KATARZYNA KUCZYŃSKA-KOSCHAN

ALEKSANDER WAT, AN ORPHIC POET

Somatic Poems—A Handful of New Footnotes

Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz wrote a long time ago:

Mediterranean mythology tells us about four great Europeans, who, while still alive, found themselves in the underworld kingdom of the dead. They were: Heracles, Theseus, Orpheus and Odysseus. Heracles and Theseus went down into the underworld in order to act. Heracles led Cerberus to daylight and freed Titans from Tartarus. Theseus intended to kidnap the mistress of the underworld, Demeter’s daughter, Persephone. Their adventures, although beautiful, did not seem to be of interest to poets of centuries to come. Orpheus and Odysseus went down into the underworld in order to know. Orpheus, by finding Eurydice, wanted to know about the nature of death. Odysseus, who at the entrance to Hades listened to the prophecy of Tiresias and the story astories of Elpenor, wanted to know about time past and time future. Knowledge of time is knowledge of history. Poets of the twentieth century who were going to hell were doing so either with Odysseus or with Orpheus. These were to be expeditions to acquire knowledge of death or of history. […] Rainer Maria Rilke went down to Hades with Orpheus. He went down to acquire knowledge about the nature of death. This journey—undertaken in the autumn of 1904, eighteen years prior to writing Sonnets to Orpheus—resulted in a beautiful poem and brought about the birth of Orphic poetry of the twentieth century. Because knowledge of death, which Rilke acquired during his journey to Hades was only a reminder of knowledge Orphic poets once possessed. Death is return, death returns us to ourselves, death
is heritage regained. Eurydice, when she died, returned to herself: 
"Sie war in sich". That much was also known to anonymous authors of hymns about Orpheus.¹

This long fragment showing Rymkiewicz arguments will help me to present my own ones — in a manner of intervention.

In the footnote to line 13 of Wiersze somatyczne (Somatic Poems)² by Aleksander Wat, which runs: "We are looking at Orpheus, Eurydice, Hermes from a Neapolitan bas-relief", Adam Dziadek says: "It’s about a famous Neapolitan bas-relief of Hermes, Eurydice and Orpheus (ca. 420 B.C., this is a Roman copy of an Attic bas-relief, which is to be found in National Archaeological Museum of Naples). A reference to these works of art can also be found in the poetic prose of Zbigniew Herbert "H.E.O," and in the poem of Mieczysław Jastrun, "Stara grecka płaskorzeźba" ("An Old Greek Bas-Relief").³

This is an unfinished footnote. Why? I will return to it soon.

First, I would like to say how important Wat’s authorial footnotes were to the author of the introduction to a selection of Wat’s poetry published in "Biblioteka Narodowa" (The National Library) — he even devoted a whole chapter of his introduction to it.⁴ For example, while analysing the fifth poem from the cycle "Pieśni wędrowca" ("Songs of a Wanderer"), thanks to the confrontation with the authorial footnote, he very accurately showed that "Wat’s text is constituted as an interrelated knot of signs emitted by a text and a footnote."⁵ Authorial footnotes were — in the case of Polish editions of Wiersze (Poems), Cracow, 1957 and Wiersze średniomorskie (Mediterranean Poems), Warsaw, 1962 — an important element

² "Nowa Kultura" 1957, no. 30, 1 and 3.
⁴ Wstęp do: Aleksander Wat, Wybór wierszy, op. cit., LII–LXVII
⁵ Ibid., LXVI.
of the process of manoeuvring when handling with communist censorship. The footnote is a marginal form (as it might seem) of the paratext. As Dziadzie wrote, in the poetry of Wat it "became important, because it acquired the features and values of a supplement, began to function as a specific case of anticipating a given text, and is very important in the reading of all the individual poems as it directs and determines the possible ways of reading."  

Now, I will return to the problem of the footnote to line 13 of "Somatic Poems". The one who gives footnotes to an author as careful as Wat should be at least as careful. Already in the description of the Neapolitan bas-relief from the fundamental Studia orfickie (Orphic Studies) by Adam Kroikiewicz7 we can already find a connecting element (mediation), which for most of the twentieth-century references to the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, is Rainer Maria Rilke’s long poem Orpheus, Eurydice, Hermes.8 Kroikiewicz wrote in prose what Rilke had written in verse. The poet himself was inspired by his direct contact with the Greek bas-relief in the museum of Naples (and maybe also by August Rodin’s sculpture "Orpheus and Eurydice"). Many years later Josef Brodski,9 in one of his essays, pronounced this long poem to be the greatest masterpiece of lyrical poetry of the twentieth century.

