

On Looking Back: What It Means to Have Love and Lost (Again)

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Antonio Canova's *Orfeo ed Euridice* sculptures were originally created separately for the garden, but they are best viewed paired together to highlight the repeated grief of the torn-apart lovers. These statues illustrate the moment when Orpheus looks back at Eurydice, realizes his mistake, and loses her once more. *Euridice*, fashioned around 1773-5, and *Orfeo*, around 1775-6 (commissioned by Falier),¹ helped to establish the young Canova's reputation as an artist while he still lived in Venice.² These early garden statues aimed to satisfy the "contemporary taste of the time," and were opportunities for Canova to move past his "clumsy passages of bland modeling" and define himself as an individualistic artist.³ Despite some criticisms, the statues evoke sympathy with their impassioned expressions and body language. Canova's artistic beginnings were the basis for his progressive evolution as a sculptor, and *Orfeo ed Euridice* was the foundation from which he began to make a name for himself. The statues are faithful to the traditional myth's fundamental points. However, Canova adds his own artistic elements that stray from the most well known versions by incorporating accessories such as a strut made of smoke and the presence of another figure in the form of a lone hand. These statues assert Canova's own interpretation of the myth, one that centers on "the desire to astonish with strongly expressed emotions."⁴ The sculptures' facial expressions vividly translate the agony of repeated heartbreak and announce the injustice of their punishment. The anguish of the particular moment that

¹ Fred Licht, *Canova*, ed. Nancy Grubb (n.p.: Abbeville, 1983), 274.

² Christopher M.S. Johns, *Antonio Canova and the Politics of Patronage in Revolutionary and Napoleonic Europe* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California, 1998), 15

³ Licht, *Canova*, 19

⁴ Licht, *Canova*, 19

Canova's sculptures capture and dramatize is not something that either Vergil or Ovid address in their versions of the myth.

Ovid's version of the Orpheus myth is the most well known. In *Metamorphoses* X, he narrates the beginning and ends of the unfortunate lovers, from their wedding and her early death, to Orpheus' search for Eurydice in the Underworld where he pleads to Hades and Persephone for his wife back. Notably, Ovid states that Orpheus turned back when they were "almost to the border / of the upper earth," not yet out of the darkness.⁵ Ovid illustrates the depth of Orpheus' love in the aftermath of the second tragedy, describing Orpheus' depressive and "unkempt, unshaven, and unfed" state as "with naught / but care and sorrow for his nourishment."⁶ Orpheus' physical and emotional response to this trauma underscore the intense devotion he felt towards Eurydice, so much so that the torment of having lost her for good ate away at him. Martin's translation of the passage in which Orpheus turns to look behind him is meaningful here: he asks, in a third-person view, "And [Eurydice] now, who must die a second death / did not find fault with [Orpheus], for what indeed / could he be faulted for, but his constancy?"⁷ Indeed, Orpheus *did* cause the second death of his wife, but as Martin also points out with his translation, Orpheus cannot be blamed: he looked back simply because he loved his wife so much that he had to see her. Eurydice understood that Orpheus' actions were motivated by his extreme love for her, since she did not blame him (according to Ovid), and there was nothing to be blamed for. She speaks, bidding him a single goodbye "one last time," because she, likewise, shares the pain in never

⁵ Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 10.74-5

⁶ Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 10.107-8

⁷ Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 10.84-5

being allowed to see her lover again⁸. Ovid and especially Martin's translation do an exceptional job of highlighting Orpheus' suffering after his second separation from Eurydice.

In Book IV of his *Georgics*, Vergil portrays the Orpheus and Eurydice myth in an equally emotional manner. However, Vergil's Eurydice has much more to say to Orpheus when he turns back. She reproaches him, crying out "what dreadful madness hath ruined my unhappy self and thee?"⁹ Eurydice blames Orpheus for his mistake as she emphasizes how she must go back to "the cruel Fates" and how they will never be together again, since she can "stretch out to [Orpheus'] strengthless hands. . .no more."¹⁰ Although Eurydice's words make it clear that she is angry with Orpheus' wrongdoing, they could also be said to imply that she still loves him -- she can never again reach out to his hands and be with him.¹¹ Despite Eurydice's criticisms of Orpheus, Vergil emphasizes Orpheus' devotion: "wildly rag[ing]", "sang of thee [...] of thee [...] of thee", and even in death, "the bare voice and death-cold tongue, with fleeting breath, called Eurydice," indicating his long-lasting love for her.¹² Unlike Ovid's, Vergil's Eurydice does not seem to share Orpheus' intense feelings of devotion.

