

Relinquishing Grief: Orpheus, Eurydice, and Hermes in *Truly Madly Deeply*
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Anthony Minghella wrote and directed his first film, *Truly Madly Deeply*, as a commentary about grief and how people deal with it. Although he never says so and may not consciously have intended it, the film also works beautifully as a re-imagining of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. It explores the hermetic qualities of communication that enable a grieving person to pass through the underworld of loss and return once again to the daylight world of ongoing life and love.

Ovid tells this story as a tragedy. No sooner have Orpheus and Eurydice married than “the bride, just wed, met death” by snakebite (Ovid 325). Orpheus refuses to accept the loss of his love. As Monteverdi tells the story in his opera *Orfeo*, he cries, “Gone from me forever, and no more may I see you. Yet I remain here? No!” (Act 2). He dares to cross over into the land of the dead and, using the power of his song, begs Pluto and Proserpina to “lend” Eurydice to him for a normal lifetime, or let him die as well. The gods relent, but with a condition: he must not turn to look at Eurydice as she follows him until they are out in the sunlight once again. Orpheus agrees, but in his desire for her cannot keep his promise:

They’d almost reached the upper world, when he,
afraid that she might disappear again
and longing so to see her, turned to gaze
back at his wife. At once she slipped away—
and down. (Ovid 327)

Monteverdi says “Orfeo first conquered Hades, then was defeated by his unruly passion” (Act 4). He loses Eurydice through his inability to control himself. Orpheus’s grief and anger at this second loss is overwhelming. He huddles down along the banks of the River Styx, the border of Hades, and refuses food. Instead he nourishes himself with “desperation, pain, and tears”

(Ovid 328). Eventually he returns to the world above, but now his anger is turned outward at women. He refuses to let his heart love any other but Eurydice and repulses the advances of the many women who would love him.

Ovid links this unrelenting refusal to let go of a dead love to the case of Myrrha, who will not relinquish her incestuous love for her father (Ovid 338-346). Even after she succeeds in seducing her father, Myrrha finds no peace. Like Orpheus, she cannot truly *live* because she cannot give what Life requires as sacrifice and let her impossible love die. She begs the gods to “banish me from both these realms; transform me, and deny both life and death to me” (Ovid 346). She rejects even the peace of death and chooses to remain in limbo as the myrrh tree, forever weeping tears of grief.

Orpheus ultimately is reunited with Eurydice through death, but his death is a judgment and punishment for his refusal to accept what life requires of him. He becomes the sacrifice he would not make when he is torn to pieces by the women he has rejected. As they attack him, “for the first time [he] spoke words without effect; for the first time his voice did not enchant” (Ovid 360). His gift in life was to charm others through song; when he rejects life, his gift fails him.

Nina (Juliet Stevenson), the lead character of *Truly Madly Deeply*, also cannot let go of her dead love Jamie (Alan Rickman). She turns away from the living and huddles in her flat, holding Jamie’s cello and her memories of him close to her, refusing the love others offer her. Ultimately, her unrelenting pain pulls Jamie back to her—but Jamie is a ghost and cannot come all the way into the world of the living. Instead, Nina’s flat becomes a limbo where the dead can enter, and other ghosts begin to take it over. Nina eventually realizes that she does not want to stay in limbo, that she wants life, her own life, even at the cost of losing Jamie forever.

Scene 1 of the film begins with a close-up shot of a sign for the London “Tube,” the trains that run in tunnels under the city. The sign says, simply, “Underground.” Minghella is giving notice that this film is about a *nekyia*, a visit to the underworld. Evans Lansing Smith tells

us that the past is an underworld “to which one may never return again once its doors are closed” (152). But then we see Nina walking up the stairs. She has not yet closed that door; she still visits her past. Yet as Minghella, in his commentary on his movie, notes, “the past is already fictional the moment it passes.” As we will see, the past Nina clings to is idealized, unreal, a fantasy. Robert Romanyshyn tells us that “the past has its value only in relation to a future” (25). Nina’s dreams of Jamie have no future, no connection to reality. She is “locked and paralyzed in her own history,” says Minghella. She is in limbo.

Her boss and friend Sandy (Bill Forsythe) tries to get her to engage with life again, gently, by inviting her to go out for a drink with her work colleagues (scene 2). When she refuses even this small gesture, he observes that “you’ve disappeared, gone to ground.” Such intense longing for the past “undermines our ties to family and friends,” warns Thomas Attig (25), and so it is with Nina. She walks among the living but does not care for them. She stares up at the sky as if the sun and clouds overhead make no sense. In her grief she has become a living ghost, “a shade haunting the outer margins of the world” (Romanyshyn 32). She is already partly underground.

