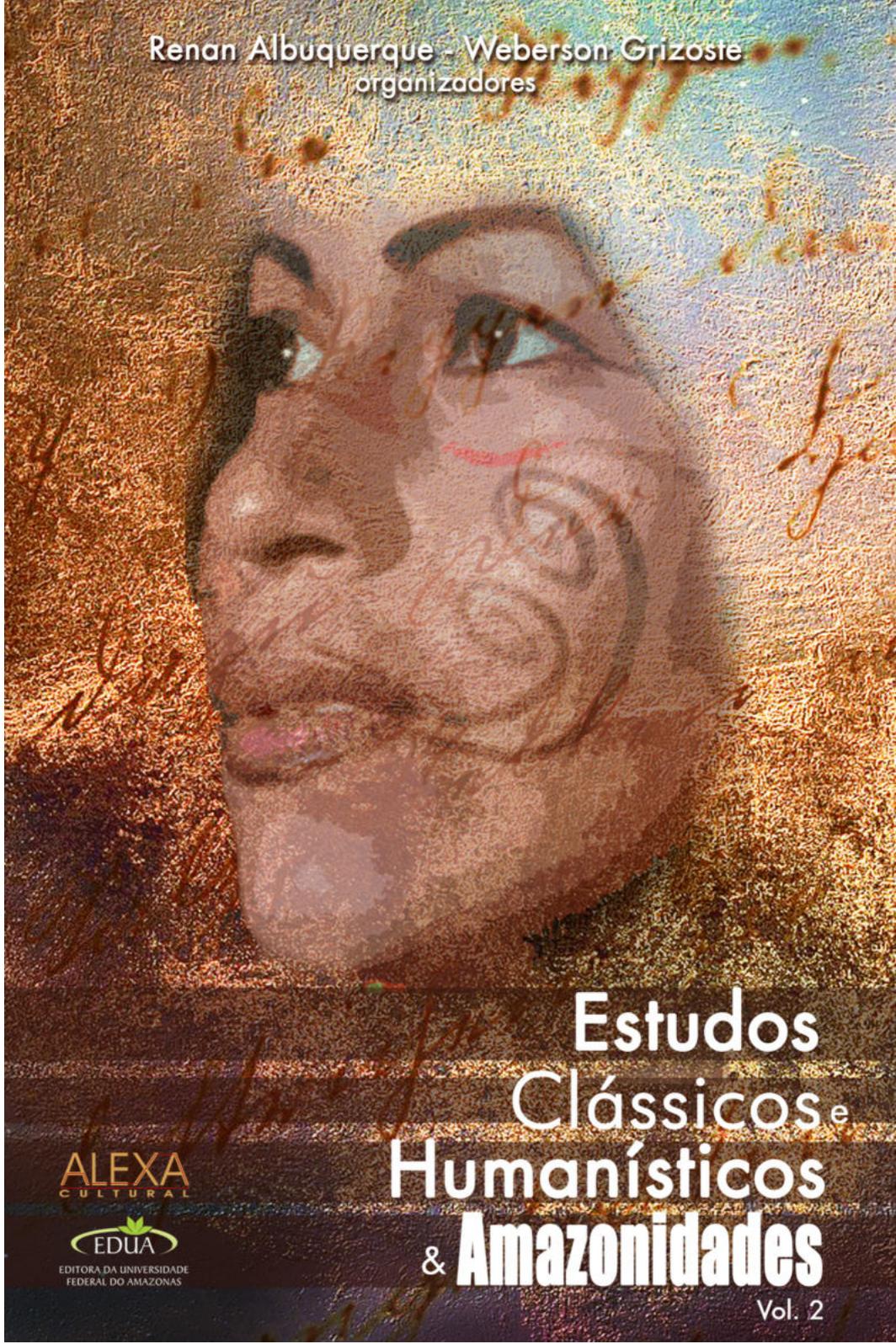


Renan Albuquerque - Weberson Grizoste
organizadores



Estudos
Clássicos e
Humanísticos
& Amazonidades

ALEXA
CULTURAL



EDITORA DA UNIVERSIDADE
FEDERAL DO AMAZONAS

Vol. 2

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Direção

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Revisão Técnica

Michel Justamend e Renan Albuquerque

Editoração Eletrônica

Alexa Cultural

Dados Internacionais de Catalogação na Publicação (CIP)

A319t ALBUQUERQUE, R.
G431w GRIZOSTE, W.

