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Nicholas Reynolds
(Eugene, OR/U.S.A.)

A Vessel to Navigate a Terrifying World Rilke's «Stunden-Buch»

Abstract

This essay is a reading of Rainer Maria Rilke's *Stunden-Buch*, particularly the first book, «Das Buch vom mönchischem Leben» from 1905. Throughout the essay, I develop the question of what prayer means in this cycle of poems, and the relationship of prayer to poetry in general. I argue that Rilke surpasses the usual limitations of language, using poetic techniques that instead of merely indicating objects in the world, have the ability to speak things into being. Furthermore, I argue that Rilke uses language as a protective layer that allows one to transform oneself and face a world that is increasingly hostile to poetic sensibility.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to explore the meaning of Rainer Maria Rilke's *Stunden-Buch*, particularly its first section, «*Vom mönchischen Leben*». The topography of Rilke's cycle of poems is quite varied, but prayer, its significance, and its transformative ability are particularly prominent. I will forge a connection here, following Rilke's lead, between the ego and language, wherein the ego, as well as the senses are transformed through poetic language in such a way as to create a permeable barrier that allows for exposure to the Real¹ but simultaneously shields one from it. This movement is parallel to the «safe reserve» that is always present in the Sublime, by which I mean that one does expose oneself to raw nature, but always has some distance to keep one safe: Caspar David Friedrich's monk is on the shore, not out in the sea; the wanderer stands safely above the sea of fog. As David Farrell Krell writes in *Contagion*, «Ahab waxes eloquent on the

¹ I have Lacan in mind here, but this term is difficult because his usage of the «Real» varied over the course of his lifetime. With this term, I would like to suggest the realm that is beyond language, as well as our conceptions and fantasies, which, as I will explain in this paper, are all necessary shielding. I will say preliminarily that Poetry is this shield.

planks of the *Pequod* but has less to say once the whirring line has bound him to the sounding white whale» (Krell 8). If we need a ship to sail the seas, poetic language is the refit that we need in order to benefit properly from that voyage.

As Aris Fioretos indicates in «Prayer and Ignorance in Rilke's "Buch vom mönchischen Leben"»,

the book is written as a *horologium*. It explores the stylistic manner of that liturgy booklet or office-book of the Orthodox church, which corresponds to the Latin breviary containing prayers for every hour of the day and night, so-called troparies for variable anniversaries, antiphones and hymns, and so forth (Fioretos 171).

What this suggests is that the poems emphasize that there is a proper place and time for the kind of contemplative thought that is present in the *Stunden-Buch*. It will become clear what type of thought I mean as the paper unfolds. To begin with, I ask the reader to follow a couple of associations: 1) The English word contemplate contains the root *templum*, the temple, which is an «open space for observation (by augers)» (Skeat 109). One theory for the history of the word «augur» is that it is related to *avis* (bird) because holy men interpreted various aspects and behaviors of birds as omens² (Skeat 31). 2) One might also associate this with the Raga, a type of song in Indian classical music that requires the performer to play a specific type of Raga for each time of day. The horologium, the etymological origin of the word «temple», and the Raga all indicate a consensus that contemplative thought requires a special time and place.

In the middle ages, the church and the nature of prayer was far more musical than one might think, because church services today tend to be sermon-centered. I mention this because of the musical quality of lyric poetry in general, and of this set of poems specifically, which focuses on the «intrinsic qualities of language» (Fioretos 171). It might help to understand what intrinsic means if we think about a poem like the thirteenth of the *Sonette an Orpheus*, which begins with the words «*Voller Apfel, Birne und Banane*» (Rilke 495). Through «rhyme, rhythm, assonance, and alliteration» (Fioretos 171) it becomes apparent that Rilke's work is not so much about a limitation of language, although it does consider this limit, but rather about the surprising ability of language to surpass its own boundaries. John

² This is seen throughout *The Iliad*, for example in Book I, Kalchas is named as the «best of the bird interpreters» (Homer 77).

