



VOLUME 10 ISSUE 2

The International Journal of

Literary Humanities

Orpheus, the Poetics of Silence,
and the Humanities

ANGELA PITTS

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF LITERARY HUMANITIES

www.thehumanities.com

First published in 2013 in Champaign, Illinois, USA
by Common Ground Publishing
University of Illinois Research Park
2001 South First St, Suite 202
Champaign, IL 61820 USA

www.CommonGroundPublishing.com

ISSN: ISSN 2327-7912

© 2013 (individual papers), the author(s)
© 2013 (selection and editorial matter) Common Ground

All rights reserved. Apart from fair dealing for the purposes of study, research, criticism or review as permitted under the applicable copyright legislation, no part of this work may be reproduced by any process without written permission from the publisher. For permissions and other inquiries, please contact <cg-support@commongroundpublishing.com>.

The International Journal of Literary Humanities is a peer-reviewed scholarly journal.

Orpheus, the Poetics of Silence, and the Humanities

Angela Pitts, University of Mary Washington College, USA

Abstract: In the Vergilian version of the katabasis of Orpheus, spatial and interpersonal silences serve to punctuate both the extraordinary poetic triumph of Orpheus and the tragic consequences of his failure. The katabatic hero is a recurring archetype in classical poetry: the ability of a living being whose soul is still attached to corporeal flesh to enter the realm of the dead and return alive marks the hero as one who possesses exceptional status. Unlike the successful journeys to the underworld of other epic heroes like Odysseus and Aeneas, the tragic failure of Orpheus' katabasis ultimately results in the brutal silencing of his art. His failure to meet the objective of his katabasis leads to a failure of poetics, a failure ironically foreshadowed by the success that he encounters at various stages of his journey, which are marked by curious silencings, as the custodians, criminals and topographical features of the Underworld give way into total quiescence upon hearing his song. This paper will examine the rhetoric of silence in the Vergilian adaptation of the myth of Orpheus, and suggest that Vergil's unique adaptation of the myth may be read as allegorically relevant to the struggle of the Humanities disciplines to survive in the contemporary academy.

Keywords: Vergil, Orpheus, Classical Literature, Classical Poetry, Myth or Mythology, Humanities

“There are many ways to stimulate the imagination, from reading literature, studying and creating art, to reviewing history. But, the lynchpins that most often tie other studies together are history and story-telling, oral and written. No disciplines outside the Humanities more effectively allow us to put on the shoes of others in past ages and different circumstances.”¹

State support for higher education in the contentious political and economic climate of the United States is waning. As states place conditions on how institutions of higher education may spend their decreased budgets and as they place caps on what institutions may earn through tuition and fee increases, disciplines in the Humanities have had to rely on varying degrees of benevolence, persuasive power and support from administrations to make the case for disciplines that do not offer obvious vocational tracks. Draconian budget cuts, where applied, have generally been levied first against the Humanities, leaving whole disciplines struggling for survival. Jim Leach, the Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, recently reported that federally funded research in the Humanities in the U.S. constitutes about 1/25,000th of the federal budget, “barely more per capita than the cost of a postage stamp.”² Various practical and ideological apologetics seem to have had little persuasive impact. Robert Watson's cost/benefit analysis of student-credit hours, fee levels, and general fund expenditure, for example, has argued that Humanities faculty and courses are relatively cheap and generate profits for institutions,³ while Jim Leach makes the utilitarian argument (“How can we compete in our own markets if we don't write, think and communicate well and understand our own culture and

¹ I would like to offer my immeasurable gratitude to Federico Schneider and Teresa Kennedy, whose views do not necessarily reflect my own, for the many conversations which inspired this paper. Thanks also to Joseph Romero, who read multiple versions of this paper, and to the editor and blind readers for their thoughtful suggestions, which undoubtedly served to improve. Leach, Jim. “The Power of the Humanities.” Presented at the American Council of Learned Societies, Philadelphia, PA on May 11, 2012. www.neh.gov/about/chairman/speeches/the-power-the-humanities. Accessed June 11, 2012.

² Leach, Jim. “Humanities and Citizenship” Presented at the National Academy of Education 2011 Annual Meeting at George Washington University, October 28, 2011. www.neh.gov/about/chairman/speeches/humanities-and-citizenship. Accessed June 11, 2012.

³ Watson, Robert N. “Bottom Line shows Humanities Really Do Make Money.” *UCLA Today*. March 13, 2010. <http://www.today.ucla.edu/portal/ut/bottom-line-shows-humanities-really-155771.aspx>. Accessed May 9, 2012.

its enormous variety of subcultures; or abroad if we don't understand foreign languages, histories and traditions?")⁴ in most of his public speeches. Martha Nussbaum (2010) and Geoffrey Galt Harpham (2011) have each argued that: marketing Humanities "skills" (critical thinking, empathy, imagination, effective communication, etc.) as professional skills betrays our responsibility to preserve and transmit timeless monuments of culture (*ars gratia artis*) in favor of credentialing students to enter the job market of the moment; and that education should not be reduced to a corporatized and instrumentalized function of the gross national product. In a series of NY Times Op Eds, Stanley Fish lambasted both Robert Watson's "Bottom Line" and other utilitarian arguments in favor of a more pessimistic view, claiming that these arguments persuade no one, and that the Humanities cannot be argued to "do" anything except offer pleasure. Moreover, he touts, "higher education, properly understood, is distinguished by the absence of a direct and designed relationship between its activities and measurable effects in the world."⁵ Frank Donoghe (2008) offers among the most pessimistic of assessments, arguing that the Humanities do not face a crisis (which suggest that a natural order may eventually be reestablished), but near-extinction as vocationally streamlined curricula will soon push out most other offerings of corporatized universities.