And it is the importance of Rilke’s long poem which I am calling for here, because Herbert in both of his prose variants of H.E.O., the one in Zeszyty Literackie (Literary Notebooks)10 and the one in Król mrówek (The King of the Ants)11 as well as Jastrun—a translator

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4 Ibid., LXVI-LXVII
8 On this topic see Katarzyna Kuczyńska-Koschan, Rilke poetów polskich, op. cit., 247–254.
11 Zbigniew Herbert, H.E.O., in Król mrówek. Prywatna mitologia, Kraków 2001, 11–12. The footnote in this edition which Ryszard Krynicki wrote to the poetic prose of Herbert is very important. I would call it the footnote of a tender erudite.
and a very careful perennial reader of Rilke—anchored their texts in the long poem by Rilke.

Herbert places the initials of names which form the title of Rilke’s poem in reverse order, clearly favouring a central position of Eurydice, and, in a way, making her the main character of his reinterpretation of the myth. Also, Czesław Miłosz, in the long poem published after the death of his wife, “Orfeusz i Eurydyka” (“Orpheus and Eurydice”), referred in both a polemical and agreeable manner Rilke’s poem. Polemically, because in his perception, Persephone was more important than Hermes, and as a continuation of Rilke’s image, because Eurydice was described again with the words of Rilke (“legs bound with a gown like a shroud, and Orpheus’s sense of hearing is — as it was in the poem from 1904 — like a hound’s. The landscape of crying was presented in a similar way”). Without Rilke, all these texts mentioned here — Jastrun’s, Herbert’s and Miłosz’s — would have been different, or maybe they might not have been written at all. Therefore, it was through his poem, which initiated the twentieth-century re-narration of the myth of a lover’s loss, that Polish contemporary poets looked at the Neapolitan bas-relief. The lack of reference to the text from the volume Neue Gedichte (1907) in the footnote of the standard edition disorient readers and ignores the basic fact that it was from this poem that the twentieth-century Orphic poetry commenced.

However, the footnote makes me think whether Rilke—the author of Orpheus, Eurydice, Hermes (where Orpheus is an earthly singer)\(^{12}\),

\(^{12}\) I wrote on this issue earlier in the sketch Bez Eurydyki. Rilke, Herbert, Miłosz wobec mitu miłośnej załoby, Zeszyty Literackie”, no. 85, summer 2005, 201.

\(^{12}\) Paweł Majewski in a brilliant erudite text combining diverse threads wrote on this issue: Paweł Majewski, Antyku w poezji Rilkego i Iwaszkiewicza — próba porównania, „Pamiętnik Literacki” 2007, (2), 74–83 (fragment entitled, Orfeusz, Eurydyka, Akestis — między życiem a śmiercią). The twin myth about Acestis and
but also the author of *Sonnets to Orpheus* (where Orpheus became a god)\textsuperscript{14}—was equally important to Wat,\textsuperscript{15} who wrote two moving Orphic texts. I have in mind *Somatic Poems*, written in 1967 and "Wiersz ostatni" ("The Last Poem"), dated 31 May 1967, composed shortly before his death.

*Somatic Poems* was written in Naples, a decade after *Orphic Studies* by Krokiewicz, in which he described the bas-relief from Naples in the following way:

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\textsuperscript{15} Wat had a high opinion about Rilke (what is interesting — similarly to Herbert — he put Rilke alongside Eliot), which is supported by a fragment of letter to Józef Czapski written in Cabris on 15.03.1962: "Everything, a contemporary poet says today clearly in the manner of the old [poets] — it is practically a better or worse stylizations, repetitions (it is different in painting, but I will probably write about it elsewhere), frankly speaking quite pathetic. It would be better if each of such poets, more than once excellent ones, published (he could write as much as he wants for himself) an anthology of old poems, which would express him so much better. (That is why I always feel like mixing into my dark poems, poems of others, so brilliantly expressed a long time ago. So, for us — the late scions — only the darkest issues and layers remain, most intimate, least verified, and if verified (because each great poet was also in great depth), not very conscious — and, of course, things most personal, often accidental, but falling into some geologically deep grooves — they must be unconditionally elevated in a clear and objective way. Then, they are good, sometimes great, as for example is the case of Rilke and Eliot, and how often, how very often — as far as our poets are concerned — only of Miłosz’s [poetry]". K. part 1, 64–65.
The National Museum of Naples has a modest (1,18m) bas-relief made of Parian marble, of Hermes, Eurydice and Orpheus. Orpheus wears Thracian dress. He holds a lyre in his left hand, and with the right one he removes a veil from Eurydice’s face, who with her left hand touches his right arm. On the other side of Eurydice there stands Hermes, leaning slightly backwards. With his left hand he holds Eurydice’s right hand, as if he wanted to put her further away from Orpheus. The heads of Orpheus and Eurydice are close to each other. Eurydice’s face, and particularly Orpheus’s face, are filled with sadness. The face of Hermes is serious and focused. Hermes and Eurydice both wear Greek dresses.

