Refashioning Myth

Refashioning Myth: Poetic Transformations and Metamorphoses

Edited by

Jessica L. Wilkinson, Eric Parisot and David McInnis

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For Dorothy Porter
(1954-2008)

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INTRODUCTION

It is curious that myth continues to flourish even in an age of reality TV: an age which celebrates mediocrity, privileges the mundane over the heroic, and prefers inconsequential acts of individual gain over long-reaching formative acts of the heroic giants of the past. For Western society in particular, with what sometimes seems like an obsessive sanctification of the author-as-individual-genius, it can be surprising that the refashioning of mythic concerns can coexist with copyright laws and their fundamental inability to recognise the nature of literary creativity (which is more usually original than aboriginal, and relies on mimetic processes which reveal substantial debts to poetic precursors). As Northrop Frye told us fifty years ago, this "conception of the great poet's being entrusted with the great theme was elementary enough to Milton, but violates most of the low mimetic prejudices about creation that most of us are educated in" (96). Frye and his fellow "myth and symbol" critics have been out of vogue since the early 1980s, of course—archetypal criticism falling by the wayside in the wake of exciting new developments in New Historicism, feminist theory, queer studies and cultural studies (for example). But despite the critical turn from myth in the academy, has the influence of myth ever really left contemporary literature? Now more than ever, as we enter a "post-theory" phase of criticism, the importance of myth deserves further attention.

This edited collection seeks to readdress the role of myth in society, to re-examine our fascination with those conventional themes and stories that originally accompanied and gave meaning to rituals as elemental as eating, harvesting and reproducing. The chapters in this book take myth as their central concern, but do so in ways that would scarcely have been possible without the advances brought about by the decades of critical thought which followed Formalism and Frye's archetypal criticism. We see the dialogue between critical and creative media as essential to this pursuit, and indeed, as an integral component of literary studies as a discipline. We are excited by the enthusiasm and variety of responses to our theme, which encompass a broad variety of cultures and time periods in their study of mythic transformations. We see this diversity as testament both to what Frye called "the infinitely varied unity of poetry" (121) and to the enduring popularity of myth.

Appropriately enough for a collection on mythmaking, the first two chapters focus on the archetypal artist, Orpheus. Taking stock of the various incarnations of the Orpheus figure in Australian poetry, Andrew Johnson argues that "[w]hile poetry in Australia might broadly be read under the aegis of Romanticism, the various Orphic poems could be used as an index of different styles and schools," and claims that "the different approaches and interests of various poets could be measured by their varied responses to the Orphic material." Johnson applies this framework to a close reading of several key Australian poets, including A. D. Hope and the notorious "mythical" poet, Ern Malley.

The following chapter, by David McInnis, examines a much earlier instance of mythopoeia involving Orpheus: the fourteenth-century Auchinleck manuscript's Breton lay, *Sir Orfeo*. For modern readers, arguably the most striking feature of this Middle English redaction of the myth is its happy ending, in which Sir Orfeo (an English king) successfully recovers Heurodis, his queen. Where critics have accounted for this and other departures from the classical myth by looking to Irish and Celtic influences or paratexts, this chapter raises the possibility of a more self-consciously playful poet who deliberately structured *Sir Orfeo* such that it is "haunted by absent narratives never quite realised in the text," and consequently "is characterised by its constant evocation of significant moments of its parallel and precursor texts." It is the important omissions, intended to be noticed by the reader/audience, which (McInnis suggests) generate the meaning of this romance.

Cassandra Atherton turns our attention to another character from Greek mythology—Morpheus, god of dreams—as he appears in the poems of contemporary Australian poets John Kinsella and Chris Wallace-Crabbe (selections of whose work are included in this volume). Atherton reads the work of Kinsella and Wallace-Crabbe as an exploration of Morpheus's transmutable form, as an ambiguous figure of both pleasure and pain, "both seductive and sinister, a giver of dreams and yet, often, the thief of time."