As we defend (among other disciplines) the relevance of the classics at the historical heart of the liberal arts, we may do well to apply that relevance to help us negotiate our way through our current 'crisis'. The classical poets, who offered *lene consilium*⁶ ("gentle counsel") in response to the crises of their own ages and whom we now endeavor to protect from disappearance, may be turned to as guides, just as Dante looked to Vergil and his predecessors to provide an enlightened path through the political and social turmoil of the Italian *trecento*. This paper turns to Vergil's adaptation of the myth of Orpheus for counsel on what is at stake for the Humanities.

Vergil's adaptation of the Orphic myth centers on the theme of artistic consciousness, and it is precisely this condition which lies at the soul-center of Humanist inquiry. Having inherited the story from a variety of Greek sources (including Euripides, Plato, Palaephatus, Hermesianax, and Moschus), Vergil may have invented the second loss of Eurydice as a "symbolic postlude" for his own *Georgics*.⁷ Unlike the journeys to the underworld of other epic heroes like Odysseus and Aeneas, the tragic irony of the *katabasis* of Orpheus in Vergil's adaptation resides in the fact that Orpheus' poetic triumph ultimately results in the brutal silencing of his art. This paper will examine the rhetoric of silence in the Vergilian adaptations of the myth of Orpheus, focusing particularly on the unique narratological value of the various kinds of silences (speechlessness, muteness, stillness, dumbness, quietude, etc.). In the realm of Tartarus, spatial and interpersonal silences serve to punctuate both the extraordinary poetic triumph of Orpheus and the tragic

⁴ Leach, Jim. "The Power of the Humanities." Presented at the American Council of Learned Societies, Philadelphia, PA on May 11, 2012. www.neh.gov/about/chairman/speeches/the-power-the-humanities. Accessed June 11, 2012.

⁵ Fish, Stanley. "The Crisis in the Humanities Finally Arrives." *The New York Times*. October 11, 2010. www.opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/10/11/the-crisis-of-the-humanities-officially-arrives. Accessed June 4, 2012; "The Crisis of the Humanities II." *The New York Times*. October 18, 2010. www.opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/10/11/the-crisis-of-the-humanities-ii. Accessed June 4, 2012. Quote taken from the op-ed, "The Last Professor." *The New York Times*. January 18, 2009. www.opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/01/18/the-last-professor. Accessed June 12, 2012.

⁶ Lee (1996, p. 138) suggests that the lines, "*lene consilium et datis et dato/ gaudetis, almae*" ("You give gentle counsel and you rejoice when gentle counsel has been given, nourishing ones." Horace, *Odes* 3.4.37-42) refer to the four-day reading of Vergil's *Georgics* to Octavian in 29 B.C.E., and indicate that Horace understood Vergil's *Georgics* as a poetic method of offering advice "to a man who very much needed to hear it."

⁷ For a discussion of the variations of the myth in the Greek antecedents, see Lee (1996, p. 1-11), who eloquently states (p. 11): "Virgil wanted a symbolic postlude for his *Georgics*. Orpheus must have seemed the mythic figure best suited to his purposes. Orpheus' songs, like Virgil's own, were sung for trees and animals. His rituals were, like Virgil's poem, concerned with both agriculture and the mysteries of life and death. Only one element seemed lacking. In other myths that told of the seasons, of the crop cycle, and of the annual death and rebirth of the land, the dead person—Persephone, Castor, Adonis—is allowed to return to earth only for a time. Orpheus' wife, in the tradition, was restored on no such terms. To turn the Orpheus Eurydice myth into a story suited to his purposes, Virgil needed more than his predecessors had provided." Heath (1994), however, argues that there is no compelling evidence to suggest that earlier Hellenic versions of the story ever represented Orpheus returning to the upper-air from the underworld with his wife.

consequences of his failure. The rhetoric of silence thus epitomizes the ambiguous and precarious position of the poet-prophet, for whom visionary perception and artistic expression may be subject to the political and social agendas of an implacable institution of power.

The failure of Orpheus is rather unique among archetypal *katabasis* (Descent to the Underworld) myths: in Greco-Roman poetry, the ability of a living being whose soul is still attached to corporeal flesh to enter, as Ovid put it (*Met.* 10.30), the *vasti silentia regni* (“the silences of the vast kingdom”) of the realm of the dead and return alive marks the hero as one who possesses exceptional status. Orpheus returns from his descent alive (at least temporarily). Unlike the journeys to the underworld of other epic heroes like Odysseus and Aeneas, however, the tragic irony of Orpheus resides in the fact that the goal of his *katabasis*, to save the soul of another, results in a failure so total as to bring about the brutal disembodiment of the extraordinary voice that secured his re-ascension.⁸ The symbolism of the myth is timeless and, thus, instructive. As Mircea Eliade noted (1991, p. 57-8):

“In narrating a myth, one reactualises, in some sort, the sacred time in which the events narrated took place...it follows that the narration of the myths is not without consequences for him who recites and those who listen. From the mere fact of the narration of a myth, profane time is—at least symbolically—abolished...Merely by listening to a myth, man forgets his profane condition, his “historical situation” as we are accustomed to call it today.”

That is not to say that myths are not called upon to mirror, to reflect back to the narrator and to the audience elements of the human condition that may be observed in the specific conflicts and struggles unique to the “historical situation” of the profane time of the recitation, as Vergil’s *Georgics* was surely meant to do.