It is usually claimed that this bas-relief shows the heroic but futile effort of Orpheus. He loved his young wife Eurydice. When she died, having been bitten by a snake, Orpheus missed her so much that eventually he went to look for her to the land of eternal darkness and begged the gods of the underworld to let Eurydice return with him to sunlight. Orpheus played the lyre and sang so beautifully that the affected gods agreed with his request, but on the condition that he would leave the kingdom of the dead without turning back till he reached home (a motif of a folk tale). But Orpheus failed to do so. He looked back too early to see if Eurydice was following him and she had to leave him again, as he had not kept his promise given to the gods. The bas-relief shows this very moment. The distraught Orpheus Despairing, Orpheus soon died. He was to be torn apart by Thracian women either because of anger and revenge that he had rejected their love, or because Dionysus induced them to a murderous frenzy because Orpheus, although he had the fame of a prophet thanks to him, had not mentioned him in the song he had sung to the gods of the underworld, and because after Eurydice’s death he had started to worship luminous Apollo more than him [...].

This bas-relief is very beautiful. The beauty of individual figures is strengthened by a synthetic beauty and a specific, metaphorical meaning of a group as such. Orpheus and Eurydice are more closely connected, which the artist stressed through various artistic means, for example, through the proximity of their heads and the centripetal line of the dresses’ folds. Hermes represents the moment of separation and the necessity of parting. Orpheus and Eurydice are spiritually united by their reciprocal love, but this union is not perfect enough
for the discreteness of their individual bodies to be merged. Spiritual
unity and corporal multiplicity come close together. People cannot
overcome the multiplicity which separates them, even if they are
connected by the most honest of passions. On the other hand,
multiplicity is not so strong as to prevent spiritual union. In this
way this bas-relief, which may be called the most fine monument
of Ancient Orphism, has become a symbol of one of its key
metaphysical ideas: a mysterious relationship of multiplicity with
unity[...]. The anonymous creator of the original composed a symbol
unintentionally, and such symbols are often more powerful than
the intended ones.16

I will quote Wat’s Somatic Poems in their completeness, as they
were published originally, because in the edition of “Biblioteka
Narodowa” ten differences between the original version published
in Nowa Kultura (New Culture) (1957, no. 30) and the version from
the volume Wiersze (Poems) (1957), used by Adam Dziadek,17 were not
noted. This seems of particular importance to me because the original
text is much more dramatic, and all the repetitions (removed already
from the book version of/ in? 1957) point to a big difference between
Wat, the poet in pain and Wat, a proof-reader outside pain/ outside
the realm of pain? (while being in remission for a while). Or, these
changes might be perceived differently: what happened between 1957
and 1957 that Wat’s text was so fundamentally altered/ modified??

16 Adam Krokiewicz, Studia orfickie. Moralności Homera i etyka Hejzoda, in Idem,
are highlighted by Adam Krokiewicz.
17 I believe that the omission described here breaks the rule of the “BN” series.
In the fragment of the declaration published in one of the early volumes of “BN”,
published again in Wat’s volume (“BN” I 300, s. II), we may read: “Stressing the care
of introductory sketches and interpretations of texts, BN at the same time takes it
as its duty to give the best texts of the authors, based on autographs, first editions
and critical editions”. Because as the basis of the 1957 edition (P. 216–217) the 1957
edition of Wiersze, the version from the first edition—confronted with the authorial
corrections made in the same year—becomes for the time the basis for interpretation
for all—except for reader of 1957 “Nowa Kultura”.

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Colloquia Litteraria

Wat had a perfect Orphic ear. The first version of the text, published in the periodical, seems to be much better. So, is it also the result of the intervention of censors as—and Dziadek discussed this issue—the volume of 1957 keeps numerous traces of censorship.18

1

Głos pierwszy:

Między serca rozkurczem a skurczem jest taka chwila gdy jesteśmy śmierci.
Za krótką ona byśmy ją postrzegli.
Esse est perci pi et perci per – powtarzamy poruszamy głową kładziemy rękę na sercu głośno zamykamy książkę
podchodzimy do stołka z jeszcze ciepłą herbatą
wpatrujemy się w Orfeusza Eurydykę z neapolitańskiej płaskorzeźby mówimy: dobranoc kochana.
Zegar bije wiatr nadyma fraknę gasimy światło.
I pogrążamy się w nicość
jeszcze wtedy pewni, żeśmy rzeką żywą rzeką rzeką rzeką. Żywą rzeką która tylko pociemnieć oczemiała – okresowo – wdowa – okresowo – po dziennym świetle
(ono wróci, wrócić musi jak skurcz po rozkurczu)
a lemury na oczemnialnym jej nurcie
to przywidzenia lunatyczne

Głos drugi:

Tymczasem
nicość jest z nami nicość za nami nicość wokoło i w nas wiele nicości.
A to co nazywamy ruchem dzianiem się życiem to

18 Wstęp do: Aleksander Wat, Wybór wierszy, op. cit., LVI.
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przerwy między nicościami. czyby tożsamiem pewno tożsamy.