Estudos clássicos e humanísticos & amazonidades - vol. 2 , Renan
Albuquerque e Weberson Grizoste, Alexa Cultural: São Paulo, 2018

14x21cm - 218 páginas

ISBN - 978-85-5467-016-0

1. Antropologia - 2. Letras - 3. Estudos clássicos e humanísticos - 4,
Amazonas - I. Índice - II Bibliografia

CDD - 300

Índices para catálogo sistemático:

Letras

Estudos Clássicos e Humanísticos

Amazonas

Antropologia

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MYTH AS CULTURAL TRANSLATION¹

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Patricia Christina dos Reis³

... all the stories would have to be told differently, the future would be incalculable, the historical forces would, will, change hands, bodies, another thinking, as yet not thinkable, will transform the functioning of all society. (Hélène Cixous)

*all the male poets write of orpheus
as if they look back & expect
to find me walking patiently
behind them, they claim I fell into hell
damn them, i say.
i stand in my own pain
& sing my own song.
(Alta)*

We can define myth as *an ancient story that is based on popular beliefs or that explains natural or historical events*⁴. All myths operate by modelling reality and many apparently unconnected myths can be shown, by semiotic analysis, to be linked in a paradigmatic relationship. An aspect of substantial significance in the study of myths concerns the relationship between the environment in which myths live and the image of the world that they express. In this sense, myth represents a system of values which belongs to a group, a society or culture, having the possibility to express or translate feelings, thoughts and values of that society or group. As this system of values, it presents elements which give coherence to the group to which it belongs. In the origin of any myth of the modern society there is a sense of lack that must be fulfilled by something which has a double function for the group: either it compensates the existential vacuum or it recounts the group's own history.

So, each time a myth is expressed in a particular culture, it takes a different meaning, according to the image of the world of that culture. For this

¹ O presente artigo resultou de uma pesquisa realizada pelas autoras, enquanto professora e aluna, respectivamente, na Universidade Federal de Ouro Preto. Na ocasião o trabalho foi apresentado no XXIX Seminário Nacional de Professores Universitários de Língua Inglesa e publicado em seus Anais.

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⁴ *Dictionary of English Language and Culture*, Longman, 1992.

reason, even for the same people, a particular myth can express different meanings in different times. It can thus be said that one myth is capable of changing its “original” signification, according to mutable conditions of its expression, that is, the temporal, spacial and sometimes social context of its production. Because of this characteristic of carrying with itself changing meanings, determined by time and place, and also because it can be seen as an element of a system of signification, a myth can be regarded as a kind of intersemiotic translation, subject to all the constraints any translation is.

With this idea in mind, it can be said that mythical material, on being appropriated by, say, literature or any other art, is likely to be transmuted. The way in which this transmutation occurs deserves consideration.

The myth of Orpheus and Eurydice tells the story of a loving husband who was such a magnificent musician that even wild animals would stay and listen to him. When his wife, Eurydice, died, he followed her down into Hades and sang to the gods there, who allowed him to rescue her up, as long as Orpheus didn't look back to see if she was following him. He did look and lost her forever.

According to Charles Segal, the myth of Orpheus, *that magical singer, half-man, half-god who was able to move all of nature by his song*, expresses the power that words/songs have in impelling us to act and the fear that this fact inspires⁵.

The most familiar version of the myth is that of Virgil and Ovid, in which Orpheus convinces the gods of Hades to relieve Eurydice but loses her forever. Renouncing women he is torn apart by the Furies. His head and tyre float down the river and are endowed by Apollo with prophetic powers. What these writers dramatize is poetic inspiration and the power of persuasive language.