Karolina Trapp's articulate reading of R. S. Thomas's poem "The Hand" opens a new direction for the volume, exploring the engagement of the modern poetic imagination with Judaeo-Christian mythology. The mythology of the Old and New Testaments has, of course, long been a foundation for the Western literary canon, but the contributions offered in this volume collectively suggest that in these comparatively secular times, poetic and artistic reflection upon the mysteries of God and Christian faith remain as relevant, and indeed, as critical as ever. Trapp's chapter cuts to the heart of the project's concern, offering Thomas's "The Hand" as a

practical example of poetry's unique capacity as a multi-dimensional creative form capable of capturing the eternal present of mythological time; or, in Laurence Coupe's terms, of poetry's ability to carry with it the mythic "promise of another mode of existence entirely, a possible way of being just beyond the present time and place" (9). For Thomas, as Trapp highlights, the message of poetry is not in what is said, but "in the way of saying," and Trapp's analysis exposes Thomas's mastery of the craft, guiding the reader through a labyrinth of metonymic, metrical and structural allusions to the enduring but ever-turbulent relationship between man and God. Tackling the full scale of Judaeo-Christian chronology, from Creation through to the Crucifixion and man's modern war with God, "The Hand" is presented as a poem overwhelmingly ambitious in scope and complexity, and equally astounding in its economical presentation of the unfathomable quality of an omniscient God.

In many ways, Robert Buchanan's *The Wandering Jew*, the subject of Eric Parisot's chapter, is a contrasting perspective of the same mythological relationship between man and a Christian God. Buchanan, as Parisot points out, was not nearly as technically proficient as Thomas, or even his Victorian contemporaries, relying heavily on dramatic narrative to capture the essence of his theological vision. And while both Thomas and Buchanan clearly shared a common desire to re-evaluate modern man's changing relationship with a Christian God, Buchanan's poem is as historically-specific as Thomas's is chronologically broad. But in bringing Buchanan's *Wandering Jew* to light, Parisot not only presents an important chapter in the history of the legend in which Christ is radically portrayed as the wearied eternal Jew, but also highlights Buchanan's dramatic tome as a significant marker of Christ's recasting as a twentieth-century anti-hero. Re-crucified by Victorian scepticism, it is Christ's turn to suffer the tortuous fate of his legendary adversary, banished as the eternal outcast of post-Christian modernism.

This modern image of a tortured Christ, however, need not diminish the power of Christ's sacrifice. As Samuel Martin's short essay explains, and his affecting images demonstrate, the iconographic quality of Christ's broken body is still a powerful locus for devotional prayer. What's more, for Martin, it remains at the centre of the Christian mystery of faith, irrespective of denomination, and in this post-modern era, retains its unifying capacity to evoke compassion among confessional and non-confessional viewers alike.

Along with Martin, the volume's other visual contributors—Eleni Rivers and Gita Mammen—remind us how mythology and poetry are interminably linked with the visual arts, and indeed with the trials of

everyday experience. Rivers's preoccupation with botanical forms explores an elemental concern at the heart of myth: the natural cycle. By situating herself in relation to the rhythms of nature (germination of seeds, growth, decay, and fertilisation), Rivers explores the role of the artist in the cycles which give birth to myth. Mammen's juxtaposition of visual art and poetry in "Inanna of the Storms" revisits some of the oldest myths known—those of Mesopotamia and Ancient Sumer—but in doing so, sheds light on such contemporary concerns as "water shortages and war, spirituality and love."

In his analysis of Judith Beveridge's poetry, Mike Heald contrasts poetic and philosophical engagements with Buddhism, arguing that "the imagination produces a conception of transcendence very different from that found in the meditative tradition," with the effect that in Beveridge's Siddhattha, the reader encounters "a figure who bodies forth the ineluctable suffering of the human condition, and thus the perennial elusiveness and implausibility of transcendence, rather than one who embodies the promise and indeed successful realisation of transcendence." This appears to be an occasion in which affect-driven literature diverges substantially from philosophical myth narratives, albeit in a complementary rather than a mutually exclusive manner.