Głos trzeci:
Jak piękna może być nicość Orfeuszu
Ile dobroci ile czułości ile słodyczy w nicość Orfeuszu
Dobranoc Orfeuszu
Dobra jest noc Orfeuszu
Orfeuszu
Orfeuszu Dobranoc.

2
Obciosać się. Uschnąć. Wyjąć się z wszystkiego co
szpikiem, krwią, wydzieliną.
Z serca się wypruć z trzewi z mózgu.
Tylko woreczek zawieszony jak dzwon w opuszczoną
campanilli z kropką zółci dzwoniącą.

3
Gdzie czułość i okrucieństwo w jeden się uciekają
splatą, tam z latorośli umierającej w paletynę stopen
geście zdrój tryśnie życi zdrój życia tryśnie.
O ekstazie ekstazia o skórze skorony o bolesne słodyczki o
bolesna słodycz penetracji w inne. Śmierć za życia!
Życie za przedprozem śmierci. Zjeścia ześcia!
ześcia plutonem W plutone koloru krwi i popiołu.29

29 I have marked as crossed out fragments, which are given in the 1957 book version, and which are different from the first edition; in bold the version from the first edition. The first voice/Between the heart's contraction and the heart's diastole there is this moment when we belong to death./It is too short for us to notice/Spasmodic are our observations, cognition/And we think, that we are the River. The live/River. The River flowing faster or slower but always, In the direction./Esse est percipi et percipere—we repeat./We move the head, put the hand on the heart/Loudly shut a book./Come to a table with tea still warm/we gaze at Orpheus's Eurydice from the Neapolitan relief./We say: good night, my love./The clock tolls the wind blows the curtain we turn on the light/And descend into nothingness./Still then sure that we are the river/live river the river. The live river/which only get
“Wiersz ostatni” (“The Last Poem”) (and some more)

I will begin with the fragment of poetic prose by Jules Supervielle’s Orpheus, which, in my opinion, is a good introduction to Wat’s “The Last Poem”:

“I only like miracles when they are hidden,” he thought. “And if I chose Eurydice for a wife it was because she didn’t raise her arms to heaven like the other young girls whenever I began to sing. She kept her emotions to herself.”

But Orpheus was so much with love and his music that it made him forget his wife. And she was loved in secret by a brutal shepherd, called Areteus, who had long since killed all the music in himself. Once when he was pursuing Eurydice among the lagoons and the reeds, she was stung to death by a serpent, born of the night itself and embodying the surprises and treachery of the night.

Thereupon Orpheus rushed thither from very far off, guided by his heart, which was at last awakened. Stirred by the incense of the funeral rites, his love finally shook off its torpor. Stricken with silence before the inert body of his wife, the poet decided to hold his peace forever, not even replying to questions put to him by the gods. All music, every word, seemed to him henceforth a profanation.

dark got blind—periodically—the widow—periodically—after/ day’s light./(she will return, she must return as contraction must after diastole)/and lemmers in her current/are only lunatic delusions./the second voice:/Meanwhile/nothingness is with us/thingness behind us nothing around us and in us/there is a lot of nothingness./And this what we call action movement life are breaks between/thingnesses identical is that not surely identical./The third voice:/How beautiful can nothingness be Orpheus/How much goodness how much tenderness how much sweetness in nothingness Orpheus/Good night Orpheus/Good is the night Orpheus/Orpheus/Good night/To chop off oneself to wither to wring out oneself from/everything which is not narrow blood secretion/From the heart to disembowel oneself from the guts from the brain/Only the bladder hanged like a bell in a deserted companilla/tolling with a drop of gall./s/When tenderness and cruelty in one clatch are mixed./there from the spout dying in the pompous gesture/the spring will erupt/of the spring of life will erupt./O ecstasy of ecstacies o communiion of skins of/painful little sweetness of painful sweetness/Of penetration into others Death during life! Life behind the threshold of death. Descent descent! descent plutonium in plutonium of the colour of blood and ash.”
The gods could not long endure being deprived of that voice, which was so pure that it linked earth to heaven with no effort and with the greatest tact.
Orpheus was given permission to go and fetch his wife, restored from the dead and to bring her from the underworld, going before her with his gaze fixed on the door of the Shades.
But when he was within a few paces of deliverance, the most human of poets could not prevent himself, in spite of the divine command, from turning his head towards his beloved. At first he did not see that his gesture had made his wife disappear, but almost immediately he began to sing a song so sad that after it there was no longer any place in the world for Eurydice.
Cruelly enlightened by his own music he grew desperate at having loved his wife so ill, and in his frenzy this poet, who could infuse life into rocks, hastily put together some verses which came swiftly to him from the far reaches of his mind, in an attempt, in spite of everything, to set the heart of Eurydice, which had turned into stone, beating once more.
But already the wind of death was blowing Orpheus far away from the underworld.20

