

Leading Individual Identity to Universal Identity: A Discussion on the Problem of Identity in Rilke's "Orpheus, Eurydice, Hermes" and the Meaning of Hermes

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Abstract: Western literature has long been infatuated with the myth of Orpheus. Many poets and writers have rewritten the myth of Orpheus. Among these rewritings of the Orphic story, Rilke's "Orpheus, Eurydice, Hermes" is unique for its introduction of Hermes. Hermes was the messenger of the gods and the guide of the dead. Hermes is not involved when most people retell the story, and the meaning of Hermes' introduction is a problem worthy of discussing. Orpheus has a dual identity. He is both a poet and an artist. His two identities correspond to Eurydice's two identities. The discussion of the identity of Orpheus and Eurydice may provide a new perspective for the study of the significance of the introduction of Hermes. In Rilke's poems, Eurydice has lost her identity corresponding to Orpheus and entered a self-sufficient situation after she was killed by the snake bite. Her individual identity vanished and was replaced by a universal identity. Hermes acted as a bridge between Orpheus, who maintained his individual identity, and Eurydice, who had a universal identity after her first death. This paper will discuss the dual identities of Orpheus and Eurydice and the changes in Eurydice's identity after her death. Then this paper will talk about the introduction of Hermes and the meaning of Hermes' introduction from the perspective of identity problems. Through these discussions, there may be a new understanding of this complex poem.

Keywords: Rilke, "Orpheus, Eurydice, Hermes"

1. Introduction

The myth of Orpheus has had a great impact on Western literature and culture. From the classical period to the post-modern era, countless literary and artistic works told Orpheus' story. The poetic and cultural interpretations of Orpheus's myth seem endless. Terence Dawson calls this phenomenon the "Orpheus complex" [1]. Mark Owen Lee puts forward that the meaning of Orpheus's myth in every era is related to the way people use the myth [2]. No matter how people use the myth, people's interpretation always involves these three themes: the victory of death over life, the civilizing power of music, and the problem of human emotion and its control.

Among many rewrites of the Orpheus myth, Rilke's "Orpheus, Eurydice, Hermes" is unique for its introduction of Hermes. Hermes in ancient Greek mythology (and Mercury in ancient Roman

mythology) often appears as the messenger of the gods. At the same time, Hermes also has quite obvious apparent characteristics of the underworld god. He often accompanies Persephone to leave and return to the underworld. He also led human heroes to enter the realm of death. From the perspective of mythological tradition, the emergence of Hermes is a logical thing logical.

Rilke's introduction of Hermes into this poem is a topic very worthy of discussion. In this poem, Hermes act as the bridge between Orpheus and Eurydice. There is no direct communication between them in the text. The looking back of Orpheus is told to Eurydice by Hermes. Eurydice herself even did not notice this vital action of Orpheus.

Studies on Rilke's poetry about Orpheus put more attention focused more on his collection "Sonnets to Orpheus". This "Orphic poem" is always regarded as a bridge to his latter poems about Orpheus. Studies that focusing on this poem tend to analyse this poem from different aspects. Liu Hongli's research focuses on the interpretation of interpreting the poet's rewriting of myths and the personal identity issues contained in them [3]. Alexander Sorenson discusses the narrative perspective adopted in this poem and compares it with "Pietà", another poem of Rilke that adopts different narrative perspectives [4]. Joseph Metz's study mentioned the introduction of Hermes, and he tends to believe that Rilke is introducing Hermes into the poem to discuss the function of language [5]. Li Yongyi commented that "the interpretation of Metz is close to the deconstruction position [6]."

Few previous studies analyse such a meaningful poem from the perspective of the identity of Orpheus and Eurydice. Erika M. Nelson have explored Rilke's preoccupations with identity [7]. Her study focuses on Rilke's understanding about the malleable nature identity and addressing the question of Rilke's place in literary history. While this paper will focus more on the identity of the character in "Orpheus, Eurydice, Hermes". It will analyse the dual identities of Orpheus and the vanished identity of Eurydice. Then it will include discussions about the introduction of Hermes. It is possible to gain a new angle to interpret this poem and understand Rilke.

