Poetry and the *Persiles*: Cervantes' Orphic Mode
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love and the imagination
are of a piece,
swift as the light
to avoid destruction.

--William Carlos Williams,
"Asphodel, that Greeny Flower"[1]

1. Cervantes and poetry

The topic 'Cervantes and poetry' has given rise to a great deal of criticism, much of it shaped by tantalizing moments in which Cervantes appears to have commented on his skills with rueful self-knowledge – for example, in the well-known lines of the *Parnaso*: "Yo, que siempre trabajo / y me desvelo / por parecer que tengo la gracia de poeta / que no me dió el cielo" (Parnaso I.25-27). Such asides, woven into works from the *Galatea* through *Don Quijote* and the *Viaje del Parnaso*, suggest that Cervantes wished he were a better poet. But as Mercedes Alcalá Galán has discussed, a number of problems arise from accepting them as authentic.[2] For one thing, they are inconsistent: Cervantes' self-deprecating comments are balanced by other passages in which he appears to boast of his skill. For another, Cervantes composed great quantities of poetry – *romances*, sonnets, pastoral laments – presented in voices that range from the parodic to the sincere. As Pedro Ruiz Perez has observed, "la atención en clave irónica y dialógica a la circunstancia contextual de la poesía son elementos opuestos a la tensión lírica que se le puede exigir del poeta" (Alcalá-Galán 1999, 29). The skill with which Cervantes imitated a spectrum of lyrics indicates his dexterity with a variety of important Spanish and Italian verse forms. This fact alone should remind us of the difference between how poetry and poetry-making are understood now and how they were conceived of in earlier periods, when a wide range of imaginative writing in verse and prose was considered poetry, and when a variety of lyric forms – psalms, hymns, funeral laments; sonnets for pithy witticisms, *romances* (ballads) for news, local history and popular wisdom – were recognized as fundamental components of the cultural fabric. As Virginia Jackson observed, the "songs, riddles, epigrams, sonnets, epitaphs, *blasons*, lieder, elegies, marches, dialogues, conceits, ballads, epistles, hymns, odes, eclogues, and monodramas considered lyric in the Western tradition" fulfilled "stipulative function(s)" in public life (183); however, the more restricted notion of poetry that has tended to dominate reading, scholarship and criticism in the nineteenth-, twentieth- and now twenty-first centuries ignores or fundamentally misreads the social importance of these lyrics. Jackson coins the term "lyricization" to designate the historical transformation of the lyric from a category that comprised a range of poetic genres into one idealized category, "the single

[1] The poem appears in *The Collected Poems*, 310-337. Subsequent citations will be labeled with page numbers only.

[2] *Teoría de la Poesía en Cervantes* 27-29. See also the discussion of Cervantes and lyric poetry in Cascardi, "Orphic Fictions."

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abstraction of the post-Romantic lyric" (183), dominated by the figure of the subject and tropes of affect, introspection and self-expression.

The search for authentic lyric expression in Cervantes' poetry is not simply a matter of projecting "back" in time ideas about poetry that dominate today, of course. Cervantes prepared the way with his ingenious manner of narrating. In particular, his deft manipulation of intra- and extra-diegetic planes produced effects of self: the witty, brilliant, prosaic rhetorical figure that readers accept, admire and even love as Miguel de Cervantes, author and man, "speaks" from the various dedications and prologues in the *Parnaso*, in Parts 1 and 2 of *Don Quijote*, in the *Novelas ejemplares*, in the *Persiles*. But it goes without saying that "he" is a rhetorical figure.[3] My first premise in this essay is that the question of Cervantes and poetry turns on that one ingenious conceit, "Miguel de Cervantes," *el manco sano*, who in the *Persiles* serves as the point from which Cervantes undertakes the testing of poetry, of poetic speech, and of the poets who claim poetic license that is such a consistent feature of his writing. Furthermore, in clarifying the nature of this poetic testing, it is helpful to keep in mind the thesis presented by María José Vega, in her important volume, *Idea de La Lírica en el Renacimiento*: "la idea de la lírica se construye, en el Renacimiento, como una encrucijada de discursos…es un género literario, o, más exactamente, comienza a conceptualizarse como tal, para las literaturas modernas, en la poética del siglo XVI" (42). Thus my second premise is that the subjective expressivity we now associate with the lyric ('the lyric voice') emerges in the sixteenth century as one among a spectrum of poetic discourses.

One well-studied example of this incipiently modern lyric is the tradition of Petrarchism.[4] In this essay I will be arguing for another important variety, the voice I will develop here as the Orphic mode. My thesis is that in the *Persiles*, Cervantes drew on Ovid's myth of Orpheus to stage a final demonstration of the truth of poetry. In order to do so, he made use of a unique subject position furnished by the myth; namely, the threshold between this world and the afterlife, a space in which poets graced with divine gifts of song are permitted to pass beyond the human world and retrieve essential truths for the living. When Cervantes writes to the Count of Lemos that he is composing the Dedication of the *Persiles* having received the extreme unction and "Puesto ya el pie en el estribo" (108), or when he offers his final valediction in the Prologue: "¡Adiós, gracias! Adiós, donaires; adios regocijados amigos! Que yo me voy muriendo y deseando veros presto contentos en la otra vida" (114), he establishes the narrative on this Orphic threshold between life and death. The entire burgeoning, chaotic world inhabited by Periandro, Auristela, Mauricio, Arnaldo, Rutilio, Feliciana, Antonio, Constanza and their fellow pilgrims – all its passions, actions, climates, regions, societies, friendships, loves, deceptions and faith (Michael Armstrong-Roche has referred to the *Persiles* as Cervantes' *summa*; 4) – bursts forth from the rapidly-diminishing moment in which the reluctant *regocijo de las musas* still inhabits this world and can communicate what he sees over the threshold of the afterlife: namely, God's boundless love for the world in its

[3] In addition to the important early work on the linguistic construction of the Cervantine authorial persona from the 1980s and early 1990s, see the discussion in Alcalá-Galán on the concept of Cervantes' creative life (2009, 13-14). See also the recent essay by Valencia on persona in the *Galatea*.