Later Milton splits the Orpheus voice into two, a mournful and a revitalized one, when he wrote “Lycidas”, an elegy written on a friend, a student of great promise. The theme of the poem is the power of death in the premature loss of life of Calliope's son, Orpheus, to whom Milton compares his friend. But Milton presents the opposite in the shepherd-singer, whose song will be reborn with the morning/life that is approaching. This poem exemplifies one aspect of the Orphic power which contains two poles corresponding to the double role of language: the power of form to master passion and the power of passion to engulf form.

Each age has actualized a different aspect of Orpheus, this protean figure, in myth and art. But underlying all the differences there is a fundamental

5 Charles Seagal in *Orpheus: the Myth of the Poet*.

unity: a mythic vision of the unity between life and death as the inseparable poles of a single reality. It is this unity that enables the Orphic voice to cross from the living to the dead, to move living beings and stones as well, although it always carries the idea that not even his melodious magic could reverse death.

In ancient references to Orpheus, Eurydice always plays a very small role in contrast to the role played by Orpheus. In many versions, the backward glance, his cowardice at dying in the place of his beloved and even his love for Eurydice—symbols of his weakness—are absent while his success is emphasized: the courageous descent into Hades, the rescuing of his dead wife, his taming of animals, stones and even Gods, his teaching of religion, bridging the gap between the living and the dead.

In recent decades there were many revivals of the myth, each with a different focus. Two filmic versions, for example, the French Cocteau's *Orphée* and the Brazilian Marcel Camus' *Black Orpheus* both present the journey into the underworld as their central focus. The plays by Anouilh, *Eurydice*, and by Tennessee Williams, *Orpheus descending*, focus respectively on Orpheus' refusal to be consoled for the loss of his beloved, and on the contrast between a sensitive artist and the brutal world where he must find his survival. Rainer Maria Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus*, the most significant modern interpretation of the myth, deals with a particular aspect of it: the drive to transcend the limits of physical matter.

But a renewal of the myth of noticeable importance in the XXth century has taken a different direction: the refocusing of the myth on the figure of Eurydice. In a century when women, discriminated by sexual prejudices, have tried to make their voice heard, a poem which reverses the genre role deserves to be analysed. According to Alicia Ostriker, the body of poetry by American women, in the last two decades, has the project of defining a female self. She argues that what distinguishes these poets is *a vigorous invasion of sanctuaries of existing language, the treasures where our meanings for 'male' and 'female' are preserved* (315). Her conclusion is that as in myth, revisionist mythmaking in women's poetry may offer one significant means of redefining us and our culture. It is therefore with a poem written in the last decades that this paper deals.

In the XIXth century Robert Browning had already let us hear Eurydice's voice but only at a moment when she needs Orpheus and feels

a desperate wish to regain her life and her beloved⁶. However, many other modern and contemporary women poets such as Hilda Doolittle, Edith Sitwell, Adrienne Rich and Muriel Rukeiser have gone beyond him. They have faced the ancient tradition and reclaimed the myth of the female voice, against the one of the superiority of men. These poems, sometimes written in an aggressive tone, represent striking attempts to expand the awareness of the feminine consciousness.

Indeed, H. Doolittle, writing mainly during the two world wars, although she has mostly remembered for poems that helped define the literary movement called Imagism, wrote long poetic narratives which later developed into a kind of work indebted to a series of contemporary men. Lately her work has been transformed into a mythology that reflected her effort to understand her identity as a woman and a poet. According to Sandra Gilbert, *she matured into the recognition that while there was always a challenge in the creativity of the men whom she admired or even adored, the Monster is the Muse, the Creator* (1461).

The poem "Eurydice" at first seems to represent only a genre reversal of the speaking- position, for in earlier writings Orpheus always represents the master poet, the one who speaks. His journey downward has been seen as the origin of his knowledge and Eurydice, reduced to a mere representation of an aspect of this mastery. While she is the "bearer of meaning", he is "the controller". However, by voicing the poem through Eurydice, H.D. calls into question the logic of representation and creation that supports the Orpheus narrative (Purkiss, 449).