In what he identifies as Gary Snyder's challenge to Judeao-Christian myth and its anthropocentric and hostile view of the natural world, Laurence Coupe highlights the Buddhist, Taoist and Native American elements in Snyder's poetry that come to form a life-long mythic project that celebrates the inter-connectedness of non-human and human life, and promotes a consciousness of place within this intricate mytho- and eco-logical network. Coupe presents a detailed exposition of the inseparable connection between mythology and ecology in Snyder's poetry, arguing that for Snyder, environmental activist and defender of the earth, mythology is a current and living reality that shapes our ecology. In light of the urgent environmental issues facing current generations—as Coupe quite rightly observes—Snyder's project is one that remains as pertinent as ever.

In "Tricked Myth-Machines," Duncan Hose examines the personal mythopoeic tendencies of John Forbes and Ted Berrigan "as a synthetic poetic praxis of mythography and mythopoesis; that is, a constant re-reading and re-writing of one's own myths." The everyday and the mythological are thus seen to enter into a dialectical exchange even as Berrigan's collage method works against self-mythologising. Hose claims that Forbes's poetry reminds us "that our everyday thinking, our being interpellated as subjects by our culture, our families, our literature, places

us immanently within the processes and logic of myth." He identifies, in these poets' work, a tension between identity/Self as a composite *product* of myth and the active *production* of the Self through myth.

With C. J. Mackie's chapter on the mythical associations of the Gallipoli peninsula, the volume turns to specific geographies of mythology. Mackie ruminates on the mythical associations of modern day Turkey (the vicinity of ancient Troy), with particular emphasis on how British poets like Rupert Brooke mobilised the myths of ancient Greece to formulate their own relationship to the Dardanelles during the First World War. Excavating the layers of memory from classical antiquity to the Romantic Hellenism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Mackie examines the motifs and symbolism reactivated in the context of the deaths of young soldiers in the Great War, and in particular how writers like Patrick Shaw-Stewart "used the layers of memory in the region to give a broader cultural context to the military debacle in which he found himself."

Moving from war to love, and from Gallipoli back to the antipodes, John Davidson explores the uses of the Venus/Aphrodite myth in the work of New Zealand poet, James K. Baxter. Davidson examines how Baxter deploys the myth, on one level, as part of "an ongoing engagement with his sexuality and feelings about the opposite sex," but also investigates how Venus/Aphrodite became "a mechanism for verbalising the creative force at the deepest level of [Baxter's] being, the creative force that shaped his personal world in terms of universal metaphor." Far more than a hopeful pedant seeking approval from the learned cognoscenti through his litany of classical allusions, Baxter simply appears prone to viewing his local landscapes and personal experiences through a mythologising lens, albeit moderated by Jungian, Freudian, and Catholic frames.

Jacquilyn Weeks shifts our attention to Irish mythology and lore in her informative examination of the poetry of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill. Weeks situates Ní Dhomhnaill's work against that of three influential poets whom she claims "set the tone for mythic Irish poetry in the twentieth century"—namely, William Butler Yeats, Frederick Robert Higgins, and Cecil Day Lewis. Weeks suggests that this contemporary Irish poet's work represents a complement to French feminist theorisations of the embodied female "voice," arguing that Ní Dhomhnaill's manipulation of the "metamorphic characteristics of myth," as well as her deployment of the mythic female body as a metaphor, "resituates gendered poetic language in a postmodern context."

Miriam Riverlea's chapter "Out of the Box" examines the Hesiodic myth of Pandora and her box (or jar) as it appears in recent picture books for children, arguing that the moral emphasis of the myth has altered such

that the myth becomes "a simple parable promoting obedience and respect for the belongings of others, and warning against the dangers of excessive curiosity." This modification, Riverlea argues, is largely attributable to the American Romantic author Nathaniel Hawthorne, and the influence of his nineteenth-century retelling of the story, the first to be produced in English for a child readership. Noting more particularly that in "Saviour Pirotta and Jan Lewis's version, Pandora's box is depicted visually as a kind of treasure chest within which the mythic tradition itself is enclosed, kept safe for the next generation of children to discover and engage with," Riverlea posits that "[c]ontemporary retellings of ancient myth have come to be characterised by an increasingly self-conscious awareness of their place within the storytelling tradition."