[4] Heather Dubrow's positioning of Petrarchism is particularly relevant to this discussion. See 15, as well as the argument that precedes it in the Introduction to *The Challenges of Orpheus*.

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fallen state. Therefore, in place of the skepticism with which Cervantes addressed poets and poetry in other works[5], the scrutiny of fictions, poems, charms, dreams and prophecies that is carried out over the course of the *Persiles* unfolds within the Orphic paradigm established in the Dedication and the Prologue. As a result, they are underwritten by what might be termed "Orphic faith." The success of the narrator's endeavor – his composition of a poem that approximates the good to the closest extent possible in this world ("ha de llegar al estremo de la bondad posible," Dedication, *Don Quijote 2*) – demonstrates the capacity of the human imagination and human art to reveal the single, fundamental truth of the Christian universe. The value of this intervention into a world generally blind to God's designs outweighs the moral and social dangers that poetry presents: the tendencies of self-proclaimed poets to frivolity, vanity, seduction and deception; the perils of false prophecies and the devolution of figures into lies. In fact, of course, the *Persiles* shows that lies, too, are inherently redeemed because they disguise and reveal the truth.

While my primary point has to do with the *Persiles*, Cervantes and poetry, in the final part of this essay I will turn to a short discussion of the Orphic mode as it unfolds over time. One of the benefits of *mode* as a critical term is that it cuts across periods and genres; as a colleague reminded me recently, genre and period are differentiated, whereas mode is conjugated.[6] Over time, the Orphic mode becomes a dominant voice that shapes the modern category of lyric. For our purposes here, it furnishes conceptual ground upon which to reframe poetry as we enter the fifth century of cervantine deliberations. This reframing may be particularly useful with respect to the *Persiles*, which tends to point up the uneasy fit between critical categories such as genre and period (modern categories oriented to works of the intellect) and works such as the *Persiles*, which unfold within the domain of poetry and are oriented by, in the words of William Carlos Williams, "love and the imagination."[7] As an example of the kinds of insight that are facilitated by approaching discussions of Renaissance and early modern imaginative writing (poetry) through the concept of mode, I turn to a brief discussion of the *Persiles* in the context of Williams' modern lyric, "Asphodel, that Greeny Flower." I will consider how it is that a late twentieth-century American poem sheds useful light on a seventeenth-century epic

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[5] In essays such as "Image and Iconoclasm" (2005) and "Orphic Fictions" (2012), Anthony J. Cascardi situates Cervantes' representation of poetry in the contexts of skepticism and the early modern suspicion of fable (2005), and with respect to belatedness and the notion that Orphic power is inescapably mediated in the present age (2012). Cascardi does not discuss the *Persiles* in these essays; however, my discussion here dovetails with claims he makes about Cervantes and the "relocation of myth from poetry to prose" (2012, 19) as I explain in the final part of this essay.

[6] The colleague is Fabienne Moore. I gratefully acknowledge her comments, as well as those of Amanda Doxtater, Lanie Millar and Casey Shoop on earlier versions of this essay. Thanks also to María Mercedes Carrión for her comments on related work I presented at the First Annual LALISA conference, held at Reed College, April 2016.

[7] See above, in the epigraph to this essay. Ruth El-Saffar set up the opposition between Cervantine writings directed at the intellect versus those that engage the imagination: "I consulted Frye a lot because he seemed least persuaded, among contemporary critics, of the innate superiority of the novel over romance and, by extension, of the intellect over the imagination" ("The Truth of the Matter," 239). Virginia Jackson criticizes such binary formulations (2014, 4).

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romance.[8] Before embarking on that wider discussion, however, I need to say a few words, first about the myth of Orpheus in the sixteenth century and, next, about the Orphic mode, specifically, as it is established in the *Persiles*.

2. Cervantes and Orpheus

As recounted by Ovid, Orpheus was the Thracian poet who created songs so sweet they tamed the beasts; the rocks and trees moved near to hear him sing; and when his wife Eurydice died from a serpent's bite his sweet and persuasive songs convinced the gods of the underworld to allow him to retrieve her. The one condition they imposed was that Orpheus not turn back to look at Eurydice before the two emerged from death's caverns. Orpheus turned to look just as he crossed into the sunlight, while Eurydice was still in the cave, and she disappeared from him forever. Orpheus returned to the realm of the living a changed man. His songs remained sweet and compelling, but he foreswore the love of women and turned instead to young boys. The Maenads, driven wild by his rejection, attacked Orpheus with stones and sticks. At first the missiles refused to harm the singer, but eventually the screams of the Maenads overwhelmed the melodies that had kept the rocks in thrall; and the weapons hit their mark. Felled, Orpheus was torn to pieces by the women. His head and lyre, still singing, rolled into the sea, landing at Lesbos. Orpheus found his way to the underworld and was reunited with his beloved wife.

