



Orpheus, Byblis, Myrrha: Towards a Matrixial Ethics of Encounter in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

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Beauty that I find in contemporary art-works that interest me, whose source is the trauma and to which it also returns and appeals, is not the beauty as 'private' or as that upon which a consensus of taste can be reached, but is a kind of encounter that perhaps we are trying to avoid much more than aspiring to arrive at ...
Bracha Ettinger

This article re-reads the stories of Eurydice, Byblis and Myrrha in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* alongside the art and critical thought of the Israeli-born artist and psychoanalyst Bracha Ettinger (b. 1948). In her work, Ettinger seeks to escape the exclusivity of 'either/or' engagements in previous discourses defining the male and the female and valorizes co-emergence in identities and genders. In her view, gender/subjecthood is not fixed but is in continuous engagement, forming a subject position incorporating in an ever-evolving togetherness of I and non-I (terms that Ettinger prefers as they show an inextricable bond between Self and Other). Ettinger's engagement with Ovid is indirect. She engages with Eurydice in a series of c. 50 paintings, gradually produced (and reproduced) since c. 1990.¹ Although I engage with her *Eurydice* paintings in Part I, alongside the Ovidian retelling of the Orpheus and Eurydice story, it is some of her key psychoanalytical writings² (rather than her paintings)³ that I deploy in my new readings of Byblis and Myrrha stories/characters in Parts II and III.

Ettinger's vision of the engaged self does not draw on Ovid, but Ovid is not worlds apart from her thought: his epic features involving and disturbing stories of

¹ A representative range of paintings from the *Eurydice* collection can be seen at <https://www.wikiart.org/en/bracha-l-ettinger> [accessed 16 May 2018].

² B. Ettinger, 'Metamorphic Borderlinks and Matrixial Borderspace' in *Rethinking Borders*, ed. J. Welchman, London, 1996, pp. 125-59; B. Ettinger, 'Copoiesis', *Ephemeria. Theory and Politics in Organisation*, 4, 2005, pp. 703-13; B. Ettinger, 'Wit(h)nessing Trauma and the Matrixial Gaze', in *The Matrixial Borderspace*, Minneapolis and London, 2006, pp. 123-56.

³ For a short discussion of the *Eurydice* paintings as an altering practice of identity in excess in Ovid, see J. Casid, 'Alter-Ovid – Contemporary Art on the Hyphen', in *A Handbook of the Reception of Ovid*, ed. J. Miller and C. Newlands, Hoboken, 2014, pp. 423-5.

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intense, totalizing, and ultimately catastrophic, connection and engagement with the other. These stories are such that we might feel safer keeping them at the outer edges of our moral and cultural maps. But when Ovid and Ettinger are placed in mutual dialogue, boundaries are submerged. In this article, I first contrast the proprietorial hold of Orpheus the bard over Eurydice in the *Metamorphoses* with Ettinger's non-possessive, self-transforming, engagement with the traumatic past in her paintings of Eurydice. Standing on a shared threshold with the pictures facing us, we, the viewers, are ushered into Ettinger's psychoanalytic experiences of 'borderlinked' part-subjects and part-objects. Inspired by this profoundly intertwined, and committedly open, world, I then proceed to trace new interpretations of Ovid as the 'compassionate' artist, through readings of Byblis's and Myrrha's own traumatic bonds in the *Metamorphoses*. These (alienating) stories flood our perceptions and emotions, precious 'extimates', to use Ettinger's terminology, i.e. external intimates in whose company we live and even thrive. For all the discomfort they might induce in us, the stories have the potential to remake us, if we agree to look back, but not (like Orpheus) with a gaze that disfigures and kills.

Orpheus and Eurydice (X.1-85)

Book X of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* begins with a short, discomfiting story. Newly wed Eurydice is taking a stroll with her attendants when she is bitten by a snake and drops dead. Consumed by grief, her husband Orpheus undertakes the descent to Hades in an attempt to convince Persephone and Pluto to give the two of them a second chance. Indeed, the couple are allowed to re-unite in the world of the living, but Orpheus must not look back during the return trip to the lands of light. As we all know, Orpheus does turn his head and thus Eurydice is snatched away from him, irrevocably. Ovid's concluding scene fills the reader with pity. Fading into the shadows, Eurydice does not complain that her husband failed her; a hardly audible farewell passes through her lips and she slips away again.

And yet, in a typical Ovidian way, the text leaves us with an impression that there is something undeclared beneath the surface of the narrative. In the blink of an eye – or in the length of two hexameter lines – Eurydice is bitten and dies, while Orpheus recovers from his grief and seems ready for an adventure. At this stage, we should also note the inherent hint of challenge in the words: 'he dared climb down to the river Styx' (X.13) from the Taenerian entrance in the southern tip of the Peloponnese. The shift delicately suggested here is from elegiac lament to epic challenge: the heroic Orpheus is ready for a task that will transmit his name to future generations.⁴

⁴ On the failure of Orpheus to bring his beloved back from the underworld and more generally the artist's (mostly emotional) limitations in Ovid, see W. Anderson, 'The Artist's Limits in Ovid: Orpheus, Pygmalion, and Daedalus', in *Syllecta Classica*, 1, 1989, pp. 1-11. See also J. Heath, 'The Failure of Orpheus', *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, 124, 1994, pp. 163-96 who explores at length the focus of the Greek sources on Orpheus as the talented bard and on his power of persuasion rather at the expense of his relationship with Eurydice. On these earlier Greek versions see also F. Graf, 'Orpheus: A Poet among Men' in J. Bremmer, ed., *Interpretations of Greek Mythology*, London, 1988, pp. 80-106; E. Robbins, 'Famous Orpheus' in *Orpheus. Metamorphosis of a*