A moment later the Bacchantes, “who hated music and poetry, which slake the thirst of the senses without feeding their lust”21 not being able to seduce Orpheus, killed the son of Oeagrus (Ares or Charops) and Calliope (Polyhymnia or Clio). His severed head and his lyre did not stop the singing about Eurydice (nymph-dryad or, as others insist, a daughter of Apollo).22 Supervielle added: “Many hours after his death his lips went on murmuring many new images and beautiful sounds which none but poets to come could hear.”23

21 Ibid., 137.
22 Information on similarities and affinities of myths are as presented in Pierre Grimal. Słownik mitologii greckiej i rzymskiej, ed. by Jerzy Łanowski, transl. by Maria Bronarska et al., Wrocław 1990, 94 (entry “Eurydice”), 260 (entry “Oeagrus”), 266-267.
23 Jules Supervielle, op. cit., 137.
Colloquia Litteraria

Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz, in “Ogród Persefony” (“Persephone’s Garden”) (a long fragment of this text has been quoted at the beginning) also wrote about poets of the future, by which he meant that is poets of the twentieth century. He wrote, which is important, that “hell of the twentieth century is hell for everybody”, that “you do not have to be an ancient hero, an outstanding European to get there in your lifetime.”

One of these poets of the future was Aleksander Wat, when at the very end of his life, with his head and his lyre alone, in his long, incurable illness, in pain that put him on the brink of insanity, he wrote about the loss of Eurydice and his own funeral, about irretrievable katabasis:

Schodzenie
schodzenie
ciągłe schodzenie
I żebym to ja sam!
w zaciszu, po ciemku.
Te przede mną, za mną
obok nogi
przeganiają
ten stukot butów,
to dudnienie w metro Châtelet?
Tylko jeden nieruchomości
beznogi akordeonista charon.
I gdzie ja się zabłąkałem?
Euridyce? Euridyce!
Schodzenie
Schodzenie
ciągłe schodzenie
ciągle w dół
schodzenie

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It seems that no one (most probably) has moved beyond Cei's
(a) definition of the poem. The poem is lonely. Lonely and end
route. Its author stays with it. The Gedicht einsam, Einsam
and underworld. We are clearly, clearly im mittelweg. It is worth
asking who is on route with this lonely poem. Apart from the one
who wrote it, or rather, who whispered it. Because, after all, Cei
who wrote the thought, who whispered it. Does this very fact not
finish the thought, the whispering? The Second Voice. Meanwhile,
the mystery of the encounter. At first Cei, unbearably returns
and begins the beginning of the poem. The song. Bad
hard everywhere, always. The black thread weaves and weaves. Behind
me and before me, and me. In the mystery of the encounter
(Aber sieht das Gedicht nnd. grade dadurch. [... in the mystery of the encounter
(And then, in the Last Poem, as a refrain, which
one cannot avoid humming: "To przebeka za mnie. "These in
front of me behind me."") I turned out later that this movement
downwards appears in the long poem. "Ocharia and Eryk
time. Here, the mournful. I move over hundred
by Czeslaw Milosz. Here, the mournful. I move over hundred
by Czeslaw Milosz.