Since the statues *Orfeo ed Euridice* were crafted in the 1770s, they are defined as Neoclassical works of art, even though Canova's conforming to a style of exaggerated body language also makes them Baroque.¹³ Neoclassicism viewed ancient Greco-Roman civilization as an ideal to "be emulated."¹⁴ Certainly, classical themes were used as the subjects of works of art, and *Orfeo ed Euridice* are prime examples. Canova drew on the myth of Orpheus and

⁸ Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 10.86

⁹ Vergil, *Georgics* 231

¹⁰ Vergil, *Georgics* 231

¹¹ Vergil, *Georgics* 231

¹² Vergil, *Georgics* 229-233

¹³ Satish Padiyar, *Chains* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1964), 125.

¹⁴ David G. Irwin, *Neoclassicism* (London: Phaidon, 1997), 5.

Eurydice as the focus of his pieces, and recalled the classical Greek style of human sculpture, which he had studied.¹⁵ Because he was still a young man at the time of the statues' creation, *Orfeo ed Euridice* are prime examples of the foundations of Canova's craftsmanship.¹⁶

Euridice was commissioned and created earlier than *Orfeo* by a couple of years. Thus, she was first meant to stand alone without a counterpart and therefore established herself as an independent sculpture. Eurydice existed on her own terms, and could tell her own narrative—being swept back into the Underworld—without needing something or someone else (Orpheus) to make sense of it. However, unlike *Euridice*, *Orfeo* could not exist by himself, because he is too reliant upon her for meaning. It would make no sense to represent the injustices of separated lovers, especially through Orpheus' mindset, by only having Orpheus without his Eurydice. Eurydice completes him, but he does not complete her.

Euridice has the Classical woman's body from Greek sculpture, yet her movements, which have "supple elegance and serpentine grace," are characteristic of late Baroque sculpture.¹⁷ The actions themselves could tell a story on their own. Eurydice is portrayed just as Orpheus turns back, as seen by the anguish in her expression and wistful tilt of her head, while a hand pulls her back towards the Underworld.¹⁸ Her face and neck lean to one side, giving off a beseeching look to Orpheus, or even to the heavens. Canova details the wrinkled furrow of Eurydice's brows; they tighten near the bridge of her nose and even creep into her forehead, emphasizing the agony she feels as she knows that she is forced to die another death. At one angle, with the viewer looking up from under her face, her eyes give off a sense of helplessness at her companion, knowing there is no stopping fate (fig. 2). Although the corneas and irises are not visible from

¹⁵ David Irwin, "Antonio Canova, marchese d'Ischia," Encyclopaedia Britannica, accessed March 24, 2016, <http://www.britannica.com/biography/Antonio-Canova-marchese-dIschia>.

¹⁶ Licht, *Canova*, 155.

¹⁷ Licht, *Canova*, 155.

this perspective, the emptiness of her gaze pierces, staring off in front of her—or upwards. No words come out of her mouth, but her lips are shaped in a manner that wishes to ask something, as if to ask for any sort of divine intervention to prevent her return to the Underworld. In both Ovid and Virgil's versions, she bids Orpheus "*vale*," farewell, and yet Canova did not sculpt her with her lips pursed; this must be the split second in which Orpheus looks back at her, before she has a chance to say goodbye and die again.

From the waist up, Eurydice's body leans back, while her legs and left hand are extended outward, as if struggling to complete the journey out of the Underworld. The upper half of her body is thrusting back into hell. However, the lower half seeks to rejoin the mortal world, as Eurydice's limbs are propelled forward, in contrast to backward motion suggested by the upper half of her body. Her left hand reaches out in a manner that not only helps add onto the imploring expression on her face and mouth, but also in an attempt to reach out to Orpheus, who could prevent her from rejoining the dead. Even though Eurydice's mouth seems to seek a mediation from above, her body language suggests that she knows that it is useless. Her arm feebly sticks out farther into space than the rest of her body, as does her right leg, and she does not make an effort to purposefully extend them farther ahead of her in a greater stride. Thus, no one, not even Orpheus, can reach out to her fruitless yearning and rescue her. Nor does she attempt to escape the clutches of the hand behind her by running, using the limp, bent leg; her body has already acknowledged her fate, but her visage continues to hold onto some kind of hope for a supernatural miracle.