Heroic confidence manifests itself right from the start in the bard's request that Persephone and Pluto allow him to speak the truth (X.19-20). There is a deed to be accomplished and Orpheus feels confident of his chances because he can tell a good and straight story. Orpheus, 'the poet from Rhodope' (X.11-12), commands the scene and, significantly, the description of the beguiling effect of his speech on those who hear it precedes the reaction of the gods themselves. The pathos of Eurydice's tragically premature death is subsumed within the epic poetic-rhetorical struggle of Orpheus at the court of the gods. It is Orpheus's art, not Eurydice's tragedy, that brings a result.⁵

Eurydice's only word in the whole episode is *vale* (X.62). The snatched bride remains in the shadows without any hint of a physical description before she is seen and then lost. And 'about what could she complain, other than for having been loved?' (X.61), we are told. But was it affection that obliged Orpheus to gaze on Eurydice? Ovid seems to imply this, focusing on Orpheus's loving eyes as they turn to stare at his beloved (X.57). But the question surely is what kind of love? Moreover, there are other telling emotions that turn Orpheus's head: fear lest Eurydice has disappeared (X.56), and greed (X.56). This suggests that his motivation might come not from an irrepressible yearning for her but from a desire to control and an inability to trust that an 'other' can be with him without him supervising every gesture of that other.

The myth of Orpheus and Eurydice has been retold time and again since Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. As we move beyond antiquity and into the medieval era we find Orpheus inserted into moralizing, allegorical, or political, discourses in equal measure, and the figure continues to metamorphose throughout the Renaissance and into modern times.⁶ The diachronic European imagination seems to have been attracted to Orpheus as a talented bard encountering a persistent esoteric solitude, and as a sage 'inner' self in taut and lonely negotiation with nature and the world around.⁷ It is almost inevitable that in this kind of vision, Eurydice is held in a subsidiary position, her fate of secondary importance. Maurice Blanchot has made this clear, removing the romanticism from the lover and attaching it rather to the mission of the artist, a mid-twentieth-century reflection on Orpheus's (in)famous gaze. For Blanchot, the pursuit of inspiration at any cost, including that of Eurydice's sacrifice, is the only authentic mode of being for Orpheus, the great man and artist: 'Everything happens as if, by disobeying the law, by looking at Eurydice, Orpheus was only yielding to the profound demands of the work, as though, through this inspired

Footnote 4 (continued)

Myth, ed. J. Warden, Toronto, 1982, pp. 3-23; C. Segal, *Orpheus. The Myth of the Poet*, Baltimore, 1989, pp. 14-20.

⁵ See here Segal, *Orpheus* (n. 4 above), pp. 54-94, with an upbeat approach to the artistic accomplishments of Ovidian Orpheus

⁶ See e. g. G. Miles *A Critical Anthology. Classical Mythology in English Literature*, London and New York, 1999, pp. 61-195. For a wide-ranging study of the post antique reception of Orpheus, see Warden, *Orpheus* (n. 4 above).

⁷ For a probing study of Orpheus's profound solitude in nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature, art and thought, see K. Silverman, *Flesh of my Flesh*, Stanford, 2009.

gesture, he really had carried the dark shade out of Hell'.⁸ Catherine Ferguson's response to Blanchot's presentation of Orpheus's sombre achievement spells out starkly the absolute necessity of Eurydice's loss in his approach:

For Blanchot the significance of this narrative is not that it is a story of loss and failure caused by impatience and weakness, but rather that it presents a figure of the artist's plight ... Orpheus, through his act of transgression, fulfils his destiny as an artist. ... For Blanchot [Eurydice's] second loss is the essential feature of artistic activity: that is, its impossibility, in the sense that art's origin is the very thing it is unable to possess for itself whilst at the same time being its sole motivation.⁹

And yet, it is with extreme fear, and not simply with grief over Eurydice's loss, that the emotional sequence on the slope leading to earth ends in Ovid's narration. 'Stunned by the double death of his wife, Orpheus was like a frightened man staring the three-headed dog with chains round the middle neck' (X.64-66). Doubly hurtful and doubly punishing, Orpheus's gaze not only sends Eurydice to her death but at that moment, in his eyes, she is deprived of her humanity, likened to the chained three-headed monster of the Underworld. There is something baleful in this glance, such a punishing, dividing glimpse that disfigures the object of its gaze right at the moment of recognition. Terror (and dislike?) seems to have eclipsed any original affection that proves subordinate to the needs, greed and passion of the persona of the heroic poet/bard. Far from merely a consequence of the transgression of divine law, Eurydice departs the world of the living having lost her human form, destroyed and eliminated by the sinister, diminishing force of Orpheus's gaze.¹⁰

* * *

Recent times have compensated Eurydice for her long absence. Contemporary female poets, notably Margaret Atwood, Carol Ann Duffy and Louise Glück, have responded to Eurydice's plight by giving her a voice to express resentment, frustration, and love for Orpheus as her selfish husband, exposing his poetic ego and his dependence on her death. Their Eurydices even show some affection for the Underworld as place of independence and rest.¹¹ Bracha Ettinger's intervention in this history of Ovid reception is, however, not some attempt to recover ancient women's voices. Ettinger eschews the gender polarities of the myth and is not interested in feminine (or masculine) subjectivity as a secure (subject) position. Her *Eurydice*

⁸ M. Blanchot, *The Gaze of Orpheus and Other Literary Essays* by Maurice Blanchot, transl. Lydia Davis, New York, 1981, p. 101.

