

## Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes.

A Rambling Response to Rainer Maria Rilke's Poem

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Note: This is a loose and by no means complete stream-of-consciousness response to Rilke's poem after first reading it. My insights incorporate the ideas of Joseph Campbell as expressed in *The Power of Myth*. There he states: All the gods, the heavens, all the worlds, are within us. They are magnified dreams, and dreams are manifestations in image form of the energies of the body in conflict with each other. Though other interpretations are possible, here I approach the poem/myth as symbolic of integration of the self—the conscious and unconscious expressed in male and female archetypes.

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The poem begins in the underworld setting: dark, forbidding depths. The words *mine of souls* flip so easily to *soul of mine* (only in English, of course). In mines one digs for elemental stuff that if brought to the surface is usually transformed into highly treasured commodities to be commonly bought and sold. Mining the unconscious contains a parallel inference of debasing precious fundamentals by bringing them to the surface—touching the sacred unprepared, as it were.

The red of the feldspar (the most abundant mineral in the earth's crust) suggests a surge of energy from the unconscious to feed conscious life, just as blood feeds the body's life-force. In addition, two images of uneasy comfort emerge from the dense darkness of the underworld's forests and rocks.

First, there are bridges (one can get across the chasms, but likely not without the terror of crossing directly over and looking straight down into them). Second, there are meadows soft and full of patience (resonance of recumbence not necessarily grave, but also completely grave—all flesh is grass).

The path into the underworld is not new but well-trodden, a long shroud-like line bleached to the colour of bone. Many others have walked this way before. This way is the way of death which is the way of all life. It is also the only way the seeker can become whole—to die to the old consciousness and be reborn to another.

The slender man in the blue mantle, the mythical poet who has lost his wife, the soul not integrated, the seeker on a quest to return to consciousness whole and to whole consciousness grieves for his beloved—his other, lost self whom he mourns deeply.

Having won the right to reclaim Eurydice, Orpheus ascends, bounding ahead of her. Eager and impatient to surface, he leaves her so far behind that he cannot sense her but must blindly trust that she follows. Here the metaphor of not chewing is lovely. Orpheus devours the distance in the way that an animal eats, thus missing the essentials of the experience by rushing toward its endpoint without deliberation.

Why has he distanced himself from her in stupid haste after descending to the depths to find her, bargain for her and win her release? Why does he not move slowly and stay close enough to sense her presence without seeing her? Having been given this singular opportunity, why does he condemn himself to leave her behind and lose her twice?

Forbidden to look, he strides ahead. All he can think to do is gobble up the distance and rush to see. What blindness. He does not understand that integration with his most beloved other self is not something he can leap to. He must wait for it; learn to sense it without his eyes. He must let it approach him at its own encumbered speed, shrouded as it is, *uncertain, gentle and without impatience*.

Orpheus is ruled by his need to ascertain her presence, but the paradox is that he must simply wait in the darkness if she—already root, already fundamental, already there—is to reunite with him. Governed by emotion he is tense, impatient, and oblivious of his lyre (the source of his art) which connects him to his lost, dead self.

His senses, too, are as divided as he is. Unable to conceive of other options, he has no choice but to bound ahead and hasten his return to the surface. What irony. He is more bound by his bounding than is Eurydice by all her shrouds and the fullness of her death.

However, she comes slowly in the hand of Hermes the trickster: entrusted to one who is not to be trusted. Tricky business this integration and enlightenment. How shall Orpheus overcome his doubt? Without the necessary insight to see without looking, how can avert his eyes?

He must learn to hear and know her presence without his eyes. She is not surface material as he is. It is he who is not whole. She does not even recognize this needy, faceless man-lover-husband who is dark in the bright exit. For her there is no *up* or *ahead* or *enlightenment* for her to aspire to. She already is.

From her depths she nourishes life—his life. But empty of her fullness, he is full of his emptiness. Without the patience to sense what his eyes cannot verify, he risks the condemning, backward glance and forever loses all.