Finally, Stephen Knight tackles the refashioning myth topic from an unexpected but fascinating angle: through the pragmatic problem of indexing the Vivien figure from Arthurian mythology. A shape-shifting character whose name and identity/role have been refashioned frequently within the Arthurian tradition, this character poses a unique challenge for the creator of a theme-based index. Knight relates his experience of indexing Vivien for his recent book on Merlin, illustrating in the process the various metamorphoses of this unusual character whose complexity outranks even Juno's and Medusa's. Curiously, there does not appear to be an historical progression in Vivien's transformations: "In each period she is multiple; there seems no clear coherence from one period to the next; she is at once both contradictorily multiple and alarmingly narrow (what unthinking students like to call one-dimensional)."

In an academic climate where demarcated subject areas are collapsing into the interdisciplinary, a text such as this one, concerned as it is with the diverse topic of poetic refashionings of myth, would be lacking if it were to ignore contemporary creative explorations and interrogations of myth. The volume therefore also includes poems by established and new poets on a variety of mythical subjects. We include new poems by Australian poets John Kinsella and Chris-Wallace Crabbe, as well as Irish poet Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill. Lisa Jacobson contributes an excerpt from her verse novel *The Sunlit Zone*. From Angela Gardner we have two short poems accompanied by sketches. There are also new poems by Diane Fahey, Danijela Kambaskovic-Sawers, Lachlan McKenzie and Jessica L. Wilkinson. We are also privileged to include two poems by the late Dorothy Porter.

Despite popular perception, mythology is not exclusively other-worldly; while it offers us mere mortals a gateway to a mode of existence outside the quotidian, it also enriches our everyday lives. Karen Armstrong

writes as much in her *Short History of Myth* (2005): mythology “is not about opting out of this world, but about enabling us to live more intensely within it” (2-3). Indeed, we hope the essays, poems, and artistic works collected in this volume are testament to this belief.

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THE ORPHIC STRAIN IN AUSTRALIAN POETRY

ANDREW JOHNSON

1

The first decade of the new millennium in Australia has, so far, been a good one for a two and a half thousand year-old Greek poet. Significant books by two prominent contemporary Australian poets, Robert Adamson and Peter Boyle were published in 2001, both having Orpheus as a central figure.[1] Adamson, perhaps more deeply than Boyle, seems to have identified with Orpheus, addressing his wife Juno in the poem "Juno and Eurydice" with these lines: "I couldn't live without you now, though in dreams I've / betrayed Eurydice." In the poems, "Reaching Light" and "Eurydice in Sydney" he speaks from Eurydice's point of view—watching the footprints of the singer ascending out of the underworld (Adamson, 30). The book in which these appeared, *Mulberry Leaves*, was Adamson's first selected works; it brought together poems written over his 30-year career in one volume. The group of new poems which opened the book, including the three which played around with the myth, revealed that the story or figure of Orpheus had been central to Adamson's poetry all along, whether implicitly, as in the early poem "The Shining Incidents," or explicitly, as in *Black Water* (1999), which had included a sequence titled "Daybook for Eurydice" based on a series of etchings "Just another day in Paradise" by Gria Shead.[2] In this sequence of poems, the identification with Orpheus is less immediate or personal than in the new poems—they are an exploration of contemporary urban life using the myth as a touchstone—but the centrality of the myth for Adamson's work is clear nevertheless.[3]

For Peter Boyle too, the ancient story seemed to have offered a means of negotiating contemporary stories of loss and desire. The long title poem of *What the Painter Saw in Our Faces* (2001) was apparently prompted by viewing images of the 1999 bombing of Belgrade and the flood of refugees to Greece and Turkey it produced, but the poem takes Poussin's masterpiece of 1650, "Landscape with Orpheus and Eurydice," as a narrative and figurative centre. The use of the figure of Orpheus seems

above all to have been a "reflexive" gesture: a way of thinking about art and its place in the world. Boyle's overarching concern is a question of the possibility of responding to suffering in poetry: can it offer consolation, understanding, or restitution, or merely sentiment and self-loathing?[4]