Social and Political Context of Vergil’s *Georgics*

Vergil’s *Georgics* offers the sensitive reflection of a poet who had been witness to an extraordinarily bloody and prolonged series of civil wars. Vergil had grown up in an era marked by nearly a century of mob riots, battles between Roman factions fought on Italian and foreign soil, bloody proscriptions, treason, arson, political corruption, tyranny, dictatorships, and, ultimately, the dissolution of the five centuries old Roman Republic. Servius (*Vita Servii* 25) and Donatus (*Vita Donati* 25, 27) are united in reporting that Vergil read the poem to his patron Maecenas and his patron’s patron, Octavian, in 29 B.C.E., just two years following Octavian’s victory against Antony and Cleopatra at the Battle of Actium and two years prior to the Senate’s conference upon Octavian of the title *Augustus*. Along with the title came the extraordinary power, granted for life, of *imperium proconsulare*.

During the years between the publication of the *Georgics* and the composition of the *Aeneid*, Octavian established himself as Augustus, emperor of Rome, with ambitions of producing a dynasty that would (and did) drain the Senate of any real power. He consolidated what came to be known as the Roman Empire into the ideal of *Pax Romana* and launched a propaganda campaign, unrivaled in its scope, which sought to: (1.) erase public memory of the civil war that birthed his ambitious early career; and (2.) establish himself as a new Aeneas, descended of the Roman Pantheon and fated by Jupiter to bring Rome into a *novus ordo saeculorum* (“New Order of the Ages”).⁹ The political landscape of Rome shifted almost inconceivably as one man

⁸ The great comparative religionist Eliade (1991, p. 164-166) compares the mythic story of Orpheus to the shamanic practice in indigenous cultures of journeying to the Underworld to retrieve the patient’s soul, which has been snatched away by demons. Orpheus’ *katabasis* is not undergone, like so many other mythic heroes, for his own “spiritual perfection” (i.e., the conquest of immortality), but “for the salvation of others.”

⁹ This phrase, of course, appears on the Great Seal of the United States, and takes its derivation from Vergil, *Eclogues* 4.4-5: “Ultima Cumaei venit iam carminis aetas;/ magnus ab integro saeculorum nascitur ordo.” (“Now comes the final age

accrued unprecedented authority and power. Vergil used the myth of Orpheus in the *Georgics* to contemplate the relationship between the poet and his art amidst these emerging and profound changes that would define an epoch.

Octavian, Orpheus, Tartarus and Silence in Vergil's *Georgics*

The Georgics begins with an elaborate proem of 42 lines, consisting of just two sentences (the first, 23 lines; the second, 19), with 19 lines dedicated to an invocation to agricultural deities (Liber, Ceres, Achelous, Fauns, Triptolemus, Dryads, Aristaeus, Pan, Silvanus, etc.), succeeded by another 19 lines of invocation to Octavian. The second half of the invocation, the half pertaining to Octavian, begins with a reference to his status as a conquering general under whose *imperium* and *auctoritas* the whole world (*maximus orbis*) has recently fallen. His future place among the gods is guaranteed, but over which domain is still to be determined (1.24-35):

tuque adeo, quem mox quae sint habitura deorum
concilia incertum est, urbisne invisere, Caesar,
terrarumque velis curam, et te **maximus orbis**
auctorem frugum tempestatumque potentem
accipiat cingens materna tempora myro;
an deus immensi venias maris ac tua nautae
numina sola colant, tibi serviat ultima Thyle,
te sibi generum Tethys emat omnibus undis;
anne novum tardis sidus te mensibus addas,
qua locus Erigonen inter Chelasque sequentis
panditur (ipse tibi iam bracchia contrahit ardens
Scorpius et caeli iusta plus parte reliquit);

And, you, too, Caesar, whose upcoming place on the gods' council has yet to be determined, whether you wish to watch over cities and tend the lands, while the whole world accepts you as the bringer of fruits and master of the seasons, crowning your head with your mother's [Venus's] myrtle; or whether you come as the god of the vast sea and sailors worship solely your divinity, as Thyle in the far north serves you, and Tethys in all her waves wins you as a son-in-law; or, whether you join the heavens as a new star, where a space spreads out between Virgo and Scorpio.

Rivaling the statuses of Neptune and Jupiter, Caesar will have domain over sea, earth, or sky. Vergil then includes the fourth region of the cosmos, the Netherworld, by way of *praeteritio* (1.36-42):

Quidquid eris (nam te nec spirant Tartara regem,
Nec tibi regnandi veniat tam dira cupido,
Quamvis Elysios miretur Graecia campos
Nec repetita sequi curet Proserpina matrem)
da facilem cursum atque audacibus adnue coeptis,
ignarosque viae mecum miseratus agrestis
ingredere et votis iam nunc adsuesce vocari.

of the Cumaean song/ a great order of ages is born anew.”). Above the inscription of “novus ordo saeculorum” on the Great Seal appears another Vergilian phrase, “annuit coeptis” (“and he nodded approval at the beginnings”) which appears in both the *Georgics* (addressed to Octavian, 1.40, “da facilem cursum atque audacibus annue coeptis”; “give an easy course and nod approval to my daring beginnings”) and the *Aeneid* as a prayer from Ascanius as he is about to enter his first battle (9.625, “Jupiter omnipotens, audacibus annue coeptis”; “Jupiter all-powerful, nod approval at my daring beginnings.”)

Whatever (god) you will be (for Tartarus hopes not for you as king, and may no such rash desire for ruling it come to you, even though Greece may marvel at the Elysian fields and Proserpina returned should have no interest in following her mother), grant an easy course and approve my bold beginnings, and, having pity for the farmers who, along with me, are ignorant of the way, come forth and agree to be summoned by our prayers.