Orpheus succeeds as a foundational myth for poetry because of its flexibility. However, both the variety of sources for the Orphic myth and the range of ways writers made use of it can create confusion.[9] Orpheus' power to bring divine love to bear on death led Renaissance Humanists and their Christian predecessors to interpret the myth as a prefiguration of Moses and Jesus (Warden, Dubrow). A more urbane version of the story, presented by Horace in his *ars poetica*, the *Epistola ad Pisones*, served as an authorizing source for sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writers as they embarked on the creation of secular, incipiently national, vernacular poetry. Horace counseled aspiring poets to abandon hopes of matching the feats of Homer, Pindar or the singers of the great hymns because their era had been eclipsed long ago. He offered an abbreviated account of Orpheus, eliding the singer's visit to the underworld and presenting him as a metaphor for the social ends to which lyric poems can be turned: persuasion, solace, civilization,

> A los hombres feroces
> El sacro Orféo, intérprete divino,
> Separó con lo dulce de sus voces
> Del estado brutal en que vivían,
> Siendo uno de ótro bárbaro asesino

[8] On the *Persiles* as epic novel and on the criticism of the *Persiles* and romance, see Armstrong-Roche (4-26).

[9] On versions of the myth in early modern Spain, see de Armas, ed. *Ovid in the Age of Cervantes*, especially ix – xix and 203-227. See also Gamechogoicoechea Llopis, *El Mito de Orfeo en la Literatura Barroca Española*. On Orpheus in the Anglophone tradition, see the excellent discussion by Dubrow (18-26). On Orpheus and the Renaissance, see Warden.

Y por tales acciones
Tódos le atribuían
Que domó fieros tigres y leones.

[…]

Entónces la mejor sabiduría
Era la que prudente discernía
Ya del público bien el bien privado,
O ya de lo profano lo sagrado...

(Iriarte, 869-885)

The *Epistola* provided classical support for a relatively new category of poetry: erudite, secular, vernacular, "minor" poems that appropriated the Orphic lyre for worldly ends – seduction (as in the "*Oda ad Florem Gnidi*," in which Garcilaso de la Vega deployed Orphic powers to the end of conquering a woman[10]), social rivalry (as in the "*Lira de Garcilaso, contrahecha*," in which Hernando de Acuña attacked his peer Jerónimo de Urrea[11]), or the elaboration of incipient ideas of nation (in poems such as the "*Canción de Orféo,*" in which Jorge de Montemayor appropriated the Orphic myth to the celebration of Spain[12]).

The tradition of defending poetry by referring to Horace, and a version of the Orpheus myth that assigned the poet the role of "conveyor of norms" (Forcione, 305) through the creation of poems that serve useful social ends, extends well into the eighteenth century. It serves as an important topos for Luzán, Feijoo and other Neoclassical and Enlightenment moralists. But we should be attentive to the importance of a mythopoeic tradition of Orphic poetry that was equally relevant to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writers. In the *Metamorphoses*, Orpheus begins his suit to the gods of the underworld by distinguishing his songs from those of other, less ambitious singers. Plucking his lyre, he intones, "I've not come down to explore the murky / regions of Tártarus, nor to enchain the three-headed monster / Medusa bore, the dog whose coast is bristling with adders" (Raeburn, 383).[13] He is referring here to the Homeric hymns that

[10] "Si de mi baja lira / tanto pudiese el son que en un momento / aplacase la ira / del animoso viento / y la furia del mar y el movimiento; / y en ásperas montañas / con el süave canto enterneciese / las fieras alimañas, / los árboles moviese / y al son confusamente los trujiese" (1-9).

[11] De vuestra torpe lira / ofende tanto el son, que en un momento / mueve al discreto a ira y a descontentamiento, / y vos sólo, señor, quedáis contento. / Yo en ásperas montañas no dudo que tal canto endureciese / las fieras alimañas, /o a risa las moviese / si natura el reír les *concediese* (1-10).

[12] No quiero yo cantar, ni Dios lo quiera/ Aquel proceso largo de mis males / Ni cuando yo cantaba de manera / Que a mi me traía las plantas animales;/ Ni cuando a Plutón ví, que no debiera,/ Y suspendí las penas infernales / Ni como volví el rostro a mi señora,/ Cuyo tormento aun vive hasta ahora. / Mas cantaré con voz suave y pura / La grande perfección, la gracia extraña,/ El ser, valor, beldad sobre natura, / De las que hoy dan lustre a España (4.11-20). On the competition among Renaissance courtiers and writers for recognition as the "national Orpheus," see Nelson.

[13] See *Metamorphoses* 10.16-31. I quote Raeburn's English translation in this essay because the length of the quotations might be burdensome in Latin. The passages quoted from Raeburn in this essay are faithful to Ovid' Latin.

transmitted the Greek myths down through the generations. In contrast to those types of poems, he undertakes a different feat – not *description*, but an active *intervention* in the divine order, by retrieving Eurydice for the light:

> I'm here in search of my wife, cut off in the years of her youth
> […]
> I'd hoped to be able to bear my loss and confess that I tried.
> But love was too strong. That god is well known in the world above,
> and I wonder whether you know him here; I divine that you do
> […]
> you too are united by Love. In the name of these confines of fear,
> in the name of this vast abyss and your realm of infinite silence,
> I, Orpheus, implore you, unravel the web of my dear Eurydice's
> early passing. (383)

Orpheus is confident that he will achieve his object because his song is fueled not only by art but by love, a force that holds sway both above ground and below; he reminds the gods of the underworld that Eros impelled Hades to kidnap Persephone. In the tradition that descends from the Orpheus myth, Orphic poetry is underwritten and enhanced by various kinds of supernatural love. Orphic poets share the conviction that, in the words of William Carlos Williams,

> love and the imagination
> are of a piece,
> swift as the light
> to avoid destruction[14]

More properly, it might be said that love and the imagination open an interval in which redemption can take place. Orpheus' song interrupts the labors of the condemned and suspends (but does not prevent) Eurydice's death. The temporality of the interval is fundamental to the Orphic mode, as I will develop further below. Indeed, the topos of Orpheus' failure to secure Eurydice's return to earthly life will be a central feature of the modern tradition.[15] For now, it is enough to observe the structural importance of the interval to the *Persiles*, whose vigorous narrative rhythms, uneven sections and compressed ending support the conceit, established in both the Dedication and the Prologue, that the book emerges from the interlude between the administration of the final sacrament and the final beat of the narrator's pulse. Whereas Orpheus sought to retrieve Eurydice during this timeless moment, Cervantes' narrator seeks to save his beloved friends, the Count of Lemos, his *lector(es) amantísimo(s)* and the *regocijados*

[14] See the epigraph to this essay and note 1.