Llewelyn writes about this poem in *The Middle Voice of Ecological Conscience* and connects it to the sixth sonnet of the same part:

Some of these and other passages may well be saying poetically something like what Bergson and many other philosophers have said (tautologically, if by “to name” is meant to apply a common noun) about the powerlessness of words to name unconceptualized quality. Though even Bergson allows they have the power to suggest. The second of the cited passages [Llewelyn quotes from thirteenth sonnet] may be read however as not about the shortcomings of words before the experience of taste, but about the way the words in the mouth have the taste and texture of the fruits they name (Llewelyn 161).

As one speaks the poem, the flavors of the fruits are spoken into the mouth by the way that the words make certain use of the tongue, lips and teeth. I use this example as a first step toward approaching the problematic that I want to face here for the following reason: although it is surprising, we can grasp the idea of the rhythms of the spoken words creating something like a flavor of fruit in the mouth. *But what is it that is spoken into the mouth and simultaneously into the world if the poem is not about fruit, but is a prayer?* What is brought into the world then? This will be the main question that I consider here.

* * *

The connection between prayer and poetry is not a new one, of course. *The Iliad*, which I cited in a footnote above, is an example; Novalis and Hölderlin's hymns are closer in time to Rilke's work. For us, Derek Walcott's poetry offers a contemporary example, as he himself confirms in an interview in the *Paris Review*:

I have never separated the writing of poetry from prayer. I have grown up believing it is a vocation, a religious vocation [...] This continues in the poet. It may be repressed in some way, but I think we continue in all our lives to have that sense of melting, of the «I» not being important. That is the ecstasy (Walcott, *The Paris Review*).

Walcott is talking about chapter 7 of *Another Life* in which the persona dissolves «into a trance» (Walcott, *Another Life* 42). In his characterization of poetry as a vocation, there is of course the etymological connection to «calling». He refers also to an elimination or perhaps sublation of a boundary between self and world, as well as an experience of gratitude that is not directed toward a human being but to some other force. In the text itself³,

³ I was seized by a pity more profound / than my young body could bear, I climbed /

he writes of a compulsion to kneel, as if directed from an external source, with one's will held in abeyance by that force.

To return to Rilke, Fioretos locates three «thematic dominants» that are at the core of Rilke's early writings and of his notion of prayer: time, the hands, and listening. He notes that the *Buch vom mönchischen Leben* has been called a spiritual diary, which centers around the gesture, especially that of placing the hands together in prayer. This gesture shows Rilke's interest in «motion and physicality, of bodily movements and of that which does not inherently possess verbal language» (Fioretos 171). «Hands», he writes further, «play the decisive role in this attempt at a poetic figuration capable of articulating “physical will”» (ibid). The edge that Rilke plays with here is that of silence and sonority, which are both necessary in our attempt to say anything. Fioretos expresses a similar view to the one that I have just cited from John Llewelyn in writing that this cycle of poems has an ability to «perform what it at the same time thematically asserts» (ibid). But the question here is, what is it that is being performed? What is one enacting through prayer? Is this cycle of poems successful in giving us an answer to this question through performing what is being thematically asserted? What is it that is being «asserted», and what is the nature of that assertion?

It is, in any case, an expression of Rilke's «preoccupation with an entity beyond human grasp» (Fioretos 172). But there is some disagreement on the success of these poems in their performative aspects. Fioretos writes,

Rhyme, rhythm, assonance, and alliteration demonstrate the authority with which his diction stabilizes a level of acoustic refinement that has few counterparts in German letters, *pave virtuos* such as August Stramm and Wilhelm Lehmann. *Das Stunden-Buch* marks the final stage of the young poet's arduous development. What follows is a rhetorically more complex patterned writing – with Cratylid attempts at semanticizing sonority – that is not, however, capable of increasing an acoustic sophistication that is already *fait accompli* (Fioretos 171).

These statements acknowledge that the poems belong to an earlier stage in the poet's development, but also make the strong and far-reaching statement that the work is all but incomparable in the world of German letters. It acknowledges Rilke's virtuosity when it comes to acoustical patterning of words.

with the labouring smoke, / I drowned in laboring breakers of bright cloud, / then uncontrollably I began to weep, / inwardly, without tears, with a serene extinction / of all sense; I felt compelled to kneel, / I wept for nothing and for everything, / I wept for the earth of the hill under my knees, / for the grass, the pebbles, for the cooking smoke ... (ibid).