With regard to the hand clenching Eurydice's right wrist, it is significant to note that in no version of the myth available has there been a mention of a figure physically drawing Eurydice back into the Underworld. This is one of Canova's own additions and it helps to his shape his

interpretation. Eurydice's right shoulder slinks back softly behind her, as the anonymous figure's hand anchors itself to her wrist. There are no muscles tensed in her arm to imply that she was showing resistance and fighting back against the force. Instead, it, too, limps feebly, as does her hand that hangs helplessly. However, the anonymous hand itself grips tightly -- the tendons in the hand bulge, and the divots of the knuckles swell. Clearly, the lone hand is clasping itself around Eurydice's wrist tightly, possibly to serve as extra security for her return. This use of force is obviously unnecessary, as Eurydice puts up no fight whatsoever, and the hand has been deemed as "realis[ti]c, though awkward."¹⁹ Eurydice's facial expression suggests she aches to return to the mortal world and is unhappy because she knows she must go back to the Underworld. She begs to ask how and why she must suffer again. Canova carefully underscores the emotional pain Eurydice must have been feeling by depicting her tense emotions and her limbs surrendering to Death.

Canova incorporated a series of curvilinear forms in Eurydice's statue, from her hair, to the mist of smoke, to the curvature of her figure itself, but they do not add much to the overall narrative. Licht interprets the ambiguous curls gathering around her waist and strut as flames, perhaps because flames are quintessential to a modern interpretation of hell. It makes more sense to see these sinuous accessories as smoke. Virgil states that Eurydice disappeared "like smoke mingling with thin air."²⁰ Neither Ovid nor Vergil mentions flames when Eurydice descends. Canova's inexperience as an artist may account for the ambiguity of the decorations, but Canova also does not stray too far from the original telling of the myth with his creative additions.

The clouds of smoke behind her rise, and the lone hand appears to drag her back down into the shadows. The base is somewhat awkwardly placed and carved, but was most likely a

¹⁹ Licht, *Canova*, 155.

²⁰ Vergil *Georgics* 231

necessary strut Canova needed to add to balance his figure. Licht feels that the strut detracts from the overall piece, and is “most indicative of Canova[‘s] experience” as a young artist.²¹ The smoke, which Licht interprets as flames, is “just as awkward” and “in unresolved contrast to the elegant torsion of the figure.”²² They are clunky additions, most likely having been established as a base for the hand to grab her back down into the Underworld. Despite Licht’s opinions on the inelegance of the column’s placement, the smoke searing up between her legs and towards her navel is an interesting feature of the sculpture. The curl of the smoke simultaneously hides and draws attention towards her genitals. Many versions of the myth imply that Eurydice dies before she and Orpheus can consummate their marriage. The smoke is very lewd, sneaking in between her thighs and invading the most feminine parts of her body. Another interpretation of the anguish on Eurydice’s face is that she is being defiled against her will, sexually, as the smoke violates and consumes her. When the statue of Orpheus is included, the smoke signifies more than just violating her. It is a double insult to Orpheus, who not only loses his wife once more, but watches her being taken not only by the anonymous figure bringing her back to the Underworld, but also by the carnal fumes that invade her. Furthermore, having been positioned and sculpted in such a manner, Canova’s *Euridice* is also sexually set up for the viewer, who has complete access to looking at her in all her vulnerability. Orpheus, on the other hand, only sees her for a fleeting moment. Canova further emphasizes the couple’s grieving separation in creating these statues, since the viewers are able to look at Eurydice as long as they would like, but Orpheus cannot.

Canova sculpted Orpheus in the climactic moment of turning back to look at his wife, and then realizing, in horror, the mistake of his actions (fig. 2). Orpheus’ body is partially twisted;

²¹ Licht, *Canova*, 157.

²² Licht, *Canova*, 157.

while his right leg strides forward out of the Underworld, the rest of him is angled backwards in an effort to gaze at his beloved. Orpheus' head turns back. He wears a laurel headband around his temples (fig. 2). Given its symbolism, Canova's inclusion of laurel is interesting and ironic. Laurels were symbols of "peace, eternity, victory, unrequited love, and the supreme ruler."²³ Its meaning also transmitted into death, "where the most important thing was the victory over it."²⁴ The laurel around Orpheus' head therefore mocks nearly all the virtues it is meant to symbolize. As Ovid explains, Orpheus is never at peace with having lost his wife a second time, so much so that he "had fled completely from the love of women [...] because the pledge that he had given / to his Eurydice was permanent."²⁵ Eurydice could be the only true lover for him. Although he does turn to men, his grief is still very much present.