The *praeteritio* is subtle, but significant, functioning as a deft rhetorical strategy for drawing particular attention to the very possibility the poet seems to be denying with parenthetical dismissiveness. The tone of dismay that registers impossibility at the prospect of Caesar ruling over the wasteland of Hell in this elaborate beginning of a four-book poem foreshadows the poem's climax in the final book, in which Orpheus journeys to Tartarus to retrieve his beloved Eurydice, only to lose her a second time. This foreshadowing is bolstered by the reference to Proserpina (line 1.39), who will be swayed by Orpheus' song to let him take Eurydice, and who will also command him not to glance backward until they arrive at the Upper Air. This initial seemingly dismissive reference to Tartarus must later be re-interpreted by the reader as references to Tartarus accumulate in the poem (1.242-49; 1.276-83) and finally culminate in the poet's journey to Tartarus as a result of the violent lust (*c.f.*, the *dira cupido*, 1.37) of the bee-keeper Aristaeus, whom M. Owen Lee (1996) persuasively and masterfully argued was intended by Vergil to resonate as Octavian. The *dira cupido* of line 1.37 ("may no rash desire come to you to rule over Hell"), in light of the poem's ending, serves as a more urgent warning to his audience than it initially appears to be.

In the metaphorical system of the *Georgics*, Tartarus offers a spatial antagonist to the idyllic, fertile, agrarian, Golden Age, utopian Italia once nourished by *Iustitia*. As a divinity on par with Olympian Jove, Caesar must steward properly the new world order so that it may flourish with renewal and fertility, become once again a *iustissima tellus*, and be, as Vergil puts it in book 2, "the imperishable empire of the Roman Republic" (*non res Romanae perituraque regna*, 2.498). The problems of politics may be overcome with reverence for the gods, hard work (*labor*), and rigorous cultivation and care for the land. The dystopic landscape of Tartarus resonates as a parallel world, boding devastation, irrecoverable loss, severest punishment, unbearable grief, inescapable hopelessness—an eternally *peritura regna* that *furor* of any kind, however fleeting, may unleash. It is Proserpina, the goddess of death and rebirth and the Queen of this realm, who gives Orpheus the commandment not to look back at this world of desolation if he is to bring life back to his beloved (*namque hanc dederat Proserpina legem*, 4.487), and with her command broken as a result of momentary *furor*, all hope for Orpheus is lost.

Silence and, in the conceptual framework of this poem, its opposite, conceived as a sound of deep thundering, punctuate the Olympian/Tartaran tensions as these two co-existing dominions of the universe envelop all *Natura* with the sacred potential for life, death, utter devastation, and regeneration. Repeatedly, silence and/or thundering or bellowing provide the soundscapes of the depths and expanses of the extreme poles of the universe. The forests and high Olympus (*longus Olympus*), for example, resound with the great groan (*vasto...gemitu*, 3.222-223) of bulls when, inflamed into madness by *amor*, they lock horns in battle. By contrast, the following passage from book one stresses the silence of *nox* that encompasses the netherworld, conceived of by Homer (*Odyssey*, 11.11-22) as lying beyond Oceanus:¹⁰

hic vertex nobis semper sublimis; at illum
sub pedibus Styx atra videt Manesque profundi.
maximus hic flexu sinuoso elabitur Anguis

¹⁰ According to the instructions of Circe, Odysseus (*Odyssey*, 11.11-22) sails in a boat that requires no helmsman past the setting of the sun, past the Cimmerians who dwell in misty shadow, and he finally reaches the far shores of Oceanus, the netherworld home of Persephone, wherein he will speak to the shades of the dead.

circum perque duas in morem fluminis Arctos,
Arctos Oceani metuentis aequore tingi.
illic, ut perhibent, aut **intempesta silet nox**
semper et obtenta densentur nocte tenebrae;
(1.242-48)¹¹

Here the summit is always lofty over us; but black Styx under foot sees it, as do the Spirits of the Dead. Here Draco with his sinuous winding glides around and between the two Bears just like a river, the Bears who fear to touch the edge of Oceanus' waters. There, as they say, a Night which knows no seasons forever pervades in silence and shadows are thickened by far-reaching night...

The two bear constellations fear to dip into the Oceanus' far waters because Silence and Night pervade the edge of Oceanus, beyond which is the long night of Death. While silence extends throughout the Underworld in the *Georgics*, thundering is the sound that originates from and permeates the Heavens:

at Boreae de parte trucidis cum **fulminat** et cum
Eurique Zephyrique tonat domus, omnia plenis
rura natant fossis atque omnis navita ponto
umida vela legit. (1.370-73)

But when lightening appears from the region of the North Wind and when the homes of the Southern and Western Winds thunder, all the ditches in the fields are full of water and every sailor on the sea furls wet sails.

In another passage that uses sound to heighten the tension in the spatial relationship between Tartarus and Olympus, Vergil alludes to features of Tartarus that will appear later in the Orphic scene (pale Orcus and the Eumenides; *pallidus Orcus/ Eumenidesque*, 1.277-78; *c.f.*, 4.482 and 4.502, both discussed below) just before Jupiter wields the thunderbolt to strike down (significantly, three times) the insurrecting Titans who had (significantly, three times) attempted to assail Mt. Olympus by piling Mt. Ossa onto Mt. Pelius in Heaven's great mythic civil war:

quintam fuge: pallidus Orcus
Eumenidesque satae, tum partu Terra nefando
Coeumque Iapetumque creat saevumque Typhoea
et coniuratos caelum rescindere fratres.
ter sunt conati imponere Pelio Ossam
scilicet atque Ossae frondosum involvere Olympum;
ter pater exstructos disiecit fulmine montis. (1.277-83)

(on that day) pale Orcus and the Furies were born, then in infamous labor Earth bore Coeus and Iapetus and savage Typhon and the brothers who conspired to destroy Heaven. Three times they tried to pile Ossa onto Pelius and then to roll wooded Olympus onto Ossa; three times father Jupiter blasted apart the piled mountains with his lightening-bolt.