2. The Double Identity of Orpheus

Orpheus has a dual identity. He is an artist who has superhuman skills. His music and his songs could move the governor of the underworld. In the meantime, he is Eurydice's husband. These two parts of Orpheus' compound identity work together in Orpheus' myth. It should also be noticed that Orpheus' identity as an artist represents the part of divinity in his body, and his identity as Eurydice's husband links to his part as a human being. The two-part of his identity refer to the two identities hidden in Eurydice. One is "Eurydice for art" in Orpheus' art. Hence, this "Eurydice for art" could be regarded as his subject. The other identity is "Eurydice as a mortal man's wife". The two aspects of Orpheus' identity is not the two side of a balanced scale. Many times, Orpheus as an artist, would outweigh another aspect of his binary identity, which would influence Eurydice.

H.D. criticizes Orpheus' arrogance in "Eurydice", in which Eurydice thinks Orpheus ignores her independence and her existence as a wife [8]. H.D.'s poem reveals that what Orpheus love is not Orpheus as an independent woman but the illusion of his art, which appears in the image of Eurydice. Migraine-George argues in "Spectacular Desires: Orpheus and Pygmalion as Aesthetic Paradigms in Petrarch's 'Rime Sparse'" that both Eurydice in Orpheus' songs and Laura in Petrarch's poem have no independent value [9]. They only act as a trigger for poets' artistic inspiration. Migraine-George calls this "Spectacular Desires". These arguments provide a perspective that Orpheus, as an artist, could always come first when he dealt with the relationship with Eurydice.

In Orpheus's myth, he must first be an artist and use his art to get Eurydice back. Everything he had done in the underworld was influenced by the two aspects of his identity. Every decision he made could come from the identity of the artist or the identity of the husband, or even both. In "Orpheus, Eurydice, Hermes", although Rilke did not directly reveal which Orpheus's identity weighs more, he did tell about the world comes from Orpheus' lyre, and undoubtedly, this world created by his art

persuaded the ruler of the underworld to let Eurydice back to the mortal world. His love for Eurydice is doubtless. However, one must realize that wherever his love for Eurydice comes from, these emotions have to be expressed by the artist's role and in the form of songs. That is to say, everything finally comes out of Orpheus' throat is conducted by Orpheus as an artist, and in Orpheus' artistic world, Eurydice is "the blond woman" [10].

3. The Vanished Identity of Eurydice

Rilke did not comment on the dual identity of Orpheus in this poem, but he still recognized the independence of Eurydice. As the poem read, "She was no longer the blond woman who sometimes echoed in the poet's songs, no longer the fragrance, the island of their wide bed, and no longer the man's to possess" (Rilke), the death of Eurydice in Rilke's narrating means two relationships vanished. These words show that something in Eurydice disappeared. She is not the subject that is praised in Orpheus' art and is never the woman that man can chase. Now the "Eurydice for art" remains no more, and the bond between husband and wife is cut. When Hermes was leading her to follow her return to the mortal world, she did not express anything but remained in peace and silence. When Orpheus looks back, she even did not observe his action. Eurydice acts like she is facing a stranger, which again proves that their relationships no longer remain neither in art nor in ordinary life.

The vanish of Eurydice's identity in ordinary life happens after her first death. The first death of Eurydice, in the retelling of Orpheus' story, does not mean the death of her social connection with Orpheus. While Rilke erases Eurydice's connection with Orpheus and makes her no longer the wife and the subject of art for Orpheus after her first death. The poem described Eurydice as, "She was already loosened like long hair and surrendered like the rain and issued like massive provisions. She was already root" (Rilke). It tells that Eurydice has entered a self-sufficient situation.

Orpheus cannot build a connection with Eurydice after her first death. The two identities of Eurydice, which connected with Orpheus, vanished. She now belongs to the realm of death. Identity provides the meaning of Eurydice. She could not leave the underworld if she did not have a mortal identity and meant nothing in the world she once lived in.

It is hard to tell whether Orpheus realizes the identity change of Eurydice. His art expressed his love for Eurydice and moved the god of death. However, his art could not give Eurydice identity in the human world, and he did lose Eurydice in the end.