David Kleinbard is hardly as enthusiastic in «Learning to See», a chapter in *The Beginning of Terror*:

[Rilke] had already written early versions of «The Book of the Monastic Life» and «The Book of Pilgrimage», two sections of *Das Stunden-Buch* (The Book of Hours), which many readers have considered his first work of enduring genius, although these poems do not move decisively beyond the excessive subjectivity, facile rhymes, and callow thinking of his early volumes (Kleinbard 23-24).

The last sentence contains a rather harsh indictment about the quality of work in *Das Stunden-Buch* and aligns itself with much commentary that refers to most anything written by Rilke before 1900 as «juvenilia». There is something juvenile about this claim, however, and it demonstrates a kind of sadism and Calvinism that secretly delights in the poet's suffering in Paris, which ultimately produced *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge* and created a general change in the current of his work.

While it cannot be denied that there is a major change in the tenor and trajectory of Rilke's ideas after this excessive exposure in Paris⁴, it is immature to assume that there is nothing of interest in his earlier works. Moreover, this view is one that reads back into history and makes unreasonable demands of its figures, expecting conventions that took two world wars and their aftermath in order to arise. It views suffering not as something inevitable, but something almost desirable, which is, frankly, a heinous way of thinking. It also is an indication that the author is not quite at home in reading the poetry in German, where whatever «callow» thinking, if there is indeed any present, is overcome through the very way in which the words roll off the tongue. Otherwise someone like Paul de Man would not write the following about «Das Buch vom mönchischen Leben»: «[It] asserts the possibility of overcoming death itself by means of euphony, and it fulfills this prophecy in its own texture» (cit. Fioretos 172).

Die Geschichten vom lieben Gott (1900), for example, could easily be overlooked because of the outward appearance of being simple children's tales. But the second or third reading reveals many hidden layers that are disclosed in a similar fashion to how St. Augustine describes his second encounter with the Bible⁵. On his first reading he found it dull and simplistic

⁴ In this novel, we see Malte come into a new understanding of the world, but he is simultaneously ravaged by anxiety and horrendous visions.

⁵ In Rilke's essay on Maurice Maeterlinck (1902), he writes of Maeterlinck's work: «Ich glaube, daß diese Bücher jedem offenstehen, der mit gutem Willen und mit einer gewissen ehrfürchtigen Aufmerksamkeit an sie herantritt, und wer gewohnt ist, in der Bibel zu lesen,

by comparison with texts like those of Cicero, but found later that the mysteries presented there gave him great difficulty (Augustine 40). There is one further aspect that is missed in this reading, because it does not take into account the performative and musical aspects of this cycle of poems⁶. This type of reading is logocentric in the sense that it requires everything to be able to be reduced to the rational-linguistic order if it is to be able to «hold the floor» and be considered a legitimate «argument». While the poems of *Das Stunden-Buch* make an argument of sorts, it is not anywhere close to the kind of argument that could take the floor and hold it because of its dominance. The voice here is far quieter and subtle and would be silenced in such an environment.

Moreover, it is historically contingent that such demands even exist. While it is taken to be a liberal method that we all read a text and are able to develop our own opinion about it and argue for that interpretation's validity, this is in fact an English imperial model⁷, which is itself part of imperial domination, and that operates in strong contrast to native and oral-based models and traditions, which tended to be based on memorization. The *Yoga Sutras of Patañjali*, written in Sanskrit, are passed down to people who do not speak or read Sanskrit by first repeating the verses and memorizing the sounds⁸. The «meaning» of the text is only given much later on. It must first be embodied and the sounds and vibrations themselves must take up residence in the person chanting them because the meaning lies there as much as it does in the philosophy contained in the text⁹. It will be useful to think also of the meaning of «Mantra» as I develop this reading of *Das Stunden-Buch*, because of the protective, shielding nature of the poem, an aspect which I will discuss further below.

Fioretos mentions two aspects of temporality that are of decisive significance for this cycle of poems. The nature of prayer, as I have mentioned,

der wird die richtige Art, sich mit diesen Büchern zu beschäftigen, leicht herausfinden» (Rilke 10, 528-9).

⁶ Although the psychological readings in Kleinbard's book are compelling, one is always haunted by the feeling that one is not actually reading the text.