As we shall soon see, the emphatic repetition of *ter* ("thrice") at the beginning of lines 1.281 and 1.283 will be capped off at the climax of the poem with the third *ter* (4.493), linking this

¹¹ In Hesiod's *Theogony* (lines 116-138), one of Vergil's most significant Greek sources, Tartarus, Night (Nyx), Murky Darkness (Erebus, rendered in the line 1.248 of the *Georgics* as *tenebrae*) and Oceanus are among the first primeval entities in the nascent universe.

passage of the Olympian thundering to the thundering in Avernus as Orpheus glances backward, breaking his pact with Proserpina and rendering all his labor lost. These examples of silences and thundering are preludes to the sounds and silences that pervade the jaws of Taenarum and the high gates of Dis entered into by Orpheus, within which dwell the *Manes...regemque tremendum/ nesciaque humanis precibus mansuescere corda* (“The Spirits of the Dead and the ruler who must be trembled at and hearts which do not know how to become softened by human prayers,” 4.469-70). The shades in the innermost recesses of Erebus are moved by Orpheus’ song (*at cantu commotae Erebi de sedibus imis/ umbrae*; “the Shades of Erebus were moved from out of their innermost recesses by his song,” lines 4.471-72) to such a degree that all movement halts and all other sound gapes in silence:

quin ipsae stupuere domus atque intima Leti
Tartara caeruleosque implexae crinibus anguis
Eumenides, tenuitque inhians tria Cerberus ora,
atque Ixioni vento rota constitit orbis. (4.481-84)

but, the House of Death itself was stupefied and the innermost chambers of Tartarus and the Furies with dark snakes woven into their hair, and Cerberus held his triple mouths agape, and the wheel of Ixion stopped in the wind.

The very shades of the dead which have hearts unknowing how to soften at human prayers (*nesciaque humanis precibus mansuescere corda*, 4.470), reminiscent of the Octavian whom Vergil asks at the beginning of the poem to be moved by prayers and approve his new poem (see above, 1.42), are moved beyond what is possible to experience pity at Orpheus’ song. The netherworld, which Vergil had earlier described as a silent Night (1.247), but which here seems to have been a place bustling with activity and sound prior to Orpheus’ entrance, stupefies with the immense motionless of an audience straining to hear every audible vibration. Yet, there are two audiences here—Orpheus’ audience, whose reaction to the incantation Vergil intimates by their responsive silence, and Vergil’s audience, who are not treated to a recitation of this song, but only to Vergil’s silence. The song itself which moved unpitied gods of Death to pity is not relayed by Vergil; while *his* audience must imagine its haunting beauty by the stupefaction of Orpheus’ audience, the fact that he does not relay it leads one to question whether the whole of the *Georgics* is *his* Orphic song, intending to soften the heart of his new deity, whom he begs in the proem not to take position as the ruler of the Underworld, characterized in the Orphic passage as knowing not know how to be moved by human prayers.

The silence that pervades Dis after Orpheus’ song will soon erupt into thundering. Just as he is about to emerge into the upper air with Eurydice behind him, a sudden madness (*dementia*) takes hold of the incautious lover (*incautum...amantem*, 4.488), a madness which, we are told, is “pardonable, if only the Spirits of the Dead knew how to pardon” (*ignoscenda quidem, scirent si ignoscere Manes*, 4.489):

iamque pedem referens casus evaserat omnis,
redditaque Eurydice superas veniebat ad auras
pone sequens (**namque hanc dederat Proserpina legem**)
cum subita incautum dementia cepit amantem,
ignoscenda quidem, scirent si ignoscere Manes:
restitit, Eurydicenque suam iam luce sub ipsa
immemor heu! victusque animi respexit. ibi omnis
effusus labor atque immitis rupta tyranni
foedera, **terque fragor stagnis auditus Avernis.**
illa ‘quis et me’ inquit ‘miseram et te perdidit, Orpheu,
quis tantus furor?’ en iterum crudelia retro

fata vocant, conditque natantia lumina somnus. (4.485-496)

and now retracing his steps, he had avoided every danger, and Eurydice restored was arriving at the upper airs as she followed behind (for Proserpina had given this law), when a sudden madness seized the incautious lover, pardonable to be sure, if only the Manes knew how to pardon: he stopped, and, forgetful, alas, conquered in his spirit, he glanced backwards at his own Eurydice just as she was at the light's edge! Then all his labor was wasted and the conditions of the harsh tyrant were broken, and three times a rumble was heard in the marshes of Avernus.

"What great madness," she said, "has destroyed pitiable me and you, Orpheus?" and the cruel fates summoned her back, and sleep covered her swimming eyes.

He is forgetful and conquered of spirit (*immemor heu! victusque animi*, 4. 491) as he looks back at his beloved Eurydice, an action which Vergil characterizes as "every labor poured out" (*omnis/ effusus labor*) and "every treaty broken" (*rupta...foedera*, 4.491-3). Hell responds with a triple rumble reminiscent of Jupiter's triple lightning-bolts cast in the triple attack on Olympus during Heaven's civil war (1.281, 283; *terque fragor stagnis auditus Avernis* = 4.493). This third *ter*,¹² perhaps finalized as the last in a conceptual cohort of three with the enclitic '-que', seals the fates of Orpheus and Eurydice, who remonstrates, '*quis et me...miseram et te perdidit, Orpheu,/ quis tantus furor?*' ("What great madness has destroyed wretched me and you, Orpheus," 4.494-5). The invocation of the poem invited the reader to link conceptually the victories of Octavian after a century of civil war with those of Jupiter. And, here, the victory of Jupiter as a result of the Typhonmachy and Titanomachy is conceptually and linguistically linked to the unfathomable loss and perdition of the Orphic poet.