Nor does Orpheus gain victory over Eurydice's death. His task was to lead her out from the Underworld into the mortal world, and yet he failed to do so by turning back to look at her and thereby causing her second demise. This twist of fate is ironic, since the laurel-adorned Orpheus should be victorious over death. And perhaps he is for himself, having then escaped the clutches of death that Eurydice could not avoid. Lastly, the laurel can also symbolize unrequited love.²⁶ Although both Ovid and Virgil make Orpheus' love distinctly clear, the fact that Eurydice is not physically with him to reciprocate his love arguably makes it unrequited

Although Orpheus turned around because his love for Eurydice was overwhelming, the literary versions suggest that his actions could also be due to his lack of self-control and trust in her. It is clear through his decision to venture into the Underworld that his love for Eurydice was resolute. However, in the myth, Orpheus also demonstrates that he lacks the self-control

²³ Dragana Rogic, Jelena Andelkovic Grasar, and Emilija Nikolic, "Wreath – Its Use and Meaning in Ancient Visual Culture," *Journal of the Center for Empirical Researches on Religion* 10, no. 18 (December 2012): 343.

²⁴ Rogic, Grasar, and Nikolic, "Wreath – Its Use and Meaning," 343.

²⁵ Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 10.113; 115-6

²⁶ Rogic, Grasar, and Nikolic, "Wreath – Its Use and Meaning," 343.

necessary to prevent himself from overcoming his urges to see her, Although it could be said that his lack of self-control is the result of his overwhelming love, the same point can apply to the opposite reading -- that his lack of self-control suggests that his love was not strong enough to bear his solitude even a little longer. Virgil describes the beginning of Orpheus' undoing: "a sudden frenzy seized Orpheus, unwary in his love," which causes him to look upon Eurydice.²⁷ Furthermore, his turning back also hints at a possible lack of trust in her. Ovid states that Orpheus, once he was at the border, was "afraid / that she would fail him", thus placing all the responsibility on Eurydice not following through on the journey outside, rather than himself when he looks back.²⁸ He believes that she will be her own downfall, and then is proven wrong when he realizes that it is he who succumbed to his urges of "want[ing] to embrace her, / or *be* embraced by her."²⁹ Indeed, Eurydice made no mistake, whereas Orpheus' lack of trust in her caused disaster.

Canova's interpretation does not follow either Virgil or Ovid's. In contrast to Eurydice's nakedness, Canova sculpts Orpheus wearing a sort of animal pelt around his groin that trails onto a tree trunk. The pelt trails over his thigh and grazes the top of a tree trunk, which Licht finds "seriously impinges on the silhouette of the figure and renders the composition [...] unclear and hesitant," an addition "most indicative of Canova's inexperience."³⁰ However, the installation of the tree trunk proves itself significant, since it demonstrates that Orpheus is already outside of the Underworld and back in the mortal world. Canova shaped rocks resembling the ground (fig. 1, 2), while Eurydice's base is devoid of those kinds of stone. In Ovid's narration, the couple

²⁷ Vergil *Georgics* 231

²⁸ Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 10.75

²⁹ Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 10.79-80

³⁰ Licht, *Canova*, 19.

stands inside the cave (“they had come almost to the border / of the upper earth”).³¹ In Virgil’s version, too, they only went up to “the very verge of light.”³² Despite the fact that Licht finds the trunk awkwardly placed, Canova’s inclusion of it and the rocks are important and demonstrates that he represented the myth with Orpheus unaware that Eurydice had to be in the mortal world with him as well when he looked at her. Orpheus was unfairly punished for the loss of his wife even though he made it out of the Underworld because he did not realize she had to be outside as well -- a cruel condition. While he still has his laurel and tree trunk (all once living, just like Eurydice), she, naked, with none of those things, is left for dead once more. For Canova, the cause of Eurydice’s death was simply that Orpheus misunderstood the guidelines set out by the Underworld.