4. Discussions on the Identity of Orpheus and Eurydice

Orpheus's dual identity is reflected in Eurydice's identity. The artist Orpheus, as Rilke described in his poem, will sing Eurydice as "the blond woman" in his songs. Orpheus used his lyre to call out a world of art. His world of art is created by him and is self-sufficient to the real world for being the artist's creation. The Eurydice in Orpheus' songs is the "Eurydice for art", which is the creation of Orpheus and belongs to Orpheus as an artist. This affiliation is based on the fact that Orpheus is an artist who will create songs with Eurydice as their theme. In the meantime, this relationship is also based on Rilke and many other modern poets' belief that art can become an independent world. The subsidiary relationship between the "Eurydice for art" and Orpheus as an artist also means that when Orpheus as an artist dominates his married life with Eurydice, the "Eurydice for art" is more important to the artist than the original Eurydice. It could even make Eurydice lose her independence in the narrative of the story of Orpheus and Eurydice.

The family relationship between Eurydice and her husband is based on their marriage. This relationship is not the same compared or contrasted with the relationship between the artist and his subject of art. Orpheus's identity as an artist proves that he has the characteristics which transcend

mortals. In addition, his marriage with Eurydice stands for his part as a mortal who lives in mortal society. This is also a contradiction in Orpheus's identity.

On the one hand, he is an artist with unparalleled skills who does not need his mortal part when creating his art. On the other hand, his daily life differs not from an ordinary husband when he is not an artist. A sense of alienation between these two identities has become increasingly felt by poets in modern society. The gap between the pursuit of art and the mechanical life of an industrialized society is becoming deeper and farther. Liu Wenfei has commented on this poem, "In a sense, the theme of the poem is alienation" [11]. The state of alienation indeed runs through the whole poem. The couple, which should have been close yet, did not even have direct communication when they were going out of the realm of death. Orpheus's dual identity, while alienating each other, could not even obtain the response of Eurydice under the guidance of Hermes.

The "Eurydice for art" and the "Eurydice as a wife" vanished after her first death. She has lost her old identity. While what she is now is blurred. Rilke described Eurydice's situation as, "She was already root". This description is not enough to clarify the identity of Eurydice, but it reveals that Eurydice now has some new identity.

The two identities of Eurydice discussed above, namely "Eurydice for art" and "Eurydice as a wife", are both individual identities. When Eurydice's first death eliminated these two identities, she, in Rilke's description, entered a new state and hence acquired a universal identity. Orpheus's process of retrieving Eurydice also became a process of universal significance. Orpheus is beyond the boundaries of life and death and gets back his dead wife with the help of his art. Then he lost his wife again because he looked back on the way out of the underworld. The process he went through also became the experience that artists want to get through. They wish their art could transcend the limit of life and death, like Orpheus. They also realize that they, as Orpheus had done, would probably go against god's requirements on the way back to the mortal world. In the eyes of western artists, this process is a prophecy, which generally foreshadows their ultimate pursuit as artists and the contradiction they face when they are artists. When Western artists realize they also have Orpheus's double identity in their own lives, they want to find their Eurydice waiting in the underworld. Therefore, Eurydice's identity has universal significance after her first death. This makes the "root" in Rilke's description. This universal identity that replaces Eurydice's personal identity makes Eurydice not only a protagonist in mythology and a symbolized being of artists' pursuits

5. The Introduction of Hermes

Hermes is a god who is closely related to the netherworld. He appears mainly as the messenger of the gods and the conductor of Hades in ancient Greek mythology. It would be Hermes to accompany Eurydice when they were going out of the realm of Persephone if someone was leading Eurydice.

The introduction of Hermes has two functions. He acted as the intermediary between Orpheus and Eurydice. In the poem, there is no direct communication between Orpheus and Eurydice when they are walking out of the netherworld. Only Hermes talked. In the meantime, the crucial scene of "Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes" is narrated from a third-person observation. However, this observation did not focus on Orpheus when he did the destructive behaviour. It was looking at Hermes and Eurydice at that time.

Moreover, Hermes gives readers the most crucial plot of the whole story: Orpheus looks back. Hermes was the only observer of Orpheus' behaviour since Eurydice did not notice this fact. In other words, the witness from Hermes gave the looking back of Orpheus meaning. If no one observed Orpheus' behaviour, his deed would not make any change for the three characters.

The perspective Rilke provides readers is focused on Hermes. Sometimes the things readers saw even came from Hermes' observation. The introduction of Hermes not only works as a bridge between Orpheus and Eurydice but also provides readers with the perspective to witness the whole

story. Another important problem would be: “In Rilke’s poem, is Hermes acted only as an observer or deeply involved in the things that happened between Orpheus and Eurydice?” It is true that he was physically involved in the communication of the husband and wife. However, he did not interfere with their behaviours nor point out the changes that happened in Eurydice. Hermes’ introduction could not change anything that happens in the crucial scene.