[15] This aspect of the myth is handed down via Vergil's *Georgics* and is fundamental to the Orphic poetics of Garcilaso's First Eclogue, for example. I am grateful to Felipe Valencia for pointing this out to me in comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

amigos from sorrow and fear. If his poem is successful, it will reveal the truth of God's unwavering planand deliver them from deception to joy.[16]

This quest is complicated, however, by the suspicion provoked in the sixteenth century by the imagination, and thus by images, figures, rhythms and meters that lodged poetic falsehoods in the mind. In Alonso Lopez Pinciano's influential *Filosofía Antigua Poética* (1591) the character El Pinciano asserts, "si por decir mentiras es vil una arte, no sé yo cuál lo es más en el mundo que la poética, que toda ella es mentira y fullería" (88).[17] Fadrique later expands on the anxieties generated by poetry: "un poeta, que con una ficción que jamás pasó y tan distante de la verdad, alborote los ánimos de los hombres y que, unas veces, los haga reír de manera que se descompongan y, otras, llorar de suerte que les lastime el corazón y le perturben tanto" (97). Over the course of the *Persiles*, persuasive speech, prophecies, fables, dreams and verse inspire both debate and private doubt as characters consider whether the benefits conferred by poetry are sufficient to redeem an art of lies. The debate regarding the veracity and morality of Rutilio's story of lycanthropy in Book 1 is one well-known example of this type of questioning. Another, more subtle exploration takes place as characters respond to Periandro, Auristela and the question of deceptive speech. For example: over the course of a series of chapters in Book 2, Periandro recounts a dream that inspires confusion and wonder among his listeners. As he dreamed, Periandro's imagination painted images so compelling that he himself, not to mention to his audience and, perhaps, a first-time reader of the *Persiles*, mistake it for reality: "De tal manera -respondió Auristela- ha contado su sueño mi hermano, que me iba haciendo dudar si era verdad o no los que decía" (383). Irritated both by Periandro's protracted narration and by having been fooled with the rest, Mauricio responds with a lecture: "Éstas son fuerzas de la imaginación, quien suelen representarse las cosas con tal vehemencia, que se aprehenden de la memoria, de manera que quedan en ella, siendo mentiras como si fueran verdades" (383). Arnaldo, on the other hand, does not respond to the content of Periandro's narration. Instead, his soul is stirred by the affective properties of the lover's voice. These lead him to glimpse something genuinely true – namely, that Periandro and Auristela are not who they seem to be and say they are:

> A todo esto, callaba Arnaldo y consideraba los afectos y demonstraciones con que Periandro contaba su historia, y de ninguno dellos podía sacar en limpio las sospechas que en su alma habia infundido el ya muerto maldiciente Clodio de no ser Auristela y Periandro verdaderos hermanos. (383)

The scene revisits ideas that appear in others of Cervantes' writings, notably, in Part 2 of *Don Quijote*, in which the power of images to distract and mislead is a central theme (Cascardi 2005). The images drawn by the imagination exert a strong force as Periandro spins his tale: because the narrator of the *Persiles* does not mark the dream off in any way, simply folding it into Periandro's account of his adventures while he was

[16] See Book 4, chapter 14. The translation "God's unwavering plan" is from Weller and Colahan, 349. The Spanish phrase is "*Un firme disponer del cielo*" (726).

[17] The work of Mary Gaylord on Cervantes and the *Filosofía Antigua Poética* is particularly relevant to this essay. See, for example, "Cervantes' Portraits and Literary Theory in the Text of Fiction."

separated from his companions, the reader is misled with the rest of his audience. In contrast to the deceptions effected by images, however, Periandro's *voice* wields the truth-revealing powers idealized in theories of poetry; indeed, this scene derives from contemporary poetic theory. In the *Filosofía*, the character Ugo responds to the challenge that poetry provokes emotions on false pretenses: "si la poesía perturba, es por mayor bien y paz" (99). Generally, this "*bien y paz*" is associated with *consonancia*, or poetic harmony, a quality shared between God and humankind before the Fall: "Desconcertóse la harmonía y consonancia humana y el hombre se tragó la inocencia el día que el primero la manzana, por cuya causa vino en disonancia y avieso" (Fadrique, *Filosofía*, 117). At its noblest, poetry approaches the restoration of that harmony, thereby providing men and women with glimpses of God's designs; and even lesser forms of imaginative speech wield the power to reveal truth, as when Arnaldo suspects the truth about Periandro and Auristela. The play of truth and lies takes a different turn, however, in the final chapters of Book 4. When Auristela's secret is finally revealed, Antonio and Constanza reassure her that her shame about deceiving her friends and traveling, unwed, with her lover are mere scruples, ("*escrúpulos,*" 710). That is, they are minor preoccupations that in this world trouble the conscience, but which in reality are comparable to pebbles in one's shoe.[18] "Los trabajos que has visto que hemos pasado han sido nuestros maestros en muchas cosas," Antonio advises,