Clinging to one’s grief in this way was feared by the Iroquois, who saw it as a manifestation of the “cult of death” (Bierhorst 110). They knew that intense grief can lead to depression, which separates the individual from the community, and even cause a person to commit suicide, in which case they are permanently lost to the community. The Iroquois Ritual of Condolence was performed to help grieving individuals move through their grief and reconnect to the community. But no such ritual exists for Nina in present-day London.

And because Nina is in limbo, Jamie is too. Normal grief shifts in time to sadness and then to acceptance, and eventual re-engagement with life. The dead loved one becomes only memory, and their soul is free to move on. But when someone clings too hard to the idea of the lost loved one, it “injures the dead, holding them in a kind of nowhere, a limbo space where they

are no longer alive but also not truly dead. The dead need to continue their journey, and they need our help to do so. Grieving is not only for us, it is for them,” says Romanyshyn (19). To let go of grief frees the soul of the loved one to its destiny as it frees us to ours.

More than that, such letting go makes possible a new form of love for the lost one. C.S. Lewis, who lost a much-loved wife, eventually learned that “passionate grief does not link us with the dead but cuts us off from them” (Attig 9). Attig, who also lost a beloved wife and found it very difficult to move on, eventually came to see that what we really have to let go of is not our love for the lost one, but “the intensity of our longing” for them (12). It is our longing for what we can no longer have that destroys our connection to life. Once we reconnect to life, we can begin to remember a lost love in a way that honors their spirit and keeps them with us in a new way, a realistic way that acknowledges death as part of life.

Like Orpheus, Nina is not ready or willing to do this. In a visit to her counselor she breaks down, screams out her anger at Jamie for leaving her, and then sobs “but I miss him, I miss him, I miss him, *I miss him, I miss him!*” in a crescendo of pain (scene 3). She can only focus on how much she wants him back in her life and how empty her life is without him. All this accomplishes, warns Attig, is to “court extreme heartache and danger.” To want the impossible—the return of the loved one from death—brings only pain and anguish, because in the face of death we are helpless (Attig 24).

But also like Orpheus, Nina has the gift of music, and this gift opens a way for her into the land of the shades where Jamie can meet her. Over and over, she sits at her grand piano and plays the piano part of Bach’s Sonata No. 3 for cello and piano while she hums or imagines that she hears the cello part being played by Jamie. In her idealized memory, Jamie’s cello has become him. She never puts it in its case, but keeps it close to her and holds it as tenderly in her arms as one would hold a loved one. She flies into a rage when her sister asks if Nina’s nephew, an aspiring cellist himself, can have it, crying “It’s like asking me for his body!” (scene 4).

One day as she plays the sonata once again, she seems to hear the cello part. She thinks it is her imagination, but then the camera tracks slightly left and we see that it is indeed Jamie himself playing the cello (scene 5). Once the shock and joy of his return are past, Nina wants to know, as do we, how Jamie can be there. He is vague. “I don’t know, maybe I didn’t die properly, so I can come back,” he says. Then he tells her that he came back because he couldn’t bear her pain anymore (scene 6). Her grief and longing were so intense, he *had* to return to help her. But Minghella comments that we must beware of wanting something so badly that we get it. For it is after Jamie returns that Nina’s problems really begin.

Nina has carried an idealized picture of Jamie in her head, just as she keeps a beautiful photograph of Jamie playing the cello above her piano. The real Jamie, even in ghost form, is not so ideal. He’s critical of her flat and her decorations and her housekeeping. He’s also cold all the time—as the dead are cold—so he turns the heat in the flat up to blood warmth and piles every blanket in the place on the bed until Nina is sweating and miserable. And then Jamie starts inviting “friends” into her flat to watch videos with him, until the place is so full of dead men she can hardly pick her way across the floor (scenes 8 and 11).

Nina has not really called Jamie back to her; instead, like Orpheus, she has gone after him, descended into Hades. Nina’s longing and music have opened the door to Hell, and it’s now in her living room. As a modern Westerner would expect of Hell, it’s unbearably hot and unpleasant and teeming with dead souls.

In some versions of the Orpheus myth, it is Hermes who leads Orpheus back out of Hades. And sure enough, Nina now encounters Hermes in the form of Mark (Michael Maloney), a young and attractive man. Nina and a friend have gone to a café where they have an unpleasant encounter with the café owner. Mark is also there and astonishes everyone when he performs a magic trick, effectively stopping the argument (scene 9). Like Hermes, Mark uses “the power of humor and ridicule in the face of harsh authority [to outwit] a powerful opponent” (Paris 61).