The title "Wetz ostani" (The Last Poem) was given by Ola Wolow. See
the etymology: the etymology of the word. The word "ostani" means"one cannot avoid humming: "To przebeka za mnie. "These in
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of corridors and floors ([..] “He descended many floors, a hundred, three hundred, down./He was cold, aware that he was Nowhere”28) in order to arrive finally in a hospital morgue which is also the mythical underworld (“Standing on flagstones of the sidewalk at the entrance to Hades/Orpheus hunched in a gust of wind.”29). This same feeling of ‘underground loneliness’ appears in Adam Zagajewski’s poem “Wielki Piątek w korytarzach metra” (“Good Friday in Corridors of the Underground”) (form the volume Jechać do Lwowa (To Go to Lwów), 1985), with an important ending: “W korytarzach metra ból się nie przemienia, / tylko trwa, boli bez wytchnienia.”30 Wat’s “one legless/accordionist Charon” will be repeated as a homeless person, as nobody in the poem by Ryszard Krynicki “Byłem tutaj” (“I have been here”) (from the volume Kamięń, szron (A Stone, Hoar Frost) (2004): “We wpneć zmroku bezdomny / rozkłada swoje kartony na nocleg. Nikt / odbija się w ścianie”.31

In the myth of Orpheus there are fragments which are more prone—according to Lessing’s classification, more nebeneinander—to be transposed to paintings (Gustave Moreau’s (1865);32 Jean Delville’s

29 Ibidem.,
30 Adam Zagajewski, Wielki Piątek w korytarzach metra, Późne święta, Warszawa 1998, 111. “In corridors of the underground the pain is not transformed./but it lasts, it aches without a break.”
31 Ryszard Krynicki, Byłem tutaj (1990), in Kamięń, szron, Kraków 2004, 23. “In the niche of the gloom a homeless/puts down his cartons for the night. Nobody is reflected in the wall.”
32 The cut off head of the poet-singer ‘hugged by’ the lyre on the 1865 painting of Moreau known under the titles “Orpheus” or “Thrasic Girl Carrying the Head of Orpheus”, the variant of the same motif in Delville’s painting “Orpheus” from 1883. Redon’s drawings have very different stylistics, particularly in the charcoal drawing “Orpheus’ Head” from 1881. Maria Poprzęcka wrote about the 1865 painting: ‘In the figure of this girl a picture of postiri was perceived, collecting and patiently protecting the works of a genius. Marcel Proust, who devoted an entire article to ‘the mysterious world of Gustave Moreau’, advised to visit this painting in the museum, as one visits graves. A flash of hope was also perceived in his sadness;
(1893),

Odilon Redon’s (1881) or sculptures (the Neapolitan bas-relief discussed here, Rodin’s sculpture with lovers growing into a stone (1893)). There are also such elements of this myth which are more prone to storytelling—they belong to the domain of nacheinander in Lessing’s terminology—these are closer to poetic or prose re-narrations: an attempt to regain Eurydice is exactly such a story within a story.

Maybe we could also treat as an important one the trace that leads to Redon, there is a poem written by Wat in Paris in November 1956

Orpheus is dead but poetry will not be silenced, because there are two small turtles at the feet of the girl, their shells will one day be used by poets to make their new lyres”. See Poprężka, Orfeusz, “Wysokie Obcasy” [dodatek do „Gazety Wyborczej”], 27 November 1999, 41. Of course, a motif of a prophesying head, of the song coming out of the dead mouth of Orpheus, is connected with the iconographical theme of Salome with John the Baptist’s head, which was so fascinating to artists of the end of the nineteenth century. As Poprężka wrote the best pictures of this head “the most perfect ones, filled with perverse desire were created also by Gustave Moreau”). See M. Poprężka, W stroną ukochanych cieni. Obraz Orfeusza w sztuce symbolizmu, in Mit Orfeusza, op. cit., 227–244. Cf., also: Jean-Pierre Reverseau, Pour une étude du thème de la tête coupée dans la littérature et la peinture dans la seconde partie du XIXe siècle, „Gazette des Beaux-Arts”, septembre 1972, 173–184.

As Poprężka wrote (W stroną ukochanych cieni..., op. cit., 242): “‘Orpheus’ of the Belgian symbolist Jean Delville connects in a hazardous way lack of reality of imagination with illusionary mimetics and is closer to an ethereal Phantom than to the macabre of the decapitated man in its literal representation [John the Baptist—K.K.K]. The head, lit by the night light, grows almost organically from a richly ornamented lyre. Around there stars twinkle, and they are reflected in the transparent, lightly ruffled water. The head itself, surrounded by frenzy of golden hair, charms with its androgyny (the painter’s wife posed for the painting).

Maria Poprężka wrote about the charcoal drawing by Odilon Redon(ibidem): “It is unusual not only because of the simplest, barely introductory technique. Also thanks to the severity of the line, elimination of colours, moulding, and almost abstract background. The artist, from the painting devoid of any painterly tricks, also removed all requisites of historical and mythographical erudition. It is unique not only because of the rudimentary, introductory technique. The painting was cleansed not only from narration, but also from all ‘delusive representations’. The head itself—big, black with ruffled hair—surfaces vertically in an inexplicable way – not only flow, but in an inexplicable way emerges vertically from the water.”
entitled “Na wystawie Odilon Redona” (“At the Exhibition of Odilon Redon”) would give a clue particularly because of the clearly Orphic study in black:

Czerni jest tyle
ile kolorów
na palecie
Natury
a każdy kolor ma własną czerń.
Przyjrzyj się czerniom
na rzece
omżonej blikami latarń gazowych;
czerniom
na bryle antracytu;
podwodnym czerniom
oceanicznym,
gdzie koncha perłowa otwiera lono
promienne,
gdzie koral się pręży
jak gałąź ciernia.
Czerniom się przyjrzyj Redona
Czerniom się przyjrzyj Rembrandta.