In some ways, the coincidence of two major works featuring Orpheus as a subject, or model, in the same year is simply a reminder of the persistence of classical myth as a source for contemporary artistic work. The reasons why this ancient myth from Greece and the near and middle east should continue to fire the imagination of artists in the western world are, perhaps, well enough understood.[5] Likewise, just why Orpheus should have a particular place in the pantheon of mythological figures drawn upon by poets and singers might be self-evident. But the meaning of myth is not static, and if, as Northrop Frye puts it in *The Great Code*, "myths are the stories that tell a society what is important to know, whether about its gods, its history, its laws, or its class structure," it is important to continue to examine the uses to which a myth has been put, and continues to be put by contemporary poets (Frye, 33).

The versions of the legends of Orpheus which are generally in play today are those found in Virgil and Ovid, especially the latter. In *Metamorphoses*, Book Ten, the episode appears as a kind of frame narrative for a sequence including the equally famous tales of Pygmalion and Venus and Adonis. In Ovid's version, Orpheus, a "divinely born" poet, whose wife dies on their wedding day, uses all his art to convince the keepers of the underworld to allow him to rescue her. He is forbidden to look at her until they reach the light, but of course he does and Eurydice is lost again. Thereafter, he scorns the love of women, and in doing so infuriates a group of Ciconian women, the Maenads, devotees of Dionysus who, in a Bacchanalian frenzy, tear him to pieces. The poet's dismembered head floats down a river all the while continuing to sing the name of his lost beloved, Eurydice, and the banks, rocks, trees and birds all around echo and amplify his lament.

The story of Orpheus upon which the Latin poets drew was in fact a collection of various ancient myths (only traces of which remain) associated with the invention and use of poetry and music, and even in some versions, writing and agriculture, but perhaps most importantly figuratively connected with the "seasonal" myth of Persephone abducted by Hades, and also with the Argonauts' search for the Golden Fleece.[6] As Emmet Robbins writes, this story (which in some versions features Orpheus as a crewmember on the Argo) has been called "the oldest and most significant of all Greek myths":

> [It is] essentially the account of the voyage out and return of the shaman, that figure familiar to so many cultures, who mediates between this world and the beyond and whose most extraordinary characteristic is his ability to bring souls back from the dead. (Robbins, 7)

In Ovid's version the story of Orpheus appears to turn on a question of the power of song, the potential of art to transcend the limits of life and death. As with much of the *Metamorphoses*, it is also difficult to disentangle the individual story or its meaning from those it surrounds. In the *Metamorphoses*, the two parts of the story of Orpheus (the first and second loss of Eurydice, and the death of the poet at the hands of the Maenads) frame and link together a sequence of tales about transgressive, hence doomed love. Orpheus's story segues into the story of Cyparissus's love for his stag (which he accidentally kills), and a mirroring tale of Phoebus's love for Hyacinthus. This leads in turn to the story of Pygmalion's love for his statue, and the story of Myrrha's (Pygmalion's great granddaughter) love for her father, Cinyras. This is the most obviously transgressive part of the sequence and it leads into the story of the doomed love of Venus for Adonis—the latter being the product of the incestuous relationship between Cinyras and Myrrha. There is, with Venus and Adonis, a further parallel with the Cyparissus and Hyacinthus stories in which the beloved is accidentally killed by his or her lover. As such, Orpheus's fate seems to draw attention to the theme of a transgression of proper limits (of life and death, no less). Balance, or the natural order, is restored through the death, or transformation of the beloved, just as a kind of balance is signaled in the pairing of stories, and the cycle running its course back to Orpheus. But such balance may be understood as artistry as much as morality; which is to say it is not a simple matter to identify the moral significance, if any, of the tales.