Nina has to laugh; she is also grateful to him. They run into each other again when Mark escorts a group of young adults with Down syndrome off a bus Nina is about to get on. His charges struggle with speech, but like Hermes, Mark understands their words no matter how garbled they may sound to others (Paris 63). We also see another quality of Hermes as Mark shepherds his group through the dangers of the London streets, that of Hermes Psychopompos, the soul guide, a quality Nina desperately needs. For Hermes is also the god of displaced persons (Paris 70). People with disabilities are often displaced from mainstream life; so are those who are lost in grief. They need Hermes' help to get where they belong.

At this encounter Nina agrees to go on a date with Mark. But she isn't quite ready for such a step and manages to be so late for their date that they only have time for a short walk together. However, this is more than enough time for clever Hermes to go to work. Mark insists that instead of walking, they shall hop on one foot while telling each other their life stories in as few words as possible (scene 13). Hermes, says Ginette Paris, "never tires of inventing nuances of voice, tone, or gestures" (63). Nina is charmed by this novel way of relating. She is further charmed by Mark's description of how he uses art to help his Down syndrome students tell stories, which echoes Carl Jung's comment that hermetic actions involve the qualities of "art and spirit in making one's way in life" (Paris 69). Mark, like Hermes, knows how to be inventive and playful with the goal of helping people to tell their stories (Paris 89).

Mark's hermetic tricks open the first chinks in the wall Nina has built between herself and life. Romanyshyn recounts how the same thing happened to him: "small moments of new life occasionally broke through. [...] In these brief moments I saw the things of the world as if for the first time" (43). Mark helps Nina begin to see the world again.

But her longing for Jamie is still strong. Their short date ends when she sees a cellist playing on a street corner. She thinks it is Jamie, turns away from Mark, and rushes home—

where she finds that Jamie has allowed the dead men to take over her bedroom as well. Instead of a loving reunion, they have a fight (scene 14).

In Ovid's version of the Orpheus story, we never hear Eurydice's point of view. We know how much he loved her, but did she love him? Did she even *want* to be retrieved from Hades? Ovid tells us that all she says when Orpheus turns back to look at her is "farewell" (327), which could be taken as a goodbye or as a blessing. She does not reproach him nor give any sign of regret. Jamie too does not seem to mind being dead. We find out that he has made many friends on the other side; he takes Spanish lessons, he plays music, and he even attends political meetings. His unlife apparently suits him just fine. He has only come back because Nina wanted him to—or so it seems.

In fact he has come back with an agenda. Minghella says that he has returned to teach Nina that "what she thought this relationship brought her was just one element of the truth of it." Jamie may have been fun at times, he may have shared her love of music and her political views, but he was also critical and selfish and thoughtless, and he now makes this clear to her as often as possible. "His job," says Minghella, "is to explain to her that she doesn't need him, that she would have grown out of him" in time. He has come back to allow her to become unstuck and grow away from him as she would have if he had lived. But he can't just *say* this to her; that communication would not be heard. He has to help her realize this truth for herself.

And to do this, he must force her to turn and look at him, really *look* at him. This is what Orpheus never got the chance for, one long, good look at Eurydice. One cannot hold onto an idealized view of another person once one has seen them as they really are. Orpheus never saw Eurydice for herself. He loved an idealized projection, as Nina has loved an idealized projection of Jamie. That is the true tragedy of Orpheus: he never experienced what love truly means. Had he even once seen Eurydice as a real person and found the bittersweet reality of love, he might have been able to love another after she died.

Jamie has almost done all he can to prepare Nina to want to return to life. Mark stands ready to guide her when she is ready. Now Life itself takes a hand. Nina receives a phone call in the middle of the night from one of her Spanish-speaking clients and rushes off to the hospital to help translate as the woman gives birth. In the dawn of a new day, she holds the newborn baby girl in her arms and croons “*que linda, que linda*” (“how beautiful”) (scene 14).

Romanyshyn suggests that “when we praise the world, we release those things that we praise into their larger domain, and with their release we win our own” (109). Nina can at last praise the beauty of a new life, not just the baby’s but the possibility of a new life for herself. Her underground journey has been necessary for her to come to this new appreciation of life. As Rilke says in one of his *Sonnets to Orpheus*:

Only one who has lifted the lyre
Among shadows too,
May divining render
The infinite praise (33).

Similarly, Smith says that Orpheus returns from Hades with “that informing awareness of the eidola of the depths that shadows all living things with the promise—and the threat—of meaning” (41). Nina’s understanding of death and therefore of life has been deepened by her nekylia. As Smith puts it, “Orpheus must cease questioning death, accept his mortality and frustrated desire [. . .] in order to be renewed” (511). Nina is nearly at this point.