> y por pequeña muestra que se no dé, sacamos el hilo de los más arduos negocios, especialmente en los que son de amores, que parece que los tales consigo mismo traen la declaración. ¿Qué mucho que Periandro no sea tu hermano, y qué mucho que tú seas su legítima esposa, y qué mucho, otra vez, que con honesto y casto decoro os hayáis mostrado hasta aquí limpísimos al cielo y honestísimos a los ojos de los que os han visto? No todos los…amantes han puesto la mira de su gusto en gozar a sus amadas sino con las potencias del alma. (708 - 709)

The lesson Antonio has learned is that the conventions, morality and piety of this world do not matter to Heaven, which has its own mysterious way of judging things. But the world of the romance and the world of its addressees draw increasingly close in the final chapters of Book 4, as the interval between the narrator's life and death comes to an end. Thus Antonio addresses Auristela here, but he also, arguably, addresses the group the narrator seeks to redeem, the readers and friends addressed in the Dedication and Prologue. The labors they have "witnessed" via the poem leads them, as it leads the characters in the poem, to anagnorisis regarding God's plan. Thus, to return to the Orphic paradigm, whereas God's grace delivers Sigismunda and Persiles from the webs of error and deceit that entangled Auristela and Periandro (early in chapter 14, Sigismunda is transformed, "ya no Auristela, sino la reina de Frislanda…que estas mundazas tan estrañas caen debajo del poder de aquella que comúnmente es llamada fortuna, que no es otra cosa sino un firme disponer del cielo," 726), the narrator's friends are delivered by means of his poem. The success of his Orphic song helps explain how what otherwise

[18] Covarrubias: "cantillo pequeño, chinilla, que entra por el zapato y causa desasosiego y dolor del pie, al que va caminando con ella. Por metáfora, llamamos escrúpulo una duda que tenemos de una cosa, si es asi o si no es asi…particularmente en materias de conciencia" (774-775).

might have been a deeply melancholy farewell in the Dedication and Prologue is suffused with a sense of joy.[19]

The narrator's poem (which is to say, the romance) succeeds in its Orphic task because it is informed and sustained by love. It is worthwhile to point out the nature of that love, which, according to Renaissance theory, was purer and closer to God than even the perfect love that unites Persiles and Sigismunda. As I indicated earlier, Cervantes' reference to the *Persiles* as poised to attain the "*estremo de la bondad posible*" is suggestive as an allusion to this hierarchy of ideals, particularly since the opinion is attributed to Cervantes' friends. Renaissance Neoplatonic theory idealized the love shared between men in perfect friendship as being free from carnal desire and hence a clearer source of contentment and wisdom (Langer, 20-24), and Wilson has noted how Neoplatonic theory and the figure of the androgyne are encoded throughout the *Persiles* (78-90). To the examples she discusses, I would add the Dedication and the Prologue, which inscribe an exclusively male domain in which friendship is associated both with sustaining life and with happiness in the afterlife.[20] Cervantes contrasted the two registers of ideal love, the consecrated and chaste erotic love of the married couple and the perfect love among male friends. The latter wields the power to underwrite the noble and redemptive poetry created by the narrator.

But we should also note that minor poetry has a place in the poetic cosmos of the Dedication and Prologue. Both of these texts distinguish (as Orpheus did) the great poem to come from socially-useful, minor poetry. In the Dedication, the narrator deploys a traditional ballad to sweeten the news of his immanent death:

> Aquellas coplas antiguas, que fueron en su tiempo celebradas, que comienzan,
> *Puesto ya el pie en el estribo*,
> quisiera yo no vinieran tan a pelo en esta mi epístola, porque casi con las mismas palabras las puedo comenzar, diciendo:
> *Puesto ya el pie en el estribo,*
> *con las ansias de la muerte*
> *gran señor, te escribo.* (108)

The adapted poem follows the conventions for an important poetic topos. Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century readers and writers displayed a keen appetite for writing on the theme of death. As Jerónimo de Urrea wrote in the introduction to his 1555 translation of an important *ars moriendi*, "la materia de envejecer y morir es pesada y enojosa, ponse la por agradables figuras… porque la dulçura del verso, y primor de la invención, engañe al

[19] As Alcalá-Galán observes, "Es sorprendente que alguien que confiesa estar a las puertas de la muerte, y calcula ésta para el domingo siguiente, escriba este prólogo en el que no sólo escoge autorrepresentarse como alegre y regocijador, sino que lamenta el no poder escribir los donaires inspirados por el encuentro con el estudiante." (2009, 12)

[20] In addition to the narrator's cheerful goodbye and look ahead to meeting his friends in the afterlife (Prologue), consider his address to the Count of Lemos in the Dedication: "llevo la vida sobre el deseo que tengo de vivir, y quisiera yo ponerle coto hasta besar los pies a Vuesa Excelencia; que podría ser fuese tanto el contento de ver a Vuesa Excelencia bueno en España, que me volviese a dar la vida" (108).

dañado gusto…"[21] The rhythm and rhyme of the ballad fragment are charming, and the selection of the poem itself is inventive – the *romance* is popular and plays on a Spanish commonplace (*con el pie en el estribo*). Moreover, it is perfectly suited to the occasion, as the narrator finds himself carried along against his will; this condition also shapes the cadence of the sentence that follows the verses: "Ayer me dieron la estremaunción y hoy escribo ésta; el tiempo es breve, las ansias crecen, las esperanzas menguan, y con todo esto, llevo la vida sobre el deseo que tengo de vivir" (108). Its pace accelerates from the balanced, '*ayer y hoy'*, to the list that follows (*el tiempo es breve*…), to the final, crowded clause, "*llevo la vida*…" which appears to press back against encroaching death with the force of the narrator's will to live and write. The Prologue follows a similar pattern. In this instance, minor poetry is represented not by verse, but in the form of a pleasing anecdote: the narrator recounts a final drinking bout with friends and an encounter with a hapless youth. These episodes provide occasion both for the *donaires* he weaves into his narrative and others that perforce will remain unwritten: "había dado gran ocasión a mi pluma para escribir donaires, pero no son todos los tiempos unos" (114). The author-narrator has arrived at his final hours: "al paso de las efeméridas de mis pulsos (que, a más tardar, acabarán su carrera este domingo), acabaré yo la de mi vida" (113).[22]

