

Elvis Presley: A Modern Orpheus?

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This note is really neither about Orpheus nor Elvis; it is about the hero figure, an eternal fixture among humans. The hero is a quasi-divine being, something of a demi-god, one who transcends the ordinary bounds set upon mortals and is especially revealed by his great deeds while alive and a strange continuance of his strong spirit after death. Perhaps it is the unique nature of a hero's death which really sets the hero apart.

Orpheus was a mythological hero whose fame rested on his wonderful, magical voice which could compel even trees and animals to follow him. He also earned his hero credentials by sailing with Jason on the Argonaut expedition. When his beloved Eurydice died from a snake bite, Orpheus almost charmed her out of Hades with his evocative vocals, failing only at the end when he disobeyed instructions not to look back prematurely. He met a bizarre end when he was torn apart alive in northern Greece by mad maenads, crazed women devotees of Bacchus. His detached head, still singing (it's hard to kill an eternal voice), floated to the island of Lesbos where it was finally buried in a sacred tomb.

Orpheus later appears as an adjunct of the cult of Bacchus in the Orphic Mysteries, wherein Orpheus is seen as a conduit to a purified life which leads to some kind of release from death and damnation for the initiate. To enter Hades and return to earth as Orpheus did - minus his girlfriend - is tantamount to escaping from death's in-

evitability. When heroes died their spirits were worshipped at their tombs and were thought to still have power among the living.

How does the son of a Mississippi sharecropper (1935-1977) compare, then, with ancient heroes? Elvis shot to stardom in 1956 with his smooth baritone voice, unique stage gyrations, and good looks, electrifying a young, enthusiastic audience into near hysteria. The effect was, in ancient terms, quite Bacchic and his devotees were clearly the modern equivalent of maenads - throughout his career his women fans grabbed and clawed at him with an unabated frenzy, leading him to hire bodyguards lest he go the way of Orpheus - some exaggeration here, though he was forced in his later career to make his capes detachable so that his fans wouldn't pull him off the stage. Elvis dominated the rock and roll scene until 1963, making a series of movies along the way to bring the demi-god closer to the devout.

Right down to his death in 1977, Elvis, now a stage performer, continued to work his strange magic upon audiences now growing older and more conservative. But did he really die in 1977? In the modern world we do not have immortal demi-gods, divine heroes at whose tombs we worship. Instead, today we deny the actuality of the hero's death. Elvis was recently spotted at a Burger King in X town; the tabloids report him at a fat-farm in Central America; or even worse, his features have been recognized in the mountains of Mars! His fans cannot accept or believe in the death of a figure who was so central in their lives. They reject the hero's death. He lives. When they do accept it they parade by the tens of thousands to his Graceland mansion's grave where they lay expensive floral tributes in the shape of "Hound Dogs" etc. and gaze reverently at the grave with its eternal flame, and view the trophies of his fame in his home and so awaken their memory of him.

The reality of Elvis is quite mundane or worse. An uncultivated man who in his latter days was a pill-popper, Elvis still managed to conceal his private vices and parade himself as the very spirit of middle-American virtues. This public posture combined with his music elevated him to the status of what in ancient Greece would clearly be recognized as a hero who especially in death transcended the normal condition. No one since Elvis has generated the same hysterical devotion and excitement in his fans, but I await with expectation the birth of the next pop-hero. You can be sure there will be one.