She returns home, exhausted and thoughtful, only to find that her flat contains even more dead men than before. Not only that, but they have moved all her furniture and taken up a carpet that she loved. It is too much. “Every time I come home, I feel like I’ve been *burgled!*” Nina yells, and orders them all to leave. After they shuffle away, Jamie rebukes her, but she turns on him, blaming him for the fact that her own home is no longer her home, her sanctuary, but some kind of public place where strangers seem to feel free to do what they want. She sees the consequences of opening the door to Hades.

She is starting to see Jamie for himself at last, as well. “Were we like this?” she asks him after she calms down. She asks him to tell her about their first days together, and he does, but when he is finished, she looks at him and says only “you see, I held this baby . . . It’s *life*, it’s a life I want” (scene 15). Jamie senses that the time has come. He asks, “How’s your Spanish?”—a little joke—and asks her to translate a poem he has been learning. The poem is “La Muerta” (The Dead Woman) by Pablo Neruda. Jamie recites it in Spanish and Nina translates it aloud:

. . . forgive me.
If you are not living,
if you, beloved, my love,
if you have died.
All the leaves will fall on my breast,
it will rain on my soul night and day.
My feet will want to march to where you sleep,
but I shall go on living.

Through his recitation of this poem, Jamie lets Nina know that he understands her feelings, but that if their positions were reversed, he would have let her go and got on with life. He uses the poem to give her permission to do the same. After Nina leaves the flat once more, the other ghosts come quietly back. One says to Jamie, “Well?” and Jamie replies, “Yes, I think so.” He thinks he’s finally freed Nina and thus himself.

Nina spends the day walking around London and thinking. Finally, she calls Mark. When he comes to pick her up, she starts to get in his car, and then stops and tears up. Hermes usually does not mind mixed messages (Paris 64), but this time he will have none of it as he intends to seduce Nina. Seductiveness is another mercurial attribute (Paris 75). More than that, Hermes—who possesses *metis*, intuition, among his other qualities (Paris 85)—usually knows what people really need, and he senses that what Nina needs most right now is a good fuck. For he is also a healer, and the caduceus of Hermes is also a phallus, says Paris (96). To seduce Nina, Mark uses a form of communication that most women cannot resist: he makes himself vulnerable as he tells her that he needs to know whether or not she’s free to go with him, “because honestly, I’m in

trouble here.” Nina is charmed once more, and replies “I think I am free.” She responds to Mark’s vulnerability and openness by being open herself. She confesses to Mark that she loved someone “very much. But he died. He died” (scene 16). At last she can admit to herself that Jamie is dead and she is not and that she wants what Mark is offering: a new love. She is free to go with Hermes now and let him guide her out of Hades.

When someone has become mired in grief, mercurial communication may be exactly what is needed to seduce and guide them away from the doorstep of death, out of the Hades of their depression. A sympathetic ear like the one Nina’s counselor offers, or well-meaning advice like her boss gives her, may only reinforce the person’s sense of being displaced, out of step, not part of the world any more. Instead, Hermes suggests we try tricks and charms that evoke a laugh one moment and touch the heart in the next. Such an approach can help a person remember that they are alive and that life is worth living after all. In the Iroquois Ritual of Condolence, the grieving person is urged to open their eyes and look at the natural world around them; to listen to the sounds of the children; to eat; and finally, to celebrate the ongoing cycle of death and rebirth by getting up and dancing (Bierhorst 168). When Mark gets Nina to hop on one foot along the Thames Embankment, he is encouraging her to dance in the world again.

In the very last scene of the movie (scene 16), Nina cleans up her flat, reclaiming it as a place of life, no longer a Hades where the dead are welcome. She carefully puts Jamie’s cello back into its case and shuts and locks it, burying his body at last. As she closes the door behind her, the ghosts reappear at the window. They watch as Nina greets Mark at the front gate. Jamie smiles and wipes away a tear as Nina kisses Mark and, without looking back, takes his hand and walks away with him from Hades into life.

Minghella shows us in this movie just how dangerous unchecked grief can be. It can lead us to separate so completely from life that we enter the land of the dead while still alive, just as Orpheus went into Hades after his lost Eurydice. It can also lead us to idealize the lost person as

perfect, instead of remembering them as they truly were, flawed and complex. But just as Mark woos Nina back out her personal Hades, so too can we help a person who is lost in grief. We can do this not by feeling sorry for them or encouraging them by sympathetic listening, but rather by using tricks and stratagems—as well as honest statements of our own need for them—to charm them out of their sorrow and engage them once again in the beauty and wonder of life.

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