The lack of a clear moral to these stories, and particularly Orpheus, in the *Metamorphoses,* as Patricia Vicari notes, posed little impediment to Christian allegorists, painters as well as poets, through the Middle Ages ("Sparagmos," 64, n10). In such allegorical readings, Orpheus deserved his punishment; not for attempting to "resurrect" his bride, but for rejecting women and introducing the love of "boys" to the Thracians. An alternative, positive reading saw in Orpheus a secular parallel with Christ, the healer, triumphing over death. According to Richard Danson Brown's study of Spenser, Renaissance humanists focused mostly on Orpheus's "mastery of nature as a metaphor for primitive poetry's suasive linguistic codification of laws and rules of conduct to control what Sidney wittily calls 'stony and beastly people'" (Young, 117).

There was also a reaction in the Renaissance against the tradition of reading Ovid with a focus on allegorical or moral sense, instead celebrating the exuberance and "wildness" of Ovid's multi-layered tapestry (Lamb, 69). Beyond allegorical readings, the trope of nature answering to, and amplifying a mourner's song (which the story of Orpheus inaugurates) has been preserved in the elegiac tradition, which in turn has contributed to the preservation of Orpheus in the cultural imagination.[7] From the Augustan to the Romantic elegy, the idea that the poet might be able to overcome the limits of death and nature, came to resonate with increasing force. And as the myth entered into the modern era, informed by developing psychological and critical methodologies, interpretations increasingly homed in on the "gaps" or lacunae in the tale. Some of these have exercised recyclers and readers of the myth more than others: questions about the reason for Eurydice's death may be glossed over as merely a narrative necessity (where earlier Christian readers saw a parallel with Eve and the serpent), but the injunction against looking back, and the reason for Orpheus's backward glance have proved less transparent—and as a result, all the more enticing.

As Peter Sacks argues, for instance, employing the "psychoanalytic" vocabulary developed by Freud, Orpheus represents an "unsuccessful" mourner. In Sacks's words:

> Orpheus insists on rescuing his actual wife, rather than a figure or substitute for her… And it is Orpheus's failure to reattach his affections elsewhere that brings about his martyrdom. The resentful women tear him apart precisely because of his refusal to turn away from or to trope the dead. (72)

In other words, Orpheus's failure to properly incorporate, or work through the death of his beloved, which is supposed to result in a detachment from the dead, results in his own disintegration, as well as initiating an endless mourning—the bodiless head which never ceases to sing out the name Eurydice.

For the Romantics and their modernist, and post-modern descendents, the association of poetry with fragments, fragmentation and the fragmentary, not to mention the deep connection between nature and poetry, and the idea of perpetual mourning, has also been significant (see MacFarland). The French critic—Maurice Blanchot—has made much of the myth, reading it as a primary story about "inspiration" and poetic "origins."[8] For Blanchot, Orpheus's backward glance at Eurydice (to which his ultimate fate at the hands of the Maenads is linked) is an attempt to see the "origin," the "unpresentable," as it really is, immediate or "un-

veiled." However impossible to achieve, for Blanchot, this backward glance is the essential literary gesture. Accordingly, poetic creation is associated with failure and fragmentation. This complicates, but in some ways re-affirms the "meaning" or significance of the dismembered, but still singing head of the poet as a symbol for the enduring power of poetry.