Hermes is there to connect Orpheus and Eurydice. Neither Orpheus as an artist nor Orpheus as a husband could have Eurydice’s response, and Eurydice has no intention to communicate. However, the introduction of Hermes also proclaims Orpheus’ failure to retrieve Eurydice even before he looks back.

Rilke has told readers that Orpheus and Eurydice could not directly establish a connection, but Eurydice still followed Orpheus under Hermes’ guidance. The connection between Eurydice and the dead Orpheus needed to be maintained by Hermes. Orpheus was actually making contact with Hermes. He could not directly or indirectly grasp the state of Eurydice. For Orpheus as an artist, Hermes was between him and Eurydice (that is, the content sometimes involved in his art). From this perspective, Hermes’ existence might symbolize poetry and music for Orpheus as an artist. Artists need the form of art to establish a connection with the content of art, but the form of art cannot be used to grasp the content of art. When the artist looked back and tried to grasp the content directly, the content of art would inevitably leave him. For Orpheus as Eurydice’s husband, the existence of Hermes meant that his family relationship with Eurydice was isolated. Orpheus could not be sure what had happened to his wife or even that the family relationship still existed. When Orpheus turned his head and observed Eurydice directly, no matter whether he had confirmed his relationship with Eurydice through this action, Eurydice, who was no longer his wife, would stop following him to the mortal world.

6. Discussions on the Meaning of Hermes’ Introduction

Rilke has told readers that Orpheus and Eurydice could not directly establish a connection, but Eurydice still followed Orpheus under Hermes’ guidance. The connection between Eurydice and the dead Orpheus needed to be maintained by Hermes. Orpheus was actually making contact with Hermes. He could not directly or indirectly grasp the state of Eurydice. For Orpheus as an artist, Hermes was between him and Eurydice (the content sometimes involved in his art). For Orpheus as Eurydice’s husband, the existence of Hermes meant that his family relationship with Eurydice was isolated. Orpheus could not be sure what had happened to his wife or even that the family relationship still existed. When Orpheus turned his head and observed Eurydice directly, no matter whether he had confirmed his relationship with Eurydice through this action, Eurydice, who was no longer his wife, would stop following him to the mortal world.

As mentioned earlier, Orpheus’s dual identities are individual identities. At the same time, Eurydice has lost her individual identity and was given a universal identity after her first death. The introduction of Hermes shows that Orpheus and Eurydice cannot establish a direct relationship from the identity. Hermes could represent the bridge between personal identity and universal identity. Identity with universal significance needs and will not pay attention to the action of any individual identity. However, it is difficult for individual identity to directly reach a universal identity since an individual identity is unique while the identity of Eurydice is universal. From this perspective, Hermes could possibly represent the form of art. Individual artists try to reach pure art as a universal concept through every possible form of art. The advancement of art requires artists to create artistic content in the form of art constantly. Moreover, art itself will not show its state to artists through artistic form. Orpheus’s looking back may be a symbol of the artist’s impulse to reach the essence of art. Based on the discussions above, the introduction of Hermes in “Orpheus, Eurydice, Hermes” is to discuss the problem of independent and individual artists’ attempts to grasp the essence of art

7. Conclusions

When the identity of Orpheus and Eurydice is discussed, it is easy to find the connection between this Orphic poem of Rilke and another Orphic story. This poem, together with his sonnets to Orpheus, reveals Rilke's "Orpheus Complex" and shows his artistic pursuit. Analysing this poem from the identity of Orpheus and Eurydice could not only bring a new perspective to understanding the poem but also provide a possible path to get close to Rilke's attitude towards art.

It is certain that the problems of identity always exist in every Orphic story. However, the introduction of Hermes makes the analysis of the identity problem of Orpheus and Eurydice could go further. Involving Hermes and eliminating Eurydice's individual identity after her first, as two significant innovations in this poem, make the discussion of identity also a discussion on pursuing art.

In all, analysing Rilke's "Orpheus, Eurydice, Hermes" from the problem of identity is a doable and very interesting attempt. It could lead to a different view when discussing the meaning of Hermes and hence have some new analysis on the meaning of the introduction of Hermes as well as the whole poem. Meanwhile, these discussions will help understand Rilke's thoughts and pursuits on art and life as a modernist poet.

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