⁹ C. Ferguson, 'The Gaze of Discourse: Figures on the Surface, Figures of the Surface', Conference paper at Changing Identities and Contexts in the Arts (CICA), University of Gothenburg, Sweden, February 2012, pp. 2-3.

¹⁰ My interest in the extract here focuses on the murderous capacity of Orpheus's gaze. For a sophisticated analysis of the broader and complex history of women's association with dogs in ancient Greece from an anthropological, feminist, even ecological perspective, see C. Franco, *Shameless. The Canine and the Feminine*, transl. M. Fox, Oakland, 2014.

¹¹ See here M. Atwood, *Poems II: Poems Selected and New 1976-1986*, Boston, 1987; C. A. Duffy, *The World's Wife*, London, 1999, pp. 58-62; L. Glück, *Vita Nova*, Manchester, 2000, p. 26.

paintings instead revisit the punitive Orphic glance in order to challenge the safe positioning and abrasive associations of (Orpheus's) watchful gaze.

The foundation for these canvasses (as often with Ettinger's paintings) is mixed-media collage. She photocopies a seemingly random series of photographs taken from public archives relating to the Holocaust and her personal family albums onto recycled paper and then traces over the results with red/purple ink so as to obscure the faces and the other details.

The layering of the work is fundamental. Some paintings are obscured by the ink, while in others the traces of ink actually enhance the outline. The whole series makes for a disturbing experience; these are not pieces susceptible to easy assimilation or confident interpretation. The blurring of different faces, different pasts, different sources, different stories resists any comfortable attribution of meaning. We search for a secret enfolded within the many layers, a secret of whose existence we are aware. The images, some of which emanate from a transformative historical event, while others are private and domestic, must surely tell a story, surely reveal some narrative connection between the elegiac personal and the epic historical, but that story remains elusive. The faces in some canvasses are clearer than in others. In some we know that we see rough silhouettes of faces and women, but the grain of the photocopier ink and the India ink superimposed on the photographs ensures that we are never confident of what we see. Indeed, can we see at all? Can we understand? Can we capture the object at which we gaze? The gaze of the viewer is hesitant, undirected: we look back and forth unsure of where to focus, of which layer truly gives meaning. We are never able to hold on to Eurydice, who is emerging from the great mystery of death, but will never complete that emergence. She will go back into death, and we must let her go and know that we must let her go. Yet Ettinger's Eurydice does not simply disappear. Depending on which canvas we glance at, she emerges and recedes in a perpetual ebb and flow, a ghostly and desired figure that reminds us of the limited power of our gaze, of our inability to hold onto what we see, and of the inadequacy of our language to express our reaction to these events, whatever they may be.

Without discussing Ovid or classical myth in particular, Judith Butler contemplates loss-as-opportunity in Ettinger's *Eurydice* series:

Eurydice is not distinct. And she is not singular. Her image seems redoubled and there seems to be a set of them, all of them fading and appearing all at once. Do we know what we have lost in her? Do we know whom we have lost? Somewhere, sometime something was lost, but no story can be told about it; no memory can retrieve it, for the memory is itself fractured, partial, fading into oblivion. ... But this does not consign us to silence. This does not obliterate the image. ... A realm of appearance emerges from this situation, a situation that cannot be described as foreclosure and cannot be described as redemption. ...¹²

¹² J. Butler, 'Bracha's Eurydice', *Theory, Culture, Society*, 21, 2004, pp. 95-100 (96).

Ovidian Orpheus descended into the Underworld armed with the conviction that he could tell a story straight, 'putting aside the confusion of a mendacious tongue' (X.19). Indeed, his language, his art, wins. His representation reverses a history of death, but his success in establishing his 'order' of representation and in asserting his power leads to failure. It is fear that he has failed that turns Orpheus's head. Ultimately, the re-emergence of Eurydice into life, which depends on the straight story that he generates, fails because of his need to check the truth of that story; the great narrator of what it is, is gripped by doubt as to how it is. He needs to check that he has won.

In contrast, the viewer of Ettinger's Eurydices is required to live with doubt and with a blurred awareness that never develops and never settles as firm cognition, never affords the conviction (and reassurance) of a clear understanding. The viewer is faced with pictures that bear some resemblance to an original, but that are themselves an original, in their mixed media blurriness that ensures nonetheless that Eurydice never disappears, but simply resides just outside our touch, a step away from oblivion and yet never enveloped by it. Partly present and partly absent from the picture, the Eurydices of Ettinger set a challenge for the viewer that cannot be overcome. We cannot be sure that Eurydice is going, or indeed coming, in the canvasses; we have no direction for her travel, and her figure belongs to the past if she is leaving the world of the living, to the present if she is truly here, and to the future if she is returning. Eurydice is thus suspended between the worlds of the living and the dead, not on an epic journey to and from the Underworld, but suspended somewhere in-between.