So much is clear: let alone the fact that the story has endured across the shifting fashions of literary history, the attractions of the myth, thematically or psychologically—love, loss, desire, violence, disintegration and endless mourning—are obvious. It is easy then to understand Australian poets wanting to take up this myth in their work. But is there a deeper logic to the frequent appearance of this figure in this country's tradition? The "Orphic" myth may not have much to tell us about Australian culture more generally, if Judith Wright was correct in declaring that Australian culture has largely been anti-Orphic, "hostile" to poets and poetry (see Wright). As I will try to show in what follows, the hostility to poets in the broader culture may be one reason for Australian poets' identification with Orpheus. Studying the use of the myth, moreover, offers some insight into the development, laws, hierarchies, and clashes within "poetic culture" in Australia. More than a hundred poems which refer to Orpheus by Australian poets in the past century and a half are recorded in the *Aust-Lit* database and examples of all the major interpretative traditions associated with the myth can be found among them. While many of these poems are like Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, in that the narrative, or some detail of it, is retold directly as the overt subject for the poem, many more Australian poems invoke, or allude to Orpheus to illustrate a theme such as death, mourning, fidelity or nature. Still more might be said to bear some mark of the myth, or have an Orphic sensibility, though they contain no apparent reference to the myth as such. As Paul Kane made clear in his important study, Australian poetry must inevitably be read in the space created around and between two terms: Romanticism and Negativity (see Kane). On the one hand, this suggests that when Australian poets feature Orpheus, it is the Romantic Orpheus, rather than the medieval or Renaissance incarnation they will invariably recall. On the other hand, it suggests that traces of the Orphic myth in Australian poems will typically echo or return to some common themes: the work of mourning, the "doomed" poet, the "transcendence" of lyric, and its corollary, fragmentation and ruin. But perhaps most importantly, as Kane also hints (drawing on Blanchot's critical work, among others) the figure of Orpheus may exert a particular force, both generative and destructive, within Australian poetry.

It is no coincidence—nor a surprise, given that Orpheus can be read as a myth of literary origins—to discover that Orpheus features in some way at the "beginnings" of Australian poetry.[9] An early poem by Charles Harpur, "to the lyre of Australia" is replete with Orphic associations, not least the lyre itself:

> Lyre of my country, first falls it to me
> From the charm muttering Savage's rude beating hand
> To snatch thee, that so thy wild numbers may be
> No longer but writ on the winds of thy land. (Perkins, 722-23)

Medieval and Renaissance scholars would readily recognise echoes of the view of Orpheus, prevalent through those periods, as a "civilising" force, taming "wild" nature through the rational order of music in the reference to Orpheus's power to charm, and to call forth "song" from rocks and animals (see Vicari, "The Triumph of Art," 210, n12).

Thus wherever Australian poets turn to questions of origins (their own as poets, as well as the origins of Australia as a place of poetry) and their relationship to the land around them, we may find traces of the Orphic myth. Another passage from Robert Adamson's "Juno and Eurydice" bears this out. On one level the poem is all about Adamson's negotiation of identity in relation to his "home" on the Hawkesbury River. The "local" turn on the figure of the lyre, which reminds us of Adamson's ornithological passion as well, is particularly note-worthy:

> this world is created for us above ground,
> Where even lyre birds walk slowly through your
> garden holding their lyres high. We move in and out of
> the myths, becoming figures from them—maybe the longer
> we live here the less they matter, as we tell ourselves
> stories that were here before myth. (Adamson, 30)

The final clauses mark out a significant development on Harpur's colonialist poetics which echo "terra nullius," figuring a "silent" land brought finally into song by the European voice: a re-incarnation of the "first" and "greatest" European poet, no less. For Adamson, such a powerful myth can't be forgotten entirely. Orpheus (and Harpur, for that matter) is part of Adamson's own mythology, but this poem's ending suggests they haven't completely overwritten the "earlier" stories; the original, indigenous "stories" may yet find a way to be heard.

Adamson, in this respect, can also be taken as a representative of a particular "strand" of the Orphic tradition, which takes the mythological poet as a precursor for a kind of eco-poetics. Orpheus's song, for these

poets, doesn't seek to "tame" or "civilise" nature, but to connect, and communicate between the human and the "more than human" world. The emphasis of such a reading of the myth falls on the regenerative power of song. Poets like Judith Wright, David Campbell, and, I would suggest, a great majority of contemporary poets sustain this idea of Orpheus in countless poems. Part of this Orphic tradition is also to read the myth critically though, so it should not be surprising to find poets also taking issue with Orpheus. Feminist deconstructions of myth, as with post-colonialist readings, are closely connected to this. I mentioned Adamson's "Reaching Light" at the outset of this chapter, written from Eurydice's perspective. David Campbell, and Diane Fahey, to mention but two others, have also taken this approach to good effect.[10]