Dalbym sobie krwi utoczyć
kwartę
czerwonej
najczerwieńszej
krwi kwartę
utoczyć
żeby osiągnąć syntezę:
czystą
czarną
czerń.
Natura przed nią się cofa
jak koń siwy
przed kobrą
warującą w poprzek drogi
szmaragdowej życia.\footnote{Aleksander Wat, Wybór wierszy, op. cit., 117–118. “There are as many blacks/as colours/on a palette/of Nature/and each colour has its own blackness/ Look at blacknesses/on a river/with flashes of gas lanterns/blacknesses on a chunk of anthracite/submarine blacknesses/of the oceans,/where a pearl conch/opens the bosom/radiant,/where coral flexes itself/as a thorn branch./Look at blacknesses of Redon/ Look at blackness of Rembrandt./I would allow my blood to be tapped/a quart/of red/the reddest/to tap in order to/achieve synthesis/pure/black/ blackness./Nature retreats from it/like a grey horse before cobra/waiting across the road/esmerald of life”}

Nature retreats from perfect, synthetic blackness as [...]—I will try to sort out this simile which is so complex because of many symbols piled one over another. An emerald way of life, that is: green and precious. Cobra—also greenish,\footnote{Among others an emblem of an Egyptian goddess Wadjet, “the Green”, a titular goddess of the Lower Kingdom of Egypt. I am quoting Władysław Kopalinski, Słownik symboli, Warszawa 1990, 448, hasło „Wąż” (entry “Serpent”)} therefore, thanks to mimicry, hidden and ’staying put’ on the way of a similar colour—a therefore even more dangerous. Grey horse—the symbolism of horses, depending on their colour and connections with elements, may be lunar (white seahorses) or solar (grey, gold, fiery on the earth and in the air);\footnote{See Jean C. Cooper, Zwierzęta symboliczne i mityczne, transl. by Anna Kozłowska-Ryś i Leszek Ryś, Poznań 1998, 112, hasło „Koń” (entry “Horse”)} in Greek myths: “White horses pulled the chariot of Apollo and Mitra, as well as Poseidon’s, and they were also mounted by Dioscuri [...]”\footnote{Ibid., 113–114.} When Orpheus loses his wife (Apollo’s daughter) bitten by a snake (cobra?), there is some fault in it, some lack of solar vitality; from this perspective Orphic katabasis could be seen as a reparative action. It should not sound paradoxical that Orpheus went down to the underworld to get sun, to get “everything which is most important”. While Orpheus’s words in the poem by Wat, that he would allow to tap “a quart of his blood” “for the blackest
of blackness”, suggest a pact with an obvious evil for the price of one’s life, a Faustian price for artistic absolute.39

Nature retreats from perfect blackness, from the quintessence of blackness—Wat seems to be saying at the end of “At the Exhibition of Odilon Redon”—as it retreats from death (and from the kind of pact to which man, particularly an artist or thinker, is ready).

The most important question. What is more Orphic than a descent into blackness: deep into the earth (kingdom of death) or descending into one’s own depth? What defines poetry more than this descent? So, Wat in “The Last Poem”, similarly to Rilke in Sonnets to Orpheus, did something remarkable: he descended down into someone’s death. Maybe Wat went even further than Rilke, because the latter went down into the death of Wera Ouckampa Knoop, a young dancer, while the former went down into his own death (from an anthropological point of view this is impossible). As if he was giving a testimony to the opening words of Somatic Poems: ”Between the heart’s contraction and the heart’s diastole there is this moment when we belong to death.”

Rilke’s long poem “Orpheus, Eurydice, Hermes” was written for three different types of steps: each protagonist had his or her own. The way they walked defined them—a man, a woman, a god. Orpheus devoured the road with huge bites; he wanted it to end as quickly as possible. Eurydice had her feet bound by a shroud, she could not walk fast, her rhythm was the rhythm of a dead person.