But crucially, and unlike Orpheus, the viewer of Ettinger's Eurydice is not distraught, for the loss she experiences is not complete, since the possession is not complete. Eurydice is never quite there, as she is never quite there in the Ovidian text, but she is never quite gone either. Ettinger turns the Ovidian experience around and we wonder not about the heroic viewer, but about our relationship to the variously reproduced images. The viewer is set on a path of discovery about the other and about herself. Her engagement with the canvasses depends on her own perception, will, compulsiveness and much more.

The paintings thus place us at the heart of Ettinger's psychoanalytic experience of what she calls the I and the non-I, intertwined qualities/denominators of each subject position. I quote from Marissa Vigneault's study, which attempts to link the paintings, and especially the Eurydice series, with Ettinger's matrixial conception of identity:

The dialogical relationship is fundamental to what Ettinger calls the Matrix, a space for an open and free-flowing connection between the Self and the Other (I and non-I, in Ettinger's terms) rendered visible in the borderless entities in the paintings, and proposed abstractly in the shared encounter of I and non-I in front of the work of art. The slight, compromised legibility of each painting's layer, prompts the viewer's eye to pass back and forth in so far as nothing holds the gaze for too long. The accessibility of the various

realms and the viewer's freedom to move between them relates the physical aspects of Ettinger's paintings to the matrixial borderspace.¹³

Ettinger's own work is replete with iterations of the matrix:

The Matrix is an extimate zone, where the internal is becoming external and the external internal by virtue of the transgressive potency of the margins. It is a zone of encounter between the intimate and the exterior, where the uncognised Other (as a non-I) and the I co-emerge and co-fade, are separate but together, in a continual attuning of distances in proximity. ... A borderline discernibility of the uncognised non-I emerges for me and emerges with me, since the Other is indispensable for the matrixial stratum of subjectivization ... From a matrixial perspective, the focus shifts from separate objects and subjects and towards the borderlinks between part-object and partial subjects and towards processes of transformation which take place jointly in their borderspace.¹⁴

Ettinger's subject position, as it emerges in this and similar accounts throughout her work, is underpinned by a strong belief in a non-possessive togetherness and an ever-evolving multiplicity that produces an always becoming, always part-subject. I and non-I are both part of the self, and subjecthood is continuously renegotiated in a borderspace of evolving relationships.

Such fluidity works against the fixity of identity and the tightening of boundaries encouraged and expected by the Symbolic. In his desire to recognize (and be recognized), the epic bard and hero Orpheus longs for a creature that will in many ways make him. The Eurydice story will complete his epic quest and make his reputation as epic hero, lover, and poet in which guises he is able to overcome death. But Eurydice is always spectral and matrixial, and Orpheus grows increasingly unsettled in his possessive love. Lack of confidence in his abilities and his success makes him turn. Rather than accepting the uncertainty, he has to know. Rather than accepting the shade that follows him from death, he needs to recognize her as he has written her into his heroic quest, and through this need he loses her, severing the borderlink between the two of them which is the only way that he and she can come into being-together. His identity as the lover/hero/*vates* is threatened and leaves him astonished and terrified by the failure of his words and actions to fix his Eurydice. She accepts his failure; he sees her as a monster, something other that he will never grasp.

¹³ M Vigneault, 'The Porous Space of Bracha Ettinger's Eurydices', in *Contemporary Art and Classical Myth*. Ed. J. Hirsh and I. Wallace, Farnham, 2011, pp. 111-33 (118).

¹⁴ Ettinger, 'Metamorphic Borderlinks' (n. 2 above), pp. 127-8.

Byblis and Caunus (IX.453-665)

The politics of Ovid's epic have long been recognized as subversive. We have trained our eye to see in his verse the oppositional and the transgressive. If the political order seeks to fix meanings and identities, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* speaks against an essentialist ontology. But there are also hints in Ovid about a matrixial counter-ontology (in Ettinger's terms) emerging in the borderspace of relations. In the remainder of this article I continue my engagement with Ettinger's free flowing becoming-subjects while at the same time considering two further related stories of emergent identities in the Ovidian epic. The first begins with a caution: 'Byblis is offered as an example of how girls should love. ... Not as a sister she loves her brother, not as she should.' (IX.453-5). But rather than just an 'everyday' story of incestuous love and societal rejection, Ovid offers a story of a troubled becoming-subject.

The story starts with Byblis abandoned in a love not yet disturbing. 'Love has flourished in a shadow of false piety' (IX.460). But gradually Byblis has become discontented. She takes to calling her brother 'master' (*dominum* IX.466), and avoids calling him brother, even as she resents him calling her sister. Peace would come only in sleep when the full extent of her connection with her brother would be revealed to her in a dream. And then free from judgement, and far from witnesses (IX.481), she revels in this connection that reaches deep inside herself. Encouraged by the strength of love, Byblis toys with the idea of changing names and social roles. A change of name would allow her to be daughter-in-law to his father, and him, Caunus, to be son-in-law to her father (IX.488-89).

In stark contrast to the brevity of Orpheus's emotions and the lack of Eurydice's, her anarchic thoughts consume her for dozens of lines until she decides to confess to Caunus. With trembling hand, she attempts to channel her emotion into words. She writes, erases and writes again. Byblis begins the letter by calling herself 'Caunus's sister', but quickly changes her mind and scribbles: 'one who loves you sends this to you'. She confesses that she is embarrassed to reveal her name and prefers to make her plea without a name (IX.531-3). Tears of pain flood the tablet, a superb account of the limitations of the Symbolic economy and the ways individuals try to work around it. When the letter is finished, Byblis's nurse delivers it to Caunus. The remainder of the story is very grim. Caunus is repulsed, Byblis pursues her terrified brother until he has to leave the country and she subsequently melts from grief.