Licht points out the “emphatic pathos” in both Orpheus and Eurydice’s emotionally striking expressions, which helps draw a poignant connection to the viewer.³³ At one angle, Orpheus’ fingers are slightly tightened and curled, partially woven into the curls of his hair, as if he were grasping at the roots during his flurry of shock (fig. 1). Looking closely, the viewers can even see small tufts peeking from between the corners of his fingers, as though Orpheus is running a hand through his hair in a fashion that emphasizes his contrition. Furthermore, from a frontal angle, the palm of Orpheus’ hand rests on his forehead (fig. 3). The additional pressure on his skin creates small folds on his forehead, along with those from his eyebrows, and physically emphasizes his maelstrom of emotions.

Additionally, Orpheus’ face screams more indicatively of his storm of emotions. His eyebrows are furrowed upwards dramatically; sharp crinkles are visible between the bridge of his nose and up towards his forehead and palm. They illustrate his acute awareness, that sudden

³¹ Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 10.74-5

³² Vergil *Georgics* 231

³³ Licht, *Canova*, 18.

moment in which he realizes that he has made a terrible mistake, and form his expression into a mixture of fear and bitter consciousness. Though his eyes are also difficult to see in detail, the ends sharply slope downwards and crease at the outer corners (fig. 3). This feature creates a look of expressive pain, and his eyes alone reveal so much about the turmoil of his emotions. The corners of Orpheus' mouth are also sloped downwards into an expression of anguish. His mouth hangs half-open, and he seems paralyzed in the moment: no words are coming out. Like the marble statue, an appropriate medium to use for this moment, Orpheus is frozen in place in the moment that brought his wife's second downfall. It does not seem like Orpheus tries to speak at all. Rather, it is simply a look of realization and shock. The creases from the ends of his nose also repeat the slanting downwards. Those kinds of grooves are only so prominent when the mouth is tilted into a frown. The shadow illustrates how caved-in the folds are, which reflects the degree of his torment. Canova truly portrays a lover's grief through Orpheus' face, and how Orpheus' overwhelming love for Eurydice destroyed her once again.

Meanwhile, Orpheus' left hand provides three different readings to convey his emotional state: one, held out in space, like he wants to stop the event from happening, another, reaching out for Eurydice's hand, and the last, as if waving her goodbye, depending on the viewer's perspective (fig. 1, 2). At one angle, Orpheus' hand is directly in front of the viewer and extended out from his body (fig. 2). Given that this is the moment Orpheus turns around and realizes what he has done, his hand is stretched out in a manner that suggests that he wants to prevent her departure from happening, or at least is a physical reflex once he sees the curls of smoke from the Underworld engulfing her. The hand expresses to the viewer the unconscious mistake he wants to take back.

The second reading, from the same angle, can be seen as Orpheus reaching for Eurydice (fig.

2). In this configuration, Orpheus' body twists and his arm stretches out into space, as if ready to grab onto something, like her own extended hand. But the fumes take her away just before Orpheus can fully turn around and clasp her hand, as he is stopped halfway before he can save her.

The final reading seems the most poignant and distressing (fig. 1). From this perspective, Eurydice looks like she is bidding Orpheus farewell, while he, fully aware of his consequences of looking back, lifts his left hand up weakly, as though waving goodbye. His lips are fixed in a position so that he is unable to form any words, and thus his only goodbye to her is indicated by the hand waving (fig. 1). Having already seen the smoke approaching her after his turning, Orpheus' feeble hand attempts to have one last chance to say his farewell.