Having returned to the world above, Orpheus sings a *miserabile carmen* (4.514), to which Vergil again does not make the reader privy, and Orpheus refuses to bend his mind in the direction of re-marriage until Bacchantes tear him limb from limb in an act of Dionysian *sparagmos*. His decapitated head rolls down the Hebrus river, whilst his voice and disembodied tongue still echo a helpless, impotent lament for Eurydice:

Eurydicen vox ipsa et frigida lingua
a miseram Eurydicen! anima fugiente vocabat:
Eurydicen toto referebant flumine ripae. (4.535-28)

"Eurydice," only his voice and ice-cold tongue cried out, "ah, my wretched Eurydice!" as his spirit was leaving him: the banks echoed "Eurydice" along the whole river.

The pathetic death of Orpheus transitions a little too quickly for comfort into a story of rebirth,¹³ as the wondrous bees emerge from the sacrificial ox in one of the most celebrated of all the *Georgics*' passages, the *Bugonia* which closes the epyllion. Orpheus' last song reverberates, *the voice itself* refusing to die along with the man; but, out of this spectacular *sparagmos*

¹² There are nine occurrences of *ter* in the *Georgics*, all but one of which appear either in book 1 or book 4. The others are also significant (1.15; 1.345; 1.410; 2.399), particularly the repetition of *ter...ter* at the beginning of the consecutive lines, 4.384-85, when Aristaeus, mourning the loss of his bees, pays a visit to his mother Cyrene, who receives a favorable omen (in a golden line) indicating that it is divinely favored that she advise her son to visit Proteus, who will inform Aristaeus that he is being punished for his lusty pursuit of Eurydice: *ter liquido ardentem perfundit nectare Vestam,/ ter flamma ad summum tecti subiecta reluxit.*

¹³ Jacobson (1984, p. 280) described the abrupt transition between the tragic story of Orpheus to the Aristaeus resolution as a "serious problem of mood...We pass suddenly to Cyrene's speech, which ignores entirely all the suffering of Orpheus and Eurydice, and declares, in effect, 'Aristaeus, your problems are easily solved.'"

reminiscent of the tragic ending of Pentheus in Euripides' *Bacchae*, rebirth occurs for Aristaeus, the guilty party whose prolonged, rampaging *furor* in his lust for Eurydice initiated the chain of events that culminated in Orpheus' split-moment of "almost pardonable" *furor* in his attempt to bring her back to life. Aristaeus learns from Proteus, again, a little too easily, how to atone for his guilty actions and, having done so through a fairly simple series of sacrificial rituals, he lives to see his civilization of bees flourishing again.

Another transition brings once again into focus Octavian Caesar, whom the poet wished, at the beginning of the poem, would never rule over the wasteland of Tartarus, and who is now thundering in the Euphrates and making his way to Olympus with his victories:

Haec super arborum cultu pecorumque canebam
 et super arboribus, Caesar dum magnus ad altum
fulminat Euphraten bello victorque volentis
 per populos dat iura viamque adfectat Olympo.
 illo Vergilium me tempore dulcis alebat
 Parthenope studiis florentem ignobilis oti,
 carmina qui lusi pastorum audaxque iuventa,
 Tityre, te patulae cecini sub tegmine fagi. (4.559-66)

This is what I sang concerning the care of fields, flocks, and trees, while great Caesar thunders in war beside the deep Euphrates and, as a victor, gives laws to willing nations and makes his way to Olympus. Meanwhile, Naples nourished me, Vergil, flourishing in obscure quietude, I who played songs of shepherds and who dared, in my youth, to sing of you, Tityrus, under the shade of a spreading beech-tree.

Naming himself directly, Vergil suggests that he, like all poets of his age, are as tenuous in this new "thundering" world order as was Orpheus in the presence of a "ruler who must be trembled at" *regem tremendum* (4.469). This sentiment was particularly meaningful to Vergil if the story that Servius reported was true—namely, that Vergil replaced a portion of the *Georgics* devoted to praise of a fellow poet, Gallus, with his adaptation of the myth of Orpheus, when ordered to excise the *Laudes Galli* ("praises of Gallus") by Augustus. Gallus, an elegiac poet of whom Vergil was a most ardent admirer and whose work has sadly not survived antiquity, had fallen catastrophically out of favor with Octavian as a result of Gallus' alleged mismanagement of his governorship of Egypt. He was ordered by Augustus to commit suicide two years after the publication of the *Georgics*.¹⁴ And, of course, in 8 C.E., Vergil's younger contemporary Ovid will be banished by Augustus to the Black Sea. The survival of the artist's vision and enterprise are matters of real consequence when the command of a Caesar has power and authority *en par* with Jupiter's lightning bolts.

Caesar thunders (*fulminat*) victory in the Euphrates while Naples nourishes a Vergil flourishing in quietude and peace (*oti*). The sound of thunder here is a clear metaphor for *bellum*, the antithesis of which (*otium*) is not just peaceful quiet, but literary pursuits.¹⁵ Vergil states that he *boldly* (or, perhaps, *bravely*—*audax*, 4.565) sang songs "about" shepherds and flocks and

¹⁴ Servius' Vergilian commentaries (*ad Ecl.* 10.1 and *ad Georg.* 4.1) claimed that the second half of the fourth book of the *Georgics* contained praises of the elegiac poet, Cornelius Gallus, and that, under orders from Augustus following Gallus' forced suicide, Vergil removed the so-called *laudes Galli* (praises for Gallus) and replaced them with the story of Orpheus a full two years after publication of the *Georgics*. For discussions of the controversy Servius' claims have generated amongst classical scholars, see Anderson (1933), Otis (1963, p. 187-90, 213-214, and 408-413), Jacobson (1984) and Thomas (1988, vol. 1, 13-16).