Byblis's story starts as a didactic narrative of what happens to those who surrender to love, to wild, unbound and furious love. Critical scholarship has focused on the ethical challenges presented by the story¹⁵ and more recently also on the generic reasons behind the disastrous turn of events.¹⁶ But I would like to focus on a parallel

¹⁵ See, e.g., B. Nagle, 'Byblis and Myrrha: Two Incest Narratives in the *Metamorphoses*', *Classical Journal*, 78, 1983, pp. 301-15. Nagle includes also thoughts also on Myrrha's incest in Book 10, to which I will turn below.

¹⁶ Notable here is S. Raval, 'A Lover's Discourse: Byblis in *Metamorphoses* 9', *Arethusa*, 34, 2001, pp. 285-311. Raval argues that Byblis's transition from written *puella* to (masculinist) elegiac writer is responsible for the calamitous end of the story.

fleeting world of connectivity (Ettinger's 'matrixial borderlinking') conjured up in Byblis's mind before her spectacular crash. The letter is a crucial aspect of the story. The moment she starts writing, Byblis realizes that the words she believed would bring understanding are the biggest obstacle to understanding. Naming her emotion is an inadequate representation of it. Each of her attempts results in something that is too precise, too restrictive, and ultimately too prescriptive. As she searches for names to recognize and express her condition, her love and she herself become more evidently inappropriate. She tries to alter her name, his name, her relation to his father, his relation to her father. But these are unyielding positions within the Symbolic Order, their intransigence the price the subject pays in exchange for participation in language and advancement in society. Let us not forget: what stops Caunus from punishing the nurse with death for supporting this disturbing passion is only his honour, his good name in society (IX.578-9).

Names define: people, roles, allowed behaviours, relationships. But that is not all that we get from this tortuous re-telling. In the beginning, there was a time and a space when Byblis's connection to Caunus was enjoyed and pleasurable. There was a time when her encounter with him was on the matrixial borderline where her 'I' was fulfilled by the relationship to his 'non-I'. He was part of her even though separate from her. The permeability of that sensation was crystallized in her dream: 'she would see what she loved, and would be seen as one body with her brother, and she would blush, even though in her sleep' (IX.470-1). The union dreamed here is already sexual, such as to make her blush. And yet it is a union in which identities are swapped and confused, in which there is a perfection, a shared body, and a familial fluidity and completion with parents, siblings, sons and daughters all re-allocated in roles entirely compatible with her fantasy (IX.487-9). In Ovid this is an illusion briefly allowed only in shadows and dreams before a catastrophic end. But for Ettinger this is better than perfection. It is com-passion, one of her most cherished visions pertaining to the co-emerging and co-fading of the I and non-I into an ever becoming-subject. Putting forward her vision of this attraction, this matrixial exposure of the individual to multiple others, Ettinger makes a clear distinction between eros and sex:

The matrixial exposure of the becoming-m/Other is an openness to the uncognized world and to unknown but intimate others by a compassionate Eros that is not a sexual libido in the usual sense. Compassionate Eros and sexual libido are different psychic instances. They might intermix, but they nurture different kinds of love. Where sexual libido takes the lead, Thanatos – death drive – is there too, never too far. In that case, the potentiality for compassionate erotic hospitality is often deformed. By compassionate Eros a non-aggressive thanatos is revealed. Not death, but the non-life as the not yet emerged, the not yet becoming alive, is accessed and intended.¹⁷

Ettinger's vision here is of a non-judgemental bond existing in infinite generosity and an unfathomable commitment to the other that renders any attempt at

¹⁷ Ettinger, 'Copoiesis' (n. 2 above), p. 709.

cognizance an act of diminution. A fleeting image in Ettinger's own thinking, it is, nonetheless, an apt (non)description of Byblis's incomprehensible and yet also fulfilling union with her brother. When she attempts to make a confession of this state of being in a letter to Caunus, words seem crude and tortuously inadequate to representing the bond that burns her inside, so she starts and stops, erases and resumes to no avail (IX.521-6).¹⁸ After many attempts her instinctive connection to him is stripped of any recognizable, fixed – but also fixing – definition and what comes across is a need for excess that cannot be tamed by existing forms of communication. 'Someone, not an enemy, someone already very close, asks to be closer to you, asking for closer bonds...' (IX.548-50). So, the joy of and for Caunus could not be fully recognized by Byblis. Registered but not defined: exactly what Bracha Ettinger is at pains to suggest as being at the heart of the matrixial identity and the matrixial borderspace we all carry around in our negotiations with the Symbolic. When Byblis tried to negotiate with the authority of language, when she tried to co-opt the language of authority hoping to represent her love, she found that this love was doomed by the intervention of those around her setting the law (IX.552), their eyes fixed on the erotic desire but missing altogether the compassion. And 'where sexual libido takes the lead, Thanatos is there too, never too far', to borrow the formulation from Ettinger in this excerpt.

