aim of every battle. That is, the character of the battle of one person with others discloses the value system of the battle itself, of the victory, and finally of power. For that *one person,* essential for the discovery of new realities within reality, defeat is part of the function of victory. Hamlet.

Obviously, Hamlet only succeeded in tipping me from one attitude to another, while many things "in between" were not yet clear when I was fifteen. But it was clear that action which always led to the victory of the

good over the bad, the clever over the stupid, was once and for all called into question, and that the qualities of the strong, the good, the clever, and the imaginative were mixed with those of the weak, bad, stupid, and unimaginative. Only the measure of one's own spirit could penetrate or not penetrate the labyrinth of those relationships.

Of course, it was then that I discovered the writer as a demigod who creates the unreal world of the book's weave, and my admiration was transferred once and for all from the character to the writer. Later that admiration would be tempered by all sorts of disagreements, doubts, disappointments, but also gratitude that in the parallel world of books I had found weapons to defend me from so many illiterate, real worlds around me. It is not easy to resist a writer, that mirror of one of our faces. And I began very early, with considerable naïveté, to exercise the eyes of a reader through the ear of my writer-self, believing that in my close attention to the general I would be able to express the particular. So I began to sketch pieces about the adolescent anxieties of some faceless character, always male. I was still *he,* who sees the "revolt" of the spirit in terms of child-adult. The adoption of a male character seemed to me entirely natural up until the moment someone gave me André Gide's *Fruits of the Earth, New Fruits.*

In Gide's "terrible fluidity of self-revelation" (H. James), I discovered a dimension of damnation and rapture in the identity of the writer. Through the prevalence of the female, subtle, threatened, sensitive, ambivalent, and shrewd in Gide, I understood that in history the fate of the female had been confined to observation, as opposed to male action, to passivity, in which woman had developed a fantastic feeling for detail within a scene dominated by the male. Detail, as a separate entity, is virtually worthless, superfluous, decorative if it is to be taken seriously, but nevertheless the whole picture cannot manage without it. According to this principle of recasting analysis into synthesis, woman has been able to maintain her connection with the world, in which she was herself a detail, but one which complete reality could not do without. Gide, like Proust later, made detail into a scene, outer states into inner tension, so defending the ambivalence and softness of his own worlds. Notwithstanding the fact that both of them are surrogate females, their procedure of projecting the small event through the irrational depths of the spirit, gave me the rhythm

of step to enter the space of "terrible fluidity of self-revelation": I finally turn from a male-reader to a female-reader, from the structural composition of a false writer to the confused unruliness of a beginner. Entering into and blending with male characters nevertheless does not come to an end without a certain shock, for—who am I after all? And with what language should I begin to investigate this question? However, there are suddenly so many women around me asking the same things. That multiple voice has a frightening strength and I am afraid that this strength will prevent my hearing the content of the message unequivocally, insofar as there is a message at all. I am not prepared to seek anyone's attention; quite simply, I do not yet know what has been taken from me.

Seeking and reading books written by women led me to Woolf, Tsvetaeva, von Arnim, Yourcenar and a few others. But in them I can find what has already been found: the space of "a room of one's own" which has to be peopled with "the damnation and rapture" of writing. Mrs. Woolf herself first asked: what about? It is impossible that fifty years later the question should contain the same quality of content. Besides, "the terrible fluidity of self-revelation" occurred in the most delicate area: in the discovery of the truth about our own, physical, female experience. But nevertheless, it seems that the trap is wrapped in more than seven veils and in the end each of these veils deepens the transparence of the place that is sought. What place am I thinking of? It is not a place at all. It is disappearance, the negative of a place.

I return to the moment when only the mythological gods knew the secret of the original truth: the transparence of life and death. In their legendary arrogance, aggression, forgetfulness and cynicism, they made many ordinary people into either cowards or heroes, according to their mood and their own strength. However, what particularly infuriated them was man's fear not only of god but of himself. They demanded a high price for this temerity, not asking either the causes or the consequences. But today, when these gods are no more, their accounts are still dragged around, absurd in their meaning and endurance. One of these accounts is Eurydice's disappearance. That is, Eurydice, a mortal woman, is bitten by a snake as she flees from the violent Aristaeus. She dies, saving her woman's honor. So her marital innocence is not dishonored. Orpheus, Eurydice's husband, is inconsolable.

Awaking in Hades, the underground world of the dead, she is grateful to the gods for having bequeathed her "the equivalent of the life of the gods themselves." Her body is still trembling from a double coldness: from the outer, dark landscape in which a shadow cannot reflect its own body and from the inner disproportion of that body caused by the landscape itself. But the thought of her beloved Orpheus interrupts Eurydice's despair for a moment. *She must not forget* a single one of his words, a single one of his gestures, a single one of his divine songs. With this decision, which rings in her ears in the rhythm of her lost homeland, she slowly creates the concept of time, as opposed to eternity stretching out to infinity. Shadows move beside her, and she, a shadow herself, comforts them with the greatness of her love which is not reflected in loss, but in agreement. She feels that this love can be preserved only as a grain of time, not as a part of eternity. This is why she denies herself the right to summon Orpheus constantly, filling the heavy, black holes of eternity with an investigation of all their beginnings, arranged beside her in this cave like a multitude of sisters, from the youngest, to the present and momentary Eurydice, to the ends of time. She often laughed and wept over these purple girls and young women who were she, bent over the first spring primrose or evening clouds which in their soft rolling suggested the bronze color of some unknown face. Coming to these unavoidable dimensions in her memory, Eurydice broke Orpheus's voice and face into thousands of splinters which, in her kaleidoscopic memory, always formed a different and unique Singer. She understood that she could attain the order, excitement, and beauty of that event infinitely in her kaleidoscope, the imagination of her own imagination. When she wanted to, she could conjure up Orpheus's eyes, swollen with the harmonious trembling of the lyre, and herself, on the threshold of her homeland house, comforting that vision, whispering: I am here, *I hear you, I hear you.* And then, her light, firm body begins to dance, leading Orpheus from song to song. He plays as she dances; transferring the center of her body now to her hips, now to her hands. With a painfully joyful face Eurydice embodies the meaning of her simple love. Then the picture is shattered, creating in a new arrangement of splinters the magic screen of Eurydice's life within death.