The openings to the Dedication and the Prologue display characteristic cervantine wit and grace, but they also correspond to Ovid's myth of Orpheus. Above, I quoted a faithful translation of Orpheus' address to the underworld. In his 1545 translation of the *Metamorphoses* into Castilian, Jorge de Bustamante adapted the scene to reflect relevant themes in sixteenth-century poetics. In place of the myths handed down in the Homeric hymns (the poetry alluded to in Ovid), Orpheus in Bustamante distinguishes his art from poems such as *ars moriendi* and funeral laments:

> yo no descendí por ver que había en vuestros palacios, ni por ver los lugares trabajosos y tan llenos de tormentos y oscuridades que en ellos están: mas descendí por solo a ver a mi mujer Eurydice… por cuya causa yo he deseado ser muerto con ella, por no ver tanto pesar. El gran amor me venció y ha forzado a descender por ella: el dios de amor mucho puede en la tierra: bien creo también que gran poder debe tener aca debajo de la tierra (157)

It is generally agreed that Bustamante's translation served as an important source for Cervantes. The Dedication and Prologue thus furnish clear evidence for the Metamorphoses (or Bustamante's *Transformaciones*) as an important intertext for the *Persiles*. In addition, they secure the conceit of an orderly cosmos from which the

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[21] *Discurso de la vida humana y aventuras del caballero determinado*,"Al lector." The book is a translation of the widely-acclaimed fifteenth-century French *ars morendi*, *Le Chevalier Délibéré*. The poem was also translated by Hernando de Acuña in 1553. I discuss the two poems in a forthcoming article, "The Task of the Courtier."

[22] Cervantes' skepticism regarding self-proclaimed poets makes an appearance here. In the Prologue, he rejects the title of *regocijo de las Musas* (111) but takes as a matter of course his skills *donaires*: "*adiós donaires*!" (114).

narrator speaks and sings. The various kinds of poetry occupy their appropriate place and perform their given roles.

On the threshold from which the book issues, the narrator can fashion truth-revealing forms that are comprehensible in the human world (that is, Orphic poems), but he is no longer entirely of this world --after all, he has received the final sacrament. His liminal position is an important context for the opening paragraph of Book 1, chapter 1. Its first line, "Voces daba el bárbaro Corsicurvo a la estrecha boca de una profunda mazmorra" (117), is both famous and, as Sonia Velázquez showed recently, an ingenious poetic creation, since the first part of the sentence scans as a hendecasyllable (207-210). The hendecasyllable is the line-form associated with the most elevated poetry; hence the opening line of the romance figures the simultaneous presence of confusion and perfection that is God's creation, the human world. What post-lapsarian men and women hear as inchoate *voces* in fact contain within them divine harmony (Fadrique's *harmonía y consonancia*), and the shouts of Corsicurvo 'perturb' instructively (as described by Ugo). This theme is slowly worked into the greater fabric of the narrative as the paragraph proceeds until it becomes simply another warp thread in the tapestry that is the *Persiles*.[23] The *voces* are transformed and take shape, first into thundering noises, then into *razones*, and finally into sentences that are spoken by someone and understood by someone else: "aunque su terrible y espantoso estruendo cerca y lejos se escuchaba, de nadie eran entendidas articuladamente las razones que pronunciaba sino de la miserable Cloelia" (117-118). The process figures aesthesis. What readers attentive to the question of poetry might also keep in mind is that the process is itself spoken into existence by an Orphic narrator, a figure who stands for a brief time on the threshold between this world and the next one, and who can thus serve as a mediator, rendering perceptible the beauty and perfection that inhere within apparent disorder, corruption and cacophony.

3. Cervantes and mode

My argument thus far has been focused on drawing forward the relationship between the *Persiles* and the myth of Orpheus. In doing so I have been guided, however, by William Carlos Williams' poem "Asphodel." This lyric shares a number of characteristics with the *Persiles* and led me to think of Cervantes' book as a work in the Orphic mode – as this essay may inadvertently reveal, my first encounter with the *Persiles* was not as a *cervantista*, but rather as a scholar and critic of poetry. Perhaps for that reason, a number of elements of the Dedication and the Prologue stood out to me for their correspondences with "Asphodel": the speaker in Williams' poem resembles both Orpheus and the narrator in Cervantes' Dedication and the Prologue in that he stands on the threshold of death – in this case, it is a double annihilation of desertion by his wife and the threat of death posed by the nuclear bomb.[24] Like the narrator (and like Orpheus), he seeks to redeem his beloved by means of a poem; and like Orpheus he travels into the

[23] Alcalá-Galán refers to the *Persiles* as exposing, "*la urdidumbre de la tela*."