Myrrha and Cinyras (X.298-502)

Byblis's tortuous story ends disastrously, but not before it offers the reader an encounter with an unconscious attachment, an unrecognized conjoining, passionate and utterly fragile, 'a life not yet emerged' but charred by the forceful light of words that sought to illuminate it. Incomprehension and despair for a passion hardly understood make an unwelcome return with the story of King Cinyras and his daughter Myrrha in the next book of the epic. The story of Myrrha is part of Orpheus's repertoire of mourning for his beloved Eurydice extending through Book X. Her story is another chance for the skilled bard to muse on the uncharted impact of fleeting encounters in people's lives. These encounters are intuitive and intimate but also transgressive and transforming in ways the Symbolic economy fails to comprehend and is thus threatened by. Their threatening incomprehension is built on their indifference to core Symbolic values surrounding the individual: rationality, intentionality, and above all recognition.

In the beginning of the re-telling a stringent narrator promotes a moralistic handling of the story and offers an unequivocal judgement to prejudice the reader right from the start: 'this is a shocking story. Daughters and fathers, I strongly advise you to shut your ears.' (X.299-300). The opening part maintains this inflexible course

¹⁸ T. Jenkins 'The Writing in (and of) Ovid's Byblis Episode', *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, 100, 2000, pp. 439-51, also takes a long, hard look at Byblis's letter in an attempt to understand what he calls its 'failure' (439), with a special emphasis on the impact of the disturbing message to the reader (be that Caunus or audiences in general).

and ensures that the narrator's disapproval for Myrrha's incestuous love for her father is registered. And yet, the further into the details of the tale we get, the more the narrative tone changes, gently but steadily, as Myrrha takes over centre stage and her thoughts begin to spill over the page. As we sink into her internal monologue and her secluded parallel universe, we are reminded of Byblis and her own extreme withdrawal to a universe very much resembling Myrrha's own. Like Byblis, Myrrha contemplates in awe and with unconcealed jealousy the freedom of animals to love and mate without control, unbothered by the spiteful prescriptions of the laws ('*malignas leges*', X.329) that define and delineate the actions of the humans. In her eyes, the contrast between nature and human law is sharp and damning.

Yet with her contention that there are humans who *can* experience emotions and contact with other human beings outside the limiting buffer of the law, Myrrha seems to be moving further than Byblis in her stream of consciousness, clinging to rumours about countries where sons and daughters are joined with their parents (X.331-2). In Myrrha's passionate mind, this is not a corrupt universe but a doubly pious one where kindness grows through the mutual love bond (X.333). It is love that makes erotic intimacy between parents and children pious and not transgressive, or rather pious even though transgressive. We can fruitfully link again with Ettinger's Eros (which is not sex) that interlinks partial subjects to other partial subjects, in fleeting, temporary encounters right on the borderspace where I meets non-I, and where the encounter generates neither aggression nor possession. Ettinger's visualization of such encounters of individual co-emergence and co-fading would hearten a desperate Myrrha:

Transgressive and intimate – even when the encounter is between, with, and in two subjects, the encounter is not symbiotic. Transgressive and intimate – even if the encounter is between three subjects, inside this sphere triangulation is not Oedipalizing. Com-passionate matrixial empathy is not Oedipalizing, yet difference is being swerved there already.¹⁹

And yet when Myrrha attempts to rationalize and recognize her drive, her and her father's identities become crisply delineated, and the only appropriate words existing for her 'condition' tear through this borderlinking vision of co-existence with their sharp, excluding precision: 'So, if I weren't the daughter of great Cinyras, it should be possible for me to lie in his bed' (X.337-8). This 'rationalizing' in turn throws into sharp relief the fixity of the Symbolic and breeds confusion through a feverish yearning for connectivity. Forced into words, Myrrha's recognition of her situatedness makes the paradox of her plight inescapable: 'because he is already mine, he cannot be mine, and our proximity is my loss' (X.339-340).

Mentally and emotionally exhausted by lurching wildly from extreme daring to utter shame, the girl resolves to end the torture by ending her life, but her old nurse's intervention postpones death and instils new pathos to the narrative. Ironically, with her entrance onto the stage, the nurse not only saves Myrrha's life – for the moment – but also ushers her into the kind of affective, interlinked world that

¹⁹ Ettinger, 'Copoiesis' (n. 2 above), p. 704.

the girl yearns for but cannot attain through her desire for her father. As soon as she has made sure that Myrrha's life is no longer in immediate danger, the nurse wastes no time with words that might or might not be forthcoming, that might or might not be understood. The bond she invokes is altogether haptic. As Myrrha stands stubbornly silent in front of her, revealing her grey hair and baring her saggy breasts, the nurse begs the girl, in the name of her infant cradle and the first milk these breasts had offered her, to entrust her with her affliction (X.391-3). An old pre-verbal / non-verbal encounter is here invoked for the transgressive-but-compassionate affinity it has established between the two women forever. They are (have always been) each part of the other, partial subjects sharing the same borderspace where language is not needed for understanding to be achieved. Having made herself indispensable to Myrrha, the nurse continues reaching to her through touch, 'drawing her close to her aged bosom and hugging her tight as she sobbed away in those frail old arms' (X.406-7).²⁰