The poem begins with a lament. Eurydice blames Orpheus for his arrogance and ruthlessness. She blames him for his failure to rescue her and for her being sent back to a place "where dead lichens drip". "You have swept me back", she says, "why did you turn back" so that Hell should be re-inhabited by me?. To emphasize her feelings of sadness, smallness and subjection before him, the poet describes her place using images related to caves: lichen, cinders and ash. These are set in direct opposition to her desire of liberty, symbolized by her "walking above the earth with the live souls" and "sleeping among the flowers." Here traditional images for the female body retain their gender identification but their attributes are transformed, so that flowers means force, instead of fragility and earth means creative imagina-

⁶ "Eurydice to Orpheus: A Picture by Leighton"

tion instead of passive generativeness. It is Eurydice who says that she would have preferred to live unconsciously resting peacefully with the dead and be forgotten, to being rescued being sent back to death again.

In the second part of the poem, she recognizes Orpheus's arrogance and ruthlessness as manifestations of a narcissistic attitude: *What was it you saw in my face? / the light of your own face, / the fire of your own presence?* She claims that what he was looking for when he glanced back was only his own face. As a shadow and a face, Eurydice is reduced to a simple mirror, a mere reflection of the masculine power and she fights against it.

The third part reflects her rage against a tremendous loss, symbolized by the black colour that crosses everything, a loss that pervades the fourth part of the poem through images of confinement (walls, fringes, silence) in opposition to images of fertility and life (yellow saffron, red and golden flowers). In rejecting being regarded as a mere part of the male body, she demands her right to reflect the happiness and freedom that exists in "golden flowers". This part is connected with the last part of the poem which presents the closed feminine space able to open as a rose: from the darkness of hell she is becoming free as a red rose.

The poet further deconstructs the prior myth, simultaneously constructing a new one which includes, instead of excluding, Eurydice. She also demands Eurydice's/women's right for completeness in death, denied by Orpheus because of his authoritative interference. In other words she claims the right to die in peace.

So for your arrogance
and your ruthlessness
I have lost the earth
and the flowers of the earth,
and the live souls above the earth,
and you who passed across the light
and reached
ruthless;

you who have your own light,
who are to yourself a presence
who need no presence;

yet for all your arrogance
and your glance,
I tell you this:

such loss is no loss,
such terror, such coils and strands and pitfalls
of blackness,
such terror
is no loss

Eurydice reaffirms, through death, the hardship of her own journey and her right to personal integrity, without his interference.

Against the black
I have more fervour
than you in all the splendour of that place
against the blackness
and the starky grey
I have more light

At the end, she discovers that she can find a selfhood in a kind of hell that is described as feminine, in an explicitly and evocatively sexual image, a hell which... "before I am lost, / . . . must open like a red rose/ for the dead to pass". She discovers that the realm of the feminine, even whether it is described as hell or death, can be freer than the oppressive life of the masculine one. As in Adrienne Rich's poem, "I dream I'm the Death of Orpheus", in which Death, in allusion to Jean Cocteau's film *Orphée*, is represented by a woman in black who comes from the underworld through a mirror, Eurydice once more shows her preference for natural death, caused simply by a snake biting, rather than that imposed and brought about by the masculine hero's selfishness.

H.D.'s poem thus reveals, through women voice, a familiar figure

from male tradition 5 8 5 that emerges altered. It reasserts the double power of mythic material either in existing objectively or appearing as intimate material — everything that is unreal to rational consciousness. The poem can thus be classified as a work of revisionist myth, like many written by American women to whom the blame of having always been writing “personally” and “confessionally” was imposed. “Eurydice” reflects women’s thoughts and attitudes which have pervaded the beginning of the XXth century society. According to Gilbert, Hilda Doolittle “sought to annihilate the inherited forms and formulas of tradition, [questing], through overt re-creations of matriarchal images as well as through inventive wordplay, for styles and forms that would free them from the burden-some conventions which infected ‘patriarchal poetry’ with the same urgency that marked the work of writers like Woolf and Stein. (. . .) As women were no longer to be primarily defined through their erotic relationship with men, (. . .) the task of women writers was for the first time to trace the prospects and problems of an expanding female intellectual community” (1241-42). The poem by H.D., “Eurydice”, works towards this goal, thus functioning as cultural translation.

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