Hermes, Psychopompos, could communicate, in any way possible, between the vehement, amorous vitality of Orpheus and the deadly condition of Eurydice. But Orpheus could not enter into Eurydice’s

39 Similarly Miłosz, in the poem “Orpheus and Eurydice”: “He remembered her words: ‘You are a good man. / He did not quite believe it. / Lyric poets/Usually have—as he knew, cold hearts. / It is like a condition. Perfection in art / Is given in exchange for such an affliction” op. cit., 260.”
death or either she could not return to life, as it was not his death and it was not her life.  

Similarly, in Somatic Poems the conversation of a suffering body with itself, in the first part of the poem, a dramatic miniature, with three voices, but in the second part it becomes a categorical imperative of dying (“To chop off oneself to wither to wring out oneself from/ everything which is not marrow blood secretion/From the heart to disembowel oneself from the guts from the brain”), a very sudden descent into its own death, and in the third part a state, which is almost impossible to record: of death during life, where both death and life are facts endured by someone experiencing unbearable pain, who is fully conscious “O! ecstasy of ecstasies! o! communion of skins o! painful sweetness/Of penetration into the Other. Death during life! Life behind the threshold/of death.”  

It is different in Sonnets to Orpheus and “The Last Poem”. An auto-katabasis and an epitaph are, in a way, put together. Rilke’s epitaph for a dancer takes 55 sonnets (maybe this is the case of multiplicity Krokiewicz wrote about, maybe Wera Knoop—a nineteen year old dancer who died of leukaemia, of which Rilke was to die soon, is the Eurydice of this cycle). Wat’s auto-epitaph is inhibited in the liminal sense (the lyrical situation is liminal indeed: “Descending descending constant/constant descending down/ascending and tomorrow they will ascertain it/only three cubits below the ground.” Maybe Wat managed to present as many as one dying person — himself, poetry became an antidote to segmentation by pain.  

Perhaps he managed to succeed in doing what Karl Dedecius regards as the essence of Orphic poetry, an attempt to overcome “a precipice between past and future, beginning and end, life and

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48 Ola Watowa is a great counterpoint to such a construction of Euridyce, who after her husband’s death was giving titles to his works (some of these titles are brilliant, for example Dziennik bez samogłosek (A Journal Without Vowels), and above all she wrote, similarly to Nadezhda Mandelstam and her Hope Against Hope — a book as important as Wszystko co najważniejsze, (The Most Important Thing), with its opening sentence “The most important things in my life are connected with Aleksander”. Ola Watowa, Wszystko co najważniejsze..., Warszawa 1990. 9.
death."41 Maybe his success was partly the result of his reading of Rilke, as it was the phrase from the third sonnet part one from Sonnets to Orpheus which kept Wat alive during the worst moments in the Soviet prison.

Nescio: and if asked what poetry is, I wouldn’t know either, even though its substance was so self-evident as to be almost palpable in Lubyanka, I could detect its presence with my fingertips, even though poetry’s spiritual content is perhaps even purer than that of religious experience since the latter contains psychological elements—a person’s feeling towards his father, his relationship to nature, and so forth. Poetry, however can feed on those elements too, but it can also do without them. Perhaps poetry could do without everything and is a state of nirvana, not meaning nothingness but, on the contrary, the highest fullness. "Gesung und Dasein," I repeated after Rilke, and that was enough for me.42

What does being an Orphic poet mean? To experience what is poetic as elementary. I will once again quote Supervielle:

Before his day, the wind in the foliage made no sound, the sea sleeked its waves in complete silence, rain fell on roofs without a murmur, and people were always remarking on the muteness of waterfalls. The nature was waiting for her first poet.

Birds used to look at you with their songs lying inert at the back of their beaks. It was Orpheus who unlocked the throats of the nightingales. And they still sing today as they did in the days of the first poet, recording the time when he came.

If the fish remain silent, it is because they lived even then in the water and so could not hear the poet’s voice. But the mermaids, whose only fishy part is their tails, were able to profit by his lesson. It was thanks to Orpheus that the swallows learned how to set about bringing news from the horizon. And if he had not died so young, he would have

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gone from space to space, giving a voice to the moon, the sun and the stars, and even to those stars that we shall not see for centuries to come. But hear him speak:

"My father was an eminent waterway. One day Calliope, who was to become my mother, was blissfully bathing in this river. Call as they might to her from the bank, she stayed in for hours, clasped in the delightful arms of the stream.

I am a fruit of that union—half-carnal and half-aquatic, half-white and half-glaucous, half-silence (my mother remained taciturn right up to my birth) and half-music. I have poetry in my blood."⁴⁹

We see deep white and deep blue colours, when a grey horse retreats from the blackest blackness on an emerald way of life: at the same time an Orphic poet loses a quart of thereddest blood.

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⁴⁹ Jules Supervielle, op. cit., 133.