Myrrha cannot speak. Overcome by fury, the only words that do surface suggest shame (X.412) and crime (X.413). The nurse's hands tremble with fear, but she never swerves away from the empathy that makes her one with Myrrha, an indispensable and inseparable part of herself that she cannot fully comprehend despite the conventional superiority of her wisdom, age and experience: 'she stretched out her arms like a beggar and threw herself down at her darling's feet...' (X.414-15). Making Myrrha's pain, a pain she barely understands, her own, she exposes herself to this pain and makes herself vulnerable, embracing (without recognizing) but not capturing the desires and will of the girl. A beloved stranger lost in her own trauma, whose traces are nonetheless woven into the fabric of her nurse's subjectivity, Myrrha guides the latter's responses while at the same time utterly depending on her, for they are both partial subjects living in and through each other's strengths and needs. Dropping herself at Myrrha's feet, the nurse subordinates herself to the girl at the same time as the girl's life is entirely in her hands. She finds herself altered as she seeks to shake Myrrha's despair: a wit(h)ness, partial object, partial subject co-emerging through Myrrha's (her non-I's), traumatic experiences.²¹

Theirs now is no longer a watchful bond between a confident agent overseeing the reactions of a distraught and vulnerable youth. With their subjectivities shared in a common borderspace, the nurse keenly experiences her powerlessness in front of the person who is entirely at her mercy. Rationality fades in this interlinked co-emergence: no longer able or willing to calculate the outcomes of her actions, the nurse is overcome by her need to show compassion. Myrrha's trauma passes through her, the non-I within the I, leaving her with no autonomous or separate perspective.

²⁰ See C. Venn, 'Post-Lacanian Affective Economy, Being-in-the-word, and the Critique of the Present. Lessons from Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger', *Theory, Culture, Society*, 21, 2004, pp. 149-58, for a discussion of Ettinger's matrixial complex with a special focus on touch, movement and hearing.

²¹ For an extensive reflection on the matrixial dimension of wit(h)nessing see Ettinger, 'Wit(h)nessing Trauma' (n. 2 above).

As Ettinger puts it; 'A noncognitive mode of knowledge is embedded in such witnessing-together: in wit(h)nessing'.²²

The nurse's machinations provide Myrrha with the encounter she desired and feared (X.437-43). Cloaked in anonymity and half-knowing, this unregistered union could come into being and be repeated for several nights, divesting both Myrrha and her father of their established roles. Each and every night the father's authority over the daughter would be altered and weakened afresh and the daughter would be afforded an otherwise impossible opportunity to transgress all accepted boundaries in her relationship with her father. And as we follow Cinyras's and Myrrha's radical and half-realized repositioning and re-orientation, we are again reminded of Ettinger's persistent focus on that spectral and often traumatic, only partially cognized, intimacy that commits two people in a shared borderlink. Alongside his conscious erotic intentions, Cinyras's attitude towards Myrrha shifts to something (also?) unmistakably and disturbingly paternal: '[Cinyras] relieves her virginal shyness and supports her in her timidity; also, maybe due to her age, he calls her "my girl"' (X.466-7). And love-stricken Myrrha instantly reciprocates with a similarly composite investment in the stranger-father, which places traces of filial love in an uncomfortable sharing with her amorous disposition: 'and she replied "father"' (X.468).

There is thus partial recognition in this keenly experienced co-emergence. The lovers share an intensity that could be realized beyond the dead-ends of language and in the phantasmatic cracks between scripted relationships, where curiosity, apprehension, guilt and excitement coexist, neither fused nor rejected, in their hybrid-personalities. And yet, this uncertain, uncanny encounter can only be a passing trace in their lives before the inflexibility of the law reminds them of the exceedingly narrow possibilities for their experience. After a few nights of shared passion, and motivated by a need to tame the turbulence of this precarious encounter, Cinyras surrenders to his need to know and shed light (literally as well as metaphorically) on the intimate unknown other that has entered his life. The encounter does not survive this kind of inspecting, fixing gaze:²³ as object of Cinyras's need for Symbolic recognition, Myrrha (and Cinyras) have absolutely no hope. The open frontier of their shared threshold retreats to leave her exposed in her transgression and him to his anger, a fixed subject and a captured object engaged in a confrontational zero-sum game of winners and losers.

Conclusion – Reading Trauma Com-Passionately

Throughout Ettinger's work a prominent position is given to her unremitting belief in a transformative art-as-compassion, a tool that can engage with trauma without deliberately making it its own. Equally importantly, her vision of the artist's work is one of joint ownership and total interdependency with the viewer:

²² Ibid., p. 144.

²³ But contrast here Ettinger, 'Wit(h)nessing Trauma' (n. 2 above), pp. 151-4, on the floating, vagrant eye and its close relation to art-as-compassion.

The artist in the matrixial dimension is wit(h)ness in com-passionate hospitality. ... The viewer is challenged by the artwork to join a specific anonymous intimacy. ... Someone must join in. With the idea of wit(h)nessing in encounter the scope of aesthetics itself shifts. By borderlinking, the artist can bear wit(h)ness and articulate sub-knowledge of/from the other. ... What is captured and is given form to at the end of such a trajectory is what was waiting to be born and to receive almost-impossible articulation, in a body-psyche-time-space of suspension-anticipation that you can only 'view' or glimpse by joining in.²⁴

