

The Making of Art(ists)

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Ralph Waldo Emerson, who was a kind of American Buddha, wrote in his essay “Art” (1841):

There is higher work for Art than the arts...Nothing less than the creation of man and nature is its end...its highest effect is to make new artists.

And in “Self-Reliance”:

A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within, more than the lustre of the firmament of bards and sages. Yet he dismisses without notice his thought, because it is his. In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts: they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty.

A resonant call indeed! We feel the need to respond better than we have done up to now.

Perhaps no better mythic icon of Art could be held up than Orpheus. Western culture owes much to Orpheus, an extremely ancient figure. His lore comes down to us mainly via the Greek philosophers, poets, and playwrights; and his cult, which was popular in Greece, Rome and other places. As is usual for such a figure, little is known for sure about the origin of his story: whether an actual person (likely, perhaps, but like most ancient mythic figures the story has accreted so many embellishments that we cannot know exactly he was, and anyway it matters little); an ancient god who declined in status to that of a tragic, almost human, personage, whose presence we feel in the tales about him; a folk-hero writ on a larger canvas than is common.

An excellent sourcebook is W K C Guthrie’s magisterial study *Orpheus and Greek Religion* on the myth and nature of Orpheus: supreme musician, enlightener of men and beasts through music, himself neither god nor man, who combined the orthogonal qualities of Apollo and Dionysius. His fate was to live and to die by passion, and to attain the immortality conferred by thus having truly lived.

Orpheus represents *song* and *music* as a powerful force in human life. His song, it is told, could turn men’s hearts from violence to peace, and even calm violent storms. His iconography—he is often depicted on Greek vases—shows him with a lyre, singing to birds and animals that crowd around him to listen. In this it differs from the iconography of Apollo who often carries a lyre but has no audience.

One greatly admires Rilke's profound poetic cycle "Sonnets to Orpheus." Here is Stephen Mitchell's translation of Book 1, Sonnet 3:

*A god can do it. But will you tell me how
a man can penetrate through the lyre's strings?
Our mind is split. And at the shadowed crossing
of heart-roads there is no temple for Apollo.*

*Song, as you have taught it, is not desire,
not wooing any grace that can be achieved;
song is reality. Simple, for a god.
But when can we be real? When does he pour*

*the earth, the stars, into us? Young man,
it is not your loving, even if your mouth
was forced wide open by your own voice – learn*

*to forget that passionate music. It will end.
True singing is a different breath, about
nothing. A gust inside the god. A wind.*

In the most familiar telling of his story, Orpheus falls in love with Eurydice, whose name means in Greek "she of vast rule" or "she who shows all." She was sometimes called by an alternate name "Agriope" which means "savage face." Perhaps she represents passion itself, especially the passion for erotic union.

Eurydice died as a result of stepping on a viper, which bit her. Orpheus, aiming to retrieve her from Hades, the underworld, played such beautifully mournful music that he was allowed to enter. His song even charmed Cerberus, the dreadful dog-guard of Hades. Eurydice was allowed to return to the living with Orpheus, under condition that he walk in front of her and not look back. But, consumed by passion, he could not resist looking back to see if she was really there, or only an apparition. She disappeared, sucked back into Hades.

Orpheus, bereft, renounced woman. Some say he became homosexual. Dionysius, whose orgiastic cult was widespread in ancient Greece, became jealous of Orpheus' power, and his Apollonian rejection of eros. He ordered his female followers the Maenads to tear Orpheus limb from limb. His soul went back to the underworld where he was reunited in eternity with Eurydice.

Parallel stories are widespread. One such is the story of Quetzalcoatl, important to the Aztecs and Mayans as is known from surviving texts, and from stonework temples such as in Teotihuacan, which predates the Aztecs. The name Quetzal-coatl translates as "feathered," or "beautiful," serpent. Again, this expresses a dual nature. Like Orpheus Quetzalcoatl was a promethean figure, regarded sometimes as human, sometimes divine, but not exactly either, who brought to mankind culture, arts, crafts, a good way of living, and especially poetry and music. Arriving in Mexico from the sea, he took an oath never to have intercourse with

woman, and never to take intoxicating drink. But he was seduced by a witch jealous of his fame and power who tricked him into drinking a psychedelic beverage. His sentence was similar to that of Persephone, to live half time in the underworld, half in the world of light and life. He is identified with the planet we know as Venus, which is hidden half of each year in the glare of the sun¹.

The deep significance of the Orpheus story seems to be about passion, especially sexual passion. This most compelling of human drives easily becomes an addiction. Fixating on a particular other, or on multiple others, the other becomes a “sex object.” But passion eventually comes to an end, from its normal cooling with the passage of time, or from death or loss of the other, or from a sense of guilt, or because of external events. If the person is deeply addicted, this leads to a crisis of identity—is the person merely his passion, which for the addict often seems to be his reason for living, or is he something independent of passion?

Does man in full require an Apollonian side, an inner freedom, free even from passion? Must he take up and perfect Apollo’s lyre of song and poetry, not to woo woman but to elevate all people?

The ancient analogical image of man as an equipage composed of horse, carriage, and driver comes to mind. The horse represents desire, passion, “e-motion,” that which moves the equipage. An ancient “teaching” image, one of its teachings is that the mind, the driver, must be developed to the point where it can control the horse, and can oversee maintenance of the carriage, the physical body. Only such a developed mind would be able to resist the tendency of the horse to charge off in any direction it desires.

A similar idea is projected in other traditions: in Buddhism *desire* is the root of inner slavery; in Christianity man’s constant yielding to desire is the “original sin” that had to be expiated by the murder of Christ, a self-sacrifice that each Christian must undergo in his own heart.

But we can recognize that a person in his subjective nature actually *is* the horse, actually *lives* in the desire nature. So is it truly wisdom that the horse must be made to submit? Is it really possible to control or subdue or abandon desire without thereby denaturing the savor of subjective being, arguably the only “being” that has real human meaning? And wasn’t Freud right, “the repressed always returns”—as a neurotic symptom?

Is not the fate of Orpheus the more honorable human condition: to live half the time in underworld thrall to Dionysian desire, half the time in the mountain air of Apollonian independence? Only such a dual subjective existence can be a true channel which, in objective reality, connects the higher to the lower, through which the unmanifest is able to become manifest.

Such two-natured being is the vehicle for Art, the true purpose of human life. In “Art”, we include song, image-making, storytelling, religion, tradition in general, and also (especially in the modern world) science, mathematics, and technology.

¹ See my essay “The Way of Sacrifice and the Light Within” <https://richardhodes.com/SacrificeAndLight4.htm>

And is not Art, the art of making Art, and the making of an Artist of oneself, then the third person of the potential human trinity, overseeing the wedding of Dionysian (Lunar) passion and Apollonian (Solar) freedom? In archeology a key signature of objects of human use is that they are somehow *Art*, in the refinement of their form, and in symbolic markings made on them. Before the Renaissance Art was always in service to religion, but then it became itself a new religion filling the gap left by the declining authority of Christianity.

Let us then make it our work to become artists. Let us even reach beyond mere passion for Rilke's "true singing...about nothing...a gust of wind." If we are inclined toward worship, let us worship Art, and if we need a mental object to represent this worship, a good choice might be Orpheus: understood as neither an actual ancient individual, nor as a God, but as an archetypal image of Man in full—man as Artist.