This is a camera-obscura of play and remembrance; in it Orpheus is not only created but re-created. Possessing the power to project the divine

foreground of Orpheus's head with the various cameras of her spirit, the middle ground of his body and the overview of his song over the landscape, Eurydice creates many Orpheuses. Her love has become a reflection of reality within unreality. Since she is fighting against eternity, not against time, she is obliged to think of love as an unconstructed finality. Only as such could she feel pleasure and longing for it. For him.

In the cinematic illusion of self-preservation, through the dark silence of Hades, Eurydice hears the resonance of her love. Taking shots of thousands of heretical planes, the real, former content of Orpheus's face and voice blend in the cosmological imagination of Eurydice's imagination. Orpheus himself becomes a song. Its creator is Eurydice, who in the charm of her activity notices that all her love lacks is a body. It is only in that area that she feels physical pain.

All this time Orpheus, crushed with sorrow, begs the gods through the skill of his playing to give him back Eurydice. The gods being gods, in the purpose of their existence, know that people need them because of their faith in the general and not the particular, and so they promise Orpheus that they will return Eurydice to the realm of the living, if he, Orpheus, does not look round as he leads her out of Hades into the light of day. Hearing this decision in Hades, Eurydice slowly stops her projector, glad that she will be able to melt with Orpheus in a new poetics of experience. And finally, stepping behind Orpheus through Hades, she glimpses with horror her mortal face on his face turned towards her. Drunk once more with eternity, she vanishes.

Orpheus has been the subject of many discussions, of which the story by Klaus Theweleit of "Benn as Orpheus" seems the closest to me. However, in all these discussions, the figure of Orpheus, in the period between the first and the second event, is constructed in one way or the other, while Eurydice is always left in a state of disappearance, a spirit with no right to a voice. But I try to imagine what it was that she first felt, catching sight of her death in the beloved face. Surprise—because it was not that face she saw, but her own, amazed and caught in a divine trap. Death was a mirror into which Orpheus had put himself, choosing the gods and not Eurydice. However, even if Orpheus had not turned round, Eurydice's life would have been a clause in a contract in which she was never asked anything. Her departure from Hades was an unsuccessful delivery in which the

trader lost his nerve. Why? Because he did not know whether his employee was returning the same as before or with something added which he did not recognize. This fear, on which the gods had counted, forced Orpheus to turn round, and without the threat of Eurydice's quadraphonic love, to be left weeping alone. His song may be multiplied indefinitely.

Returning to Hades once more, Eurydice, drugged with the appalling pain which only treachery can cause, understands the full meaning of her *subterraneanness:* without love, without a voice, without choice. And up there, Orpheus will wretchedly praise her qualities, her beauty and devotion, those characteristics of a virtually decorative being. Eurydice died twice; the first time fleeing from a man, the second time running towards another. In all of it she forgot what was most important: the space of her love "in between." This love was left as an unfulfilled event, a negative which is always referred to as permanent disappearance. Can this place nevertheless be rendered visible? Can Eurydice speak like a self-made woman who has filled the womb of her personal Hades by driving out emptiness and darkness, remembering fire, not as an apocryphal element but in the personal pain of her forged capacity to endure? And what is that fire? And to whom is it directed?

Of course, as the story fades away, Eurydice becomes an increasingly visible metaphor. The event which did not experience the unification of its symbols demanded its continuation as "invention," as *in the name of. . . . We know the fate of that in the name of:* everywhere, including in literature, it has been created through the name of men. They have lent women their voices, not suspecting that the falsetto often sounds completely grotesque and depraved.

But when in the 19th-century fairy story "The Emperor's New Clothes" some child (a girl, I'm sure) shouted: "The Emperor is naked!" everyone closed their mouths in fear, not daring to confirm the truth. But the truth had been voiced: the emperor's nakedness was not covered by any divine cloth but by a deception which could not be disclosed because of the law. I note this event as the place of Eurydice's possible appearance. Instead of "The Emperor is naked!" in another situation the child shouts: "That isn't a woman!" Again everyone stays silent in terror, laws are laws, until some woman, the most conscious of them all, confirms: "That *really* isn't a woman. That's a man dressed as a woman." The noise that

breaks over her is the weary monochrome of Orpheus's voices. But the woman, that welcome Eurydice, now knows very well the incurable fear around her and does not want to quarrel. What is more, her delight is not a pragmatic victory, but a new place of creative doubt which has to be differentiated like every other terrible fluidity of self-revelation, a voice which blends with the body. Emotion expressed in words. The One sunk into the Other.

translated by Celia Hawkesworth