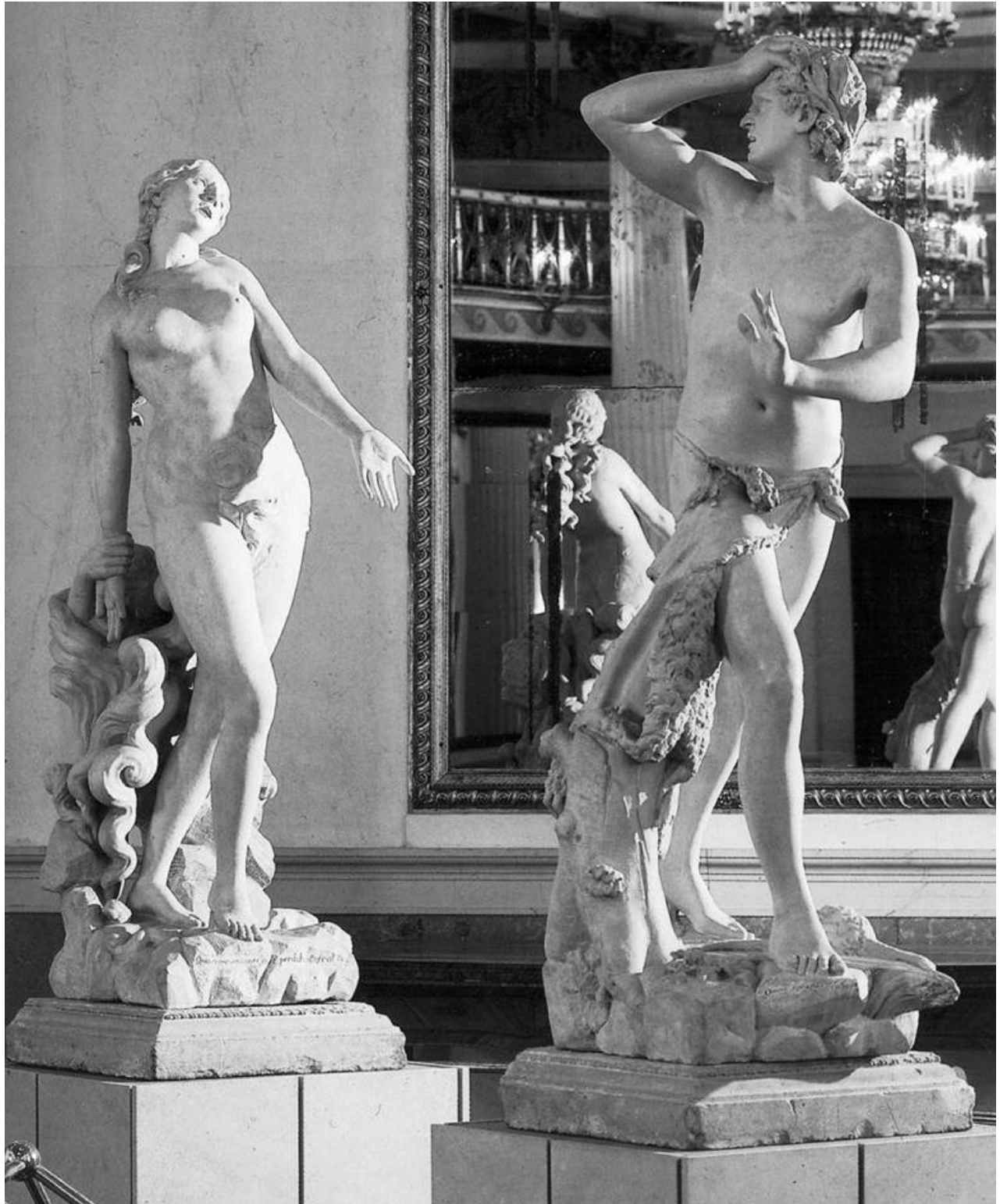
Orfeo ed Euridice are significant examples of Canova's early journey with art. Critics regard their composition together as "[un]satisfactory" and claim that it is "difficult to see the figures in conjunction."³⁴ It is unclear in what position they were originally meant to be placed, since positioning and viewing *Orfeo ed Eurydice* at any given angle can drastically alter one's interpretation of the work. Licht remarks on the ambiguous setup of the statues, pointing out that "the *Orpheus* in particular offers no single point of view that might provide a clue as to its proper installation," so the placements of the statues by the Museo Correr is also in accordance with the interpretation of the exhibit designers themselves.³⁵ Not knowing the intended positioning is a mixed blessing. It does not let the viewer observe the works together as Canova wanted them to be placed, but it allows the viewer herself to interpret the myth from the statues as she pleases. Each angle provide several viewpoints from which to understand Canova's work, the myth, and to highlight the unfairness of losing a loved one because of love for that person. Canova's artistic

³⁴ Licht, *Canova*, 157.

³⁵ Licht, *Canova*, 157.

retelling in *Orfeo ed Euridice* thoroughly epitomize, through Orpheus and Eurydice's expressions and body language at their second departure, that to keep loyal lovers like them away from each other is unjust. According to Canova, Orpheus' only flaw in looking back was that his love for Eurydice overwhelmed him. After all, what could Orpheus be blamed for, except that his love was resolute³⁶?