Another aspect of this kind of contemporary Orphism is the focus on mourning. A great many of the poems that feature Orpheus in the Australian tradition, as with the wider literary tradition, do so in the context of elegies—using the ancient story of loss, as I mentioned with regard to Peter Boyle, to work through both personal and public experience of death. Rosemary Dobson, for instance, in her elegy for David Campbell (*The Continuance of Poetry*) does so through complex configurations, and re-figurations of the standard elegiac tropes, not least of which is the participation of nature in the act of mourning. As with literature around the world and through the centuries, death and loss are inevitable themes of much Australian poetry. Kenneth Slessor's "Five Bells," one of the country's best loved poems, is a good example of how frequently elegy, or poetry written in response to loss, occupies a central place in national literature, and the poetic response to loss is unavoidably shaped by Orpheus's original lament. In a recent essay, Philip Mead makes a somewhat convoluted connection between Slessor and Jean Cocteau's 1950 film *L'Orphee* in order to note a more fundamental correspondence: "the bitter irony that Slessor's wife Noela, like Orpheus's Eurydice, was to be snatched away early by death and that his career would become a backward-looking silence" (5-6; see also Croft, Lilley).

Slessor, as Mead also suggests, was not of the view that "poetry" could "overcome," endure beyond, or even ameliorate death, and so we might suppose Slessor rejected Orpheus as a model. But as the image of Slessor as a "shattered" man, nevertheless, reiterates, Orpheus can stand for failure and disintegration, as well as survival and transcendence and is connected with the Romantic commonplace of the poet as a tragic failure and outsider. Again, we can go back to Harpur to find an example of this. Some twelve years after "claiming" the "Lyre of Australia" for himself, Harpur wrote disconsolately: "alas! Neither then nor since did my country

deign to award one smile of encouragement to the endeavors of her poet. Her best and only gifts to him have been hunger and rags" (quoted by Kane, 50). An identification with Orpheus, for many poets might offer a kind of consolation, however much self-dramatization is involved: a way of placing their own disappointments into a larger context and tradition.

There could also be a political element to the identification. While poetry in Australia might broadly be read under the aegis of Romanticism, the various Orphic poems could be used as an index of different styles and schools. That is to say, the different approaches and interests of various poets could be measured by their varied responses to the Orphic material. It suffices to say that Orpheus can be turned this way and that and made to stand for conservative, or radical values. In 1987, Don Anderson bemoaned the negative response to post-modern or experimental work in Australia (specifically, new "writing" by himself, David Brooks and Marion May Campbell), using the title, "Orpheus Down Under: or is the new welcome in Australia." A few years later, A. D. Hope, a poet often taken to be the preeminent defender of traditional poetic values in Australia, rounded off a long and distinguished career with a book titled *Orpheus*. In the next part of this chapter, I will continue to explore how the figure of Orpheus might be a name for a fault-line, or stress-fracture within Australian poetry, beginning with a closer look at the title poem of Hope's final collection.

2

Many different strands of the Orphic tradition in Australia which I have been following intertwine in the collection of poems Hope published in 1991 under the simple, but resonant title, *Orpheus*. Perhaps with the exception of Peter Porter, no poet has been more consistently involved in "refashioning" classical myth in an Australian context (see also Hope, *Collected Poems*). Some of Hope's readers, beginning with James McAuley, and more recently, Kevin Hart and Paul Kane, have argued that rather than seeing Hope as either a "displaced" Romantic, or a belated "Augustan" poet, it makes most sense to see him as an Orphic poet, and that this third term "mediates" between the other two.[11]

One immediate context for Hope's choice of *Orpheus* as a subject or theme in the book (he may not have known it would be his last) can be found in the dedicatory poem addressed to the poet's wife, Penelope, who had died a few years earlier. "Trees" measures the magnitude of his loss:

> Since you left me forever, I find my eyes
> See things less clearly than they used to do.