[24] "Asphodel" forms part of a group of poems Williams wrote in the 1950s and 1960s in which he explored the potential of the triadic-line form. See Berry.

underworld and back in the process.[25] "Asphodel" and the *Persiles* also share a temporality: both are shaped by the urgency of a speaker who is impelled to "talk on against time." In the *Persiles*, the theme is encoded through the narrator's reference to the interval between "today" (as in the Dedication, "hoy escribo esta") and "Sunday" (as in the Prologue). In Williams' poem, the speaker refers to "that sweetest interval, / when love will blossom" (344) and pleads:

> There is something
> something urgent
> I have to say to you
> and you alone
> but it must wait
> while I drink in
> the joy of your approach
> perhaps for the last time. (311)

This "something" is a variant on the message that subtends the *Persiles*; namely, the power of "love and the imagination" to "geld the bomb" (344), suspending and even transforming death – in the words of Williams:

> If a man die
> it is because death
> has first
> possessed his imagination.
> But if he refuse death—
> no greater evil
> can befall him
> unless it be the death of love
> meet him
> in full career.
> Then indeed
> for him
> the light has gone out. (334)

For this reason, to stave off death, he speaks at length:

[25] "I cannot say / that I have gone to hell / for your love / but often / found myself there / in your pursuit. / I do not like it / and wanted to be / in heaven. Hear me out. / Do not turn away" (314). The asphodel appears in the *Odyssey*, Book 11. When Odysseus travels to the underworld, he sees Achilles pacing the Elysian fields, where the flower is found. In keeping with the charismatic, flawed antihero that the post-romantic, twentieth century tradition will associate with the lyric speaker, the speaker in Williams' poem is modeled on epic heroes – on Odysseus, on Aeneas (in his unhappy encounter with Dido), and perhaps to some extent on Achilles (these figures were particularly evocative to U.S. and Anglophone writers in the 1950s and 1960s as they experimented with confessional poetry). The fact that the speaker undertakes the task of recuperating his wife's love by means of poetry and his faith in the art of love and the imagination align him with Orpheus.

And so
with fear in my heart
I drag it out
and keep on talking
for I dare not stop.
Listen while I talk on
against time. (311)

Finally, the speakers in both "Asphodel" and the Dedication and the Prologue of the *Persiles* are poets who probe the power and reach of their art by posing what might be considered the Orphic question: is there poetry in the afterlife? Poetry is an act of aesthesis, the art of devising and fashioning forms that render essential truths perceptible to the human senses, and, as a consequence, comprehensible to the human mind. But if this is the case, what does poetry look like in the afterlife, which conforms to divine, and not human, intelligence? This question is suggested in the Prologue, when the narrator laments that he will not be able to write all the *donaires* that were suggested to him by his encounter with the student. Like muse-inspired song, the skill to fashion *donaires* is a divine gift; Covarrubias defines the word as "Don y gracia hecha de Dios al animal racional hombre." Regarding the lost opportunity, the narrator writes, resignedly, *"*Había dado gran ocasión a mi pluma…pero no son todos los tiempos unos*."* However, he then appears to reverse himself: "Tiempo vendrá, quizá, donde, anudando este roto hilo, diga lo que aquí me falta y lo que sé convenía" (114). [26] This line can be read in two ways: the speaker may be suggesting that someone in the future will write the donaires, or he may be suggesting that he himself may be permitted to do so. The fact that a version of this speculation also appears in the Dedication suggests that we entertain the latter interpretation. The narrator muses, "todavia me quedan en el alma ciertas reliquias y asomos de Las semanas del jardín y del famoso Bernardo. Si, a dicha, por buena ventura mía (que ya no sería ventura sino milagro), me diese el cielo vida, las verá, y con ellas, fin de *La Galatea*..." (108). Both texts thus introduce the question that is also central to "Asphodel," in which the speaker embarks on the Orphic task of retrieving his wife by means of a poem. The poem is structured by the language of flowers. The pair devised the metaphor together during the happier days of their love: "We lived long together / a life filled, / if you will, / with flowers" (310). Derived as it was in love, the force that, as we have seen, sustains Orphic song, the metaphor is strong enough to carry over into the world of the dead. However, in the same way that Orpheus encounters the limits of his powers in the underworld, and in the same way that Cervantes' narrator questions whether or not he will be granted the miracle of completing poems and fashioning *donaires* in the afterlife, the efficacy of the lovers' poetic language in "Asphodel" is thrown into question:

the dead see,
asking among themselves:
What do I remember
that was shaped

[26] On the trope of *hilos rotos*, see Alcalá Galán (2009), 209-242.

as this thing is shaped? (311)

To his relief, he finds that while the metaphor is weakened in the underworld, it still does its work:

Of love, abiding love
it will be telling
though too weak a wash of crimson
colors it
to make it wholly credible. (311)

These features join the *Persiles* and "Asphodel" in a category I am positing here as "the Orphic mode," a voice that will in modern traditions become closely identified with "the lyric." In the opening of this essay, I suggested that it might be useful to reframe our approach to questions of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century poetry by thinking in terms of mode. My aim is not to dismiss criticism anchored in concepts of genre and period. On the contrary; recent interventions by Armstrong-Roche on the *Persiles* as an epic novel and Barbara Fuchs on romance demonstrate the vibrancy and relevance of a vein of criticism that reaches back to the foundational work of Forcione.[27] Moreover, it would seem that much of what I have written about Cervantes and the myth of Orpheus here would fit within a discussion of the *Persiles* anchored in theories of romance, where mode lingers in the background. Frye's well-known thesis about fiction – a touchstone in most discussions of the *Persiles* as romance – opens a chapter of *The Anatomy of Criticism* titled, "Historical Criticism: A Theory of Modes." Angus Fletcher has clarified Frye's reasoning in choosing the title: "The term 'mode' is appropriate because […] the hero is a protagonist with a given strength relative to his world, and as such each hero – whether mythic, romantic, high mimetic, low mimetic or ironic – is a *modulor* for verbal architectonics; man is the measure, the modus of myth" (34; original emphasis). It could be argued that Orpheus serves as the original modulor for the myth of noble poetry, and that both the narrator of the *Persiles* and the speaker in "Asphodel" are worthy heirs within that lineage; in fact, I gestured to that idea earlier in this essay when I referred to the Orphic tradition.