³⁶Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 10.84-5



**Fig 1: Antonio Canova, *Orfeo ed Euridice*, marble, 1773-6
Museo Correr, Venice**



Fig 2: Antonio Canova, *Orfeo ed Euridice*, marble, 1773-6

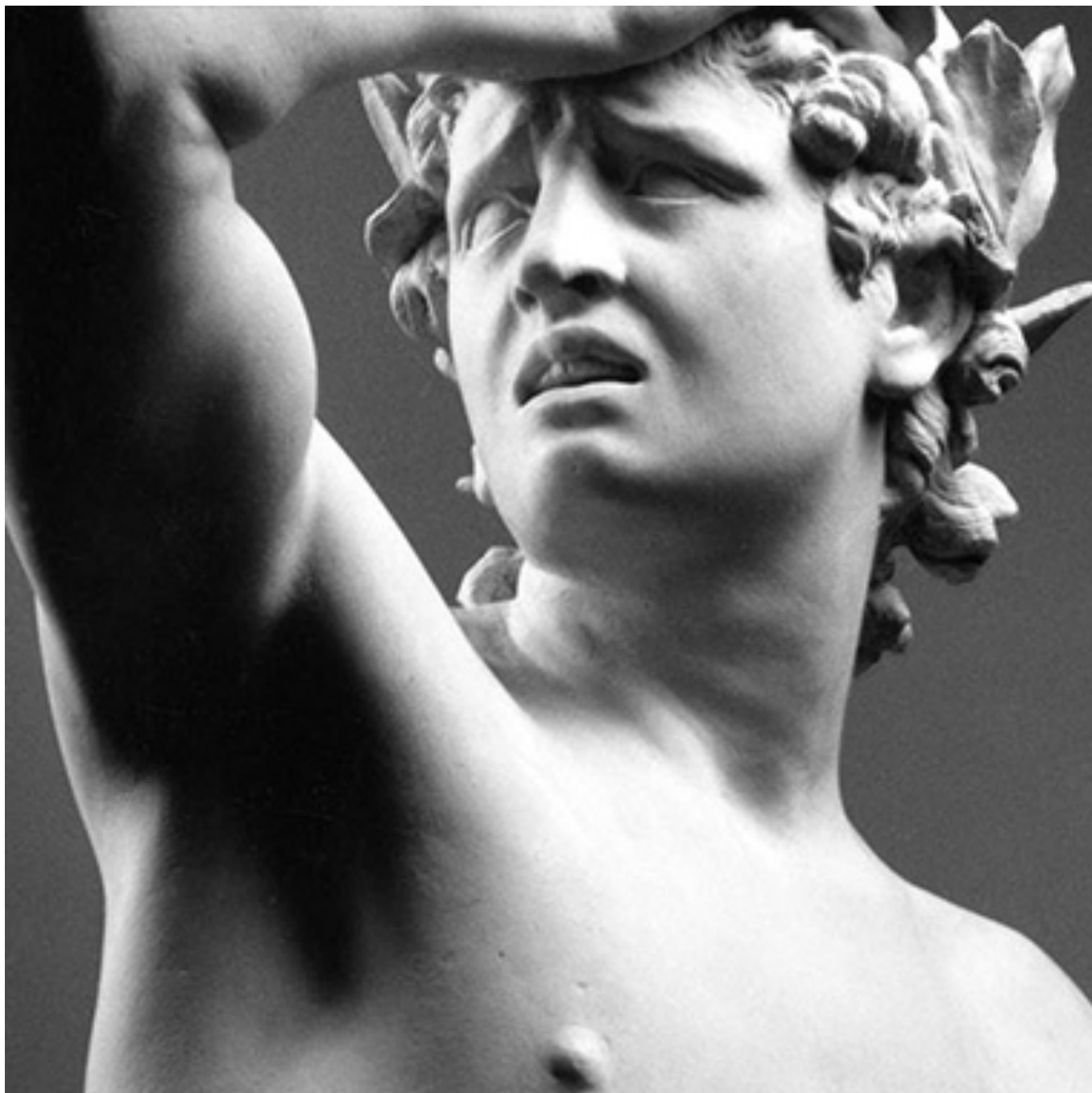


Fig 3: Antonio Canova, *Orfeo*, marble, 1775-6



**Fig 4: Antonio Canova, *Orfeo ed Euridice*, marble, 1773-6
Museo Correr, Venice**



**Fig 5: Antonio Canova, *Orfeo ed Euridice*, marble, 1773-6
Museo Correr, Venice**

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