¹⁵ Coleman (1977, p. 74) makes the following comment about Eclogues 1.6 (*Tityrus: O, Meliboee, deus nobis haec otia fecit*): "a specific antithesis of *otium* and *bellum* is often found; e.g., Cic. *Mur.* 30...Caes. *B.C.* 2.36...; and this is certainly relevant here, since the *otium* of the real Italian countryside has been disrupted by the civil wars and their aftermath. Finally there is an association of *otium* with the pursuit of the arts...This connotation is also relevant to Tityrus' music-making. All the overtones of this word are sounded in the famous epilogue to the *Georgics*, 4.559-66."

pastoral refugees like Meliboeus, the pastoral companion of Tityrus of the *Eclogues*,¹⁶ who openly claims that he has been displaced from his *patria* by the civil war. By alluding to the first lines of the *Eclogues*, Vergil signifies that the *otium* of which he speaks in these last lines of the *Georgics* serves as an antithesis to Caesar's war-scape in the East.¹⁷ The wars in the East were the direct result of civil war among Romans, in which proscriptions, exile, and massive displacement of countless Roman citizens were symptoms of the tumultuous, contemporary political climate in which Octavian had vigorously participated. Ring composition in the poem's invocation and conclusion, wherein the poet offers overtures specifically addressed to Octavian Caesar, frame the poem, stressing the hieratic position of the sovereign in relation to the poet. The poem begins with an invocation requesting Octavian, cast as a new Jove, to approve the poem (l. 40-42). And, the poem concludes with a *sphragis* ('seal', 'signature') in which Vergil names himself, proclaims his literary achievements, and reiterates praise of Octavian, intimating that while Octavian has supplanted Jupiter as the ruling patriarch of the universe by his "thundering" campaign in the East, Vergil has dared to practice the peaceful arts of poetic reflection.

The *Georgics*, with breath-taking beauty and balance, mourns unfathomable loss as it celebrates the hope of new life that may arise from the ashes of devastation. One need not read too far into the text to appreciate the poet's *katabatic* journey to Tartarus as a metaphor for all that this sensitive poet of this epoch has experienced. Eurydice lost through the *tantus furor* of glancing backward may be read as a sympathetic warning against looking backward, against resisting the potential that Octavian heralds by focusing too narrowly on the loss, bloodshed, and devastation that Octavian's ambitious political career brought to pass. The Orphic narrative contemplates the ethics of suffering with regard to the artistic enterprise when the poet's *vision* is directed (he may not glance backward) by a most formidable and unputting overlord.

Orpheus and the Humanities

Hailed by Dryden as the "best poem of the best poet," the *Georgics* contemplates irrecoverable destruction and loss in the human and natural world along with the natural world's potential to regenerate, renew, and redeem a world utterly devastated, and it has all but fallen from the reading lists of undergraduate curricula, even in many Classics programs. While it would be folly to argue too pointedly for socio-political parallels between Vergil's *Zeitgeist* and our own, nevertheless, the 'sacred time' of the Orphic myth embedded within *The Georgics* renders it universally relevant. As Eliade (1991, p. 178) noted, the "symbolic thinking 'breaks open' the immediate reality without any minimizing or undervaluing of it." But, I do sufficient see broad-sweeping, general parallels between Vergil's socio-political situation and our own to make Vergil's adaptation of the myth particularly meaningful. Like Vergil, we are witness to a new age of transformation as a new world order faces unprecedented technological change and geopolitical strife, and as many of us of an older generation grieve so much that has been lost in the wake of progress. These changes are to be felt everywhere: for nearly a decade, my nation has been thundering in the Euphrates once again; globalizing corporations and bio-engineering technologies are usurping the soft powers of traditional governments; the empires of the Caesars have been replaced by the empires of the Halliburton's, the pharmaceuticals and Monsanto's, and they know not how to pardon or pity.¹⁸

¹⁶ The allusion in this last line of the *Georgics* to the first line of the *Eclogues* (*Meliboeus: Tityre, tu patulae recubans sub tegmine fagi/ silvestrem tenui Musam meditaris avena;*) has been widely acknowledged and discussed.

¹⁷ *Eclogues* 1.3. Thomas (1988, p. 240) notes that Vergil also may have been thinking about the Callimachean rejection of epic projects in the phrase, "Thundering is not mine, but Zeus'" (Aet. 1, fr. 1.20), contrasted here with the idea of the poet's peacefulness and leisure.

¹⁸ See Robin (2010) for an investigation of the malicious bioengineering practices of Monsanto. For a critical examination of the pharmaceutical industry's unethical marketing strategies, see Petersen (2008). For authoritative studies of Halliburton's geopolitical influence, see Briody (2004) and Chatterjee (2009).

The academy has not been immune to these seismic shifts. Corporate culture is shaping higher education and, in some cases, directly funding academic research.¹⁹ Disciplines in the Humanities struggle to survive while administrations have become bloated and STEM disciplines, wonderful as they may be, are fed and fattened off the starvation of Classics, English, Theater, Language and Art programs. The discipline of Classics is in real peril.²⁰ Studies have shown that literary reading is experiencing an alarming decline in the U.S.,²¹ while the perverse dramas of “reality” TV shows occupy the imaginations of our students. What song are we, the Humanist descendants of Orpheus, what song are we to sing in such an age? How might we lull the beasts to sleep at our feet?²² If holding a past-ward gaze and lamenting our losses only serve to render a more pitiable perishing of the sublime, what song dare we sing to recapture the “voided gifts” of the public imagination? What expressions of *furor* must we, with great discipline, avoid in the process? If we fail, what echoes of our ancestors will still ring out along the riverbanks? And, for how long?

¹⁹ For just chilling example, see Jennifer Washburn (“Big Oil Goes to College: An Analysis of Ten Research Collaboration Contracts Between Leading Energy Companies and Major U.S. Universities.” *Center for American Progress*. October 16, 2010. http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2010/10/big_oil.html. Accessed August 16, 2012). The author, who obtained copies of the contracts through state-level public act requests, notes that “in nine of the 10 energy-research agreements we analyzed, the university partners failed to retain majority academic control over the central governing body charged with directing the university-industry alliance. Four of the 10 alliances actually give the industry sponsors full governance control.”