However, some years ago, Paul Alpers revisited theories of mode to measure the ideas of critics such as Empson, Frye, Fletcher and Fowler against the way the term tends to be used in literary criticism (46-49). He found that "mode is the term we tend to use when we want to suggest that the ethos of a work informs its technique and techniques imply an ethos" (49). Critics who make arguments about mode tend to refer to "qualities of diction, syntax and rhythm;" furthermore, a critic such as Helen Vendler (his example) examines these usages as they "encode" an attitude, as opposed to "*expressing*" it (48; original emphasis); "there is a reciprocal relation between usages and attitude" (49).[28]

[27] See Fuchs 1-9.

[28] Vendler serves as a useful critic for Alpers; however, as should be clear from my discussion at the start of this essay, the concept of a "transhistorical" lyric that informs her work runs counter to the ideas about lyric that motivate this essay. More properly, Vendler's discussions are relevant to romantic and high-modern lyrics, and to the kinds of poetry that can be read through a modern lens (here I have suggested

This view of mode is useful because it offers a way to move around some of the issues I presented at the start of this essay when I discussed the challenges genre presents when we turn to reading, discussing and teaching sixteenth- and seventeenth century poetry. "Lyric reading" is a practice conditioned by the subject; and Frye's theory of romance also focuses on "man" and his agency. In contrast, Alpers' analysis of mode foregrounds aesthesis and the signifying power of form. Whereas genres tend to be distinguished on the basis of set external features (novels are prose works, drama is spoken, poems are composed in lines of verse, etc.) and, increasingly, on elements of content (for example, genre fiction), works share a *mode* when form and content are drawn into the "reciprocal" relationship Alpers describes, such that they encode meaning in the most efficacious way a poet or writer can imagine and bring to completion.

This efficaciousness is contextual. As Susan Stewart writes, poetry

> proceeds by means of imagination and a material engagement with the resources of language; it takes place under the threat of overdetermination (that the Orphic creator might turn back tragically in distrust of himself, inadvertently losing the work through adherence to habit or convention) and a threat of underdetermination (that the freedom of creation could be rooted only in the particular history of the creator, or that the spontaneous and musical effects of the work might overwhelm its capacity to produce a lasting form). (12)

A number of critics have pointed out that Stewart's discussion of the Orphic is itself highly poetic; in fact, late twentieth-century literary criticism and theory has been attacked as unhelpfully and even solipsistically lyrical.[29] Among other consequences, these observations support my argument about mode: different forms convey and reveal meaning depending on the cultures in which meaning arises and is received. For Cervantes, the form most suited to his ambitions for the *Persiles* was the Greek romance. From its opening lines, the *Persiles* plunges its readers into a bewildering encounter with an obscure cosmos whose pattern and intentions are simultaneously displayed (in the metamorphoses of the *voces*), and hidden beneath layers of action, passion, artifice, characters and narration. That is, the formal and stylistic features of the book are all turned to the service of *admiración*, *desengaño*, revelation – varieties of *anagnorisis* that ancient thinkers such as Ovid and the other epic poets associated with poetry and song (although we should remember that Ovid, Vergil and Horace were contemporaries). Far from being 'rooted in the particular history of the creator', however, this form was recognized by his contemporaries as valuable.[30] As the sources quoted over the course of this essay show, poetry was viewed with suspicion in the sixteenth- and seventeenth

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Petrarchism and poems in the Orphic mode as two examples). Her famous assertion that the lyric is "intended to be voiceable by anyone reading it" and effects "mimesis toward the performance of the mind in solitary speech" (1-2), while clearly relevant to Renaissance sonnet sequences and to the Petrarchan discourse of desire, does not comprehend the majority of poetry that a sixteenth- or seventeenth-century writer would consider lyric. (Moreover, as Roland Greene, among others, has demonstrated, "personalist" lyric discourse played a powerful role in sixteenth-century imperialism and colonialism –that is, it served social as well as private ends.)

[29] For example, see Jackson 2014, 2.

[30] As was discussed most recently by Armstrong-Roche (5-9).

centuries. While it mattered, culturally, and played, as we have seen, important roles in daily life, it was not an ideal discourse. In this context, as Cascardi has pointed out, Cervantes, as an "iconic as a writer of prose" might have been expected to participate with thinkers such as Descartes and Hobbes in demystifying poetry and Renaissance touchstones such as the myth of Orpheus (2012, 19). However, a "more accurate description" in Cascardi's view, holds that Cervantes, "submit[ted] myths […] to a process of transposition and transformation," from lyric poetry to prose. In this way, Cervantes participated in an important stage in the tradition of Orpheus; "relocation from one generic home to another" was "crucial to the fate of the Orpheus myth" (19-20).

The *Persiles*, a poem composed in highly polished, aesthetic prose that was crafted to communicate powerful truths not discursively, but by means of form, illustrates this transformation. However, I would argue that the relationship of the *Persiles* to Orphic poetry comes into focus more easily when it is taken up in conjunction with a poem that "looks poetic" to modern eyes. Williams devised his broken triadic line form as a means of forging a modern noble song (Berry), and, as I have demonstrated here, the concerns of "Asphodel" lie very close to those of *Persiles*, at least with respect to poetry and poetics. As we continue to examine the questions posed by sixteenth- and seventeenth-century poets, mode promises to assist us in drawing new insight from the fact that poets talk to poets.

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