Reflected in this vision of the artist is someone committed to keeping almost-impossible traces of events floating in our perception. Where Ettinger commits herself to the ineffable and incomprehensible experience of the Holocaust, an experience that is both of global historical significance and, crucially in Ettinger's reception, personal and embedded in the individual's trauma, Ovid's wit(h)nessing opens him to the trauma which is in origin psychological and domestic and gradually emerges into the poetic-public sphere, woven into his characters' incestuous desires.²⁵ Read as a compassionate artist, Ovid neither silences his heroines nor lifts the repression of their trauma. The moralizing authorial gaze we meet at the start of the stories fades and gives way to a narrative art-as-compassion. Stringent and horrified narrating voices disappear, allowing the agonizing monologues to expose the ethical dilemmas that accompany the openness and precarious self-positioning of Byblis and Myrrha. The traumas are not stably articulated, denounced or accepted, but rather developed and dispersed through several transitions, never foreclosed and never rejected. The Ovidian text takes us to the transgressive girls and puts us in their heads and in their beds. The reader is exposed to the transgressive erotic charge in the texts. The text calls and 'someone must join in', to repeat Ettinger's injunction above. We come alive to our obligation to, and powerlessness before, the non-I, the unfamiliar and threatening, yet intimately close, traces of which are lodged traumatically in us through stories such as those of Byblis and Myrrha.²⁶

The shadow of the Symbolic order of language and law haunts these tales, and we know that this order will be violently and tragically restored. As long as their love is unrecognized and unnamed, before Byblis's attempts to communicate and while Myrrha is still in the shadows, brother and sister, father and daughter connect and find completion, confident and content in the darkness of the bedrooms. But when the strength of that longing for the non-I is contaminated by the need for clarity, control, and ultimately possession, words are the obvious tool available and the only language in which that intensity can be expressed is sexual. We are invited to feel the trauma of a connection that cannot be named, of the non-possessive intimacy

²⁴ Ettinger, 'Copoiesis' (n. 2 above), p. 710.

²⁵ Compare here J. Butler, *Antigone's Claim. Kinship Between Life and Death*, New York, 2002, for a reworking of incest as a political model.

²⁶ For a study of the ethics and politics of the dispersal of trauma in Ettinger's paintings, see J. Butler, 'Disturbance and Dispersal in the Visual Field', in *Art as Compassion: Bracha L. Ettinger*, ed. C. de Zegher and G. Pollock, Brussels, 2001, pp. 149-65.

that exists in the borderspace of our subjects' co-existence with others. Our empathy cannot save the stories, but it does expose the inadequacy of Symbolic certainties and ushers us into a troubling yet less certain and thus more tolerant world. We are and we are not with Byblis and Myrrha; we can and cannot name their love.

Orpheus, the artist, span a tale that made a man. His words made him and fixed his place in history. They gathered up Eurydice and transported her almost to life. But in the end words failed Orpheus. Art could not give him confidence in the truth of his tale, and so he turned and the girl he had tried to capture (to have) in his language was lost. But he never asked her about her place in his web of words: her only word was farewell. Ovid, the artist, in turn, offers us stories with a stable, if sombre, meaning: Myrrha and Byblis nourished affections that could only have one outcome, once they emerged into the light or into language, once they were transferred into the Symbolic order. But the Symbolic does not own the fabric of these stories even though it has dictated their ending. We read to be with the girls and we are drawn into compassion. We share their stories, keenly aware that we are not them, but we meet them at the threshold, in a reader position of being them. We are thus also drawn into uncertainty, as the girls themselves grapple with who they are and how they relate to the one they reach out to and the order they are about to reject. Once (if?) we name them, turn and establish exactly who they are, and their place among the living, we kill them. But we will also forever remember that moment before we turn, the space of possibility, when the girls are not named. If we could suspend time at that moment, or gaze without naming, without quite seeing, what might the picture be?

Bracha Ettinger asks whether there can be another gaze, a matrixial, non-proprietary gaze that would not kill, a perpetual restart in search for an understanding that engages the other without ever capturing her/him. In turn, Ovid's sombre stories of disturbing intimacy seem to question the optimism inherent in Ettinger's dedicated belief in matrixiality, as they highlight the perils of possessiveness and transgression. And yet, though ultimately suppressed by the law-of-the-father, Byblis's and Myrrha's stories offer a powerful challenge to it.

Living in the matrixial borderspace, Byblis and Myrrha constitute an uncontainable eruption-in-waiting at the heart of their society, and Ettinger's matrixiality inspires us to sense the deeply unsettling radicalism of these disempowered figures. Unwaveringly borderlinked with their non-I, they hold subject connections and positions that are unthinkable and threatening for elders and peers and the differentiating power of the law. Far from simply living alongside each other, in Byblis's and Myrrha's matrixial world people are linked in the border, incomplete and transgressive, always 'strange', always already out-of-(their assigned)-place. They are citizens mindful of their assigned positions but also fully abandoned to their instinctive urge to connect. They are ready for the call of the non-I in them, inspired by the unconventional, invested in the unexpected, which they welcome and do not seek to resist, while simultaneously terrified by its behest. As the commitment of the nurse to Myrrha has shown, the bond to the non-I challenges radically all social authority. It keeps the individual primarily, unconditionally, provisionally beholden to others in spite of the rulings of the Symbolic. We cannot help but notice the authority of the Symbolic that seems to seal the stories; and yet, what lingers in our conscience

is how these scorned girls can for a moment be untouched by the normative control of the law, queer heroines pointing out the fragile centre of the stately/masculine powers that frame their lives. It is this radical possibility of I in non-I that challenges by transcending the sexual context of the stories. The engagement with the non-I is ontological and makes self separately from the laws of the Symbolic, which responds, in turn, with death.

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