²⁰ According to Emily Stimpson, (“Classics programs struggle to stay alive on college campuses.” *Our Sunday Visitor*. February 27, 2011. <http://www.osv.com/tabid/7621/itemid/7541/Classics-programs-struggle-to-stay-alive-on-colleg.aspx>. (Accessed May 9, 2012), “In recent months, more than a dozen U.S. universities, including the State University of New York at Albany, Louisiana State University at Baton Rouge, the University of Maine at Orono, the University of Nevada at Reno and Florida State University, just to name a few, have either attempted to cut, suspended or actually eliminated their programs in classics.” The University of Nevada-Lincoln has opted to eliminate its Master’s program in Classics (Abourezk, Kevin. April 14, 2011. “Proposed UNL cuts include classics, art education.” *JournalStar.com* http://journalstar.com/news/local/education/article_6c6edf0f-4e23-54b7-82a3-b04ac72da8e7.html. Accessed May 9, 2012), while the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill’s Classics department received a 15% budget cut in 2011 (Will, Madeline. “Classical studies programs face uncertainty amidst budget cuts.” *DailyTarHeel.com*. November 10, 2011. http://www.dailytarheel.com/index.php/article/2011/11/classical_studies_face_uncertainty. Accessed May 9, 2012). Howard University is closing its Classics department (Berman, Russell. “The Real Language Crisis.” AAUP’s *Academe Online*. September-October, 2011. <http://www.aaup.org/AAUP/pubsres/academe/2011/SO/Feat/berm.htm>. Accessed May 9, 2012).

²¹ Office of Analysis and Research, National Endowment for the Arts. *To Read or Not To Read*. November, 2007 reports a general decline in literary reading for pleasure, particularly among college students.

²² Stanley Fish (“The Crisis of the Humanities Finally Arrives.” *NYTimes* Op-Ed 10/11/2010. <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/10/11/the-crisis-of-the-humanities-officially-arrives/> Accessed June 4, 2012) suggests that it’s not the job of the public or of university administrators “to value the humanities or even to understand them. But it is the job of presidents and chancellors to proclaim the value of liberal arts education loudly and often and at least try to make the powers that be understand what is being lost when traditions of culture and art that have been vital for hundreds and even thousands of years disappear from the academic scene.”

REFERENCES

- Anderson, W. B. 1933. "Gallus and the Fourth Georgic," *Classical Quarterly* 27: 36-45, 73.
- Anderson, William S. 1982. "The Orpheus of Virgil and Ovid: flebile nescio quid," in Warden, John (ed.), *Orpheus: The Metamorphosis of a Myth*. Toronto: 25-50.
- Bowra, C. Maurice. 1952. "Orpheus and Eurydice," *Classical Quarterly* 2:113-126.
- Briody, Dan. 2004. *The Halliburton Agenda: The Politics of Oil and Money*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Chatterjee, Pratap. 2009. *Halliburton's Army: How a Well-Connected Texas Oil Company Revolutionized the Way America Makes War*. New York, NY: Nation Books.
- Coleman, Robert. 1977. *Virgil: Eclogues*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Donoghe, Frank. 2008. *The Last Professors: The Corporate University and the Fate of the Humanities*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Eliade, Mircea. 1991. *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Harpham, Geoffrey Galt. 2011. *The Humanities and the Dream of America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Heath, John. 1994. "The Failure of Orpheus," *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 124: 163-196.
- Jacobson, Howard. 1984. "Aristaeus, Orpheus, and the Laudes Galli," *American Journal of Philology* 105.3: 271-300.
- Lee, M. Owen. 1996. *Virgil as Orpheus*. Albany, NY: SUNY University Press.
- Nussbaum, Martha C. 2010. *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Otis, Brooks. 1963. *Virgil: A Study in Civilized Poetry*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Petersen, Melody. 2008. *Our Daily Meds: How the Pharmaceutical Companies Transformed Themselves Into Slick Marketing Machines and Hooked the Nation on Prescription Drugs*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Robin, Marie-Monique. 2010. *The World According to Monsanto: Pollution, Corruption, and the Control of the World's Food Supply*. New York, NY: The New Press.
- Segal, Charles P. 1966. "Orpheus and the Fourth Georgic," *American Journal of Philology* 87.3: 307-325.
- Thomas, Richard F. 1988. *Virgil: Georgics*, 2 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Angela Pitts: Dr. Pitts is an Associate Professor of Classics at the University of Mary Washington College. Her research interests include Archaic Greek lyric, epic poetry, and the poetry of Ovid and Vergil.

The International Journal of Literary Humanities is one of five thematically focused journals in the collection of journals that support the New Directions in the Humanities knowledge community—its journals, book series, conference, and online community.

The literary humanities analyze and interpret literatures and literary practices. Their role is to locate texts and stabilize bodies of work into traditions and genres. Or, in a critical orientation, the literary humanities may also seek to unsettle received expressive forms and conventional interpretations. This journal explores these dimensions of the literary humanities, in a contemporary context where the role and purpose of the humanities in general, and literary humanities in particular, is frequently contested.

As well as papers of a traditional scholarly type, this journal invites presentations of literary practice—including unpublished literary pieces. These can either be short pieces included within the body of article or if longer, referenced pieces that are readily available in the public domain (for instance, via web link).

Documentation of the literary practice in the article should include factors such as contextual explanation, interpretative exegeses and audience analysis.

The International Journal of Literary Humanities is a peer-reviewed scholarly journal.

ISSN 2327-7912