⁷ James Hevia explores a similar line of thought in *English Lessons: The Pedagogy of Imperialism in Nineteenth-Century China*. Great Britain's pedagogical techniques were a form of imperialism in and of themselves, used to create defeated subjects.

⁸ From a conversation with Dr. M. A. Jayashree, a Sanskrit professor and Head of the Department of Sanskrit at D. Banumaiah's college in Mysore, Karnataka.

⁹ This is similar to medieval chanting in the Christian church at time periods when people were less literate and Latin was losing its foothold. People chanted without knowing the meaning of the Latin text, which gave the practice a distinctly embodied character.

is the question that is aroused by the poems themselves. Fioretos locates prayer within a «fairly determinable temporality: the Now of continuous presence» (Fioretos 172). But prayer is also characterized by its expression of a hope and a wish (ibid.) and therefore appeals also to a «delayed future» (ibid.). It is interesting that Fioretos should say that this is determinate, because it seems that the only temporality that prayer does not invoke is that of the past. The Now would indicate a state of Being, while the continuous presence would denote a becoming, and the delayed future is of course, the future. But there is another temporality present in the text: «a prolonged poetic presence» in its use of the vocative *Du*, which is «continuously renewed, recreated, and redefined» (ibid.). This Thou, writes Fioretos, is «permanently evasive», which «grants the text an infinitely extended presence» (ibid.).

This leads Fioretos to an observation of the dedication of the text, which is to Lou-Andreas-Salomé. Specifically, the dedication reads: «*Gelegt in die Hände von Lou*» (Rilke 6). Fioretos takes this to mean that the Thou that is evoked throughout the poems is Salomé, and the hands of the dedication are the hands «of someone who will pray» (Fioretos 172). While this is possible and likely, there is another possibility: that the prayers are *to* her. Rilke is prostrated before a demigoddess in his relation to Salomé, as the only one who was capable of completing his cosmology. The «Du» of the poems, as Fioretos mentions, is constantly undergoing renewal and transformation and this is true also of the order of his «mythology». Different figures occupy the highest position in his schema at different times and God is less at the center or top of this model, and is more an expression of a dynamic unity of all the parts of the schema. This is a unity that is often yet-to-be in his works and this work is no exception, which results in the lamenting character of much of his work.

At times the Madonna, the mother figure, plays a central role in this endeavor, as it does here. Salomé is an instance of this figure and perhaps the most persistent, but Phia Rilke, his actual mother, as well as Clara Rilke, his wife and mother of his child are all blended into a single, feminine figure (see «This Lost, Unreal Woman» and «Take Me, Give Me Form, Finish Me» in Kleinbard's *The Beginning of Terror*). Rilke needs this feminine figure, ultimately, as well as a father figure, in order to produce «ein Menschentyp der Zukunft» (Imhof 77). This is something of a Nietzschean idea, in that it aims at a future humanity that is beyond its present form. Rilke needs the mother figure, which is particularly evident in this and some other works, and the father figure, whom he found in Auguste Rodin, in order to produce a «homunculus», not in the sense of a human child, but a heavenly son, which

would complete the picture, making a «psychisches Konglomerat» (Imhof 119):

Dieses wird im Laufe der Zeit in eine Mehrzahl Figuren von bestimmterem und differenzierterem Charakter aufgesplittet, wobei jede dieser Figuren einen Sonderaspekt des ursprünglichen Konglomerates «Gott» verkörpert (ibid).

What is ultimately to be produced is the *Artifex*, either creativity or the artist himself, who becomes the artwork. According to Imhof, the feminine figures are the unconscious, the masculine the conscious, and they are joined to produce a mix, «die Vereinigung des Animus mit der Anima» (ibid). The son, which is also the self as artist, is produced and the poetic *word*¹⁰.

With this poetic word we have a preliminary answer to the question that I have posed above, viz., if the flavor of an apple is surprisingly spoken into existence through assonance, alliteration, and other techniques in a poem like «Apfel, Birne, und Banane ...», what is brought into existence through prayer? I mentioned already the possibility of the words producing the flavor of the fruit in the mouth, so we must ask what it is that is produced alongside this poetic word in relation to prayer. It is noteworthy that Rilke, in this cycle of poems, has introduced a fictive Russian monk, who writes down his thoughts in the form of prayers (Fioretos 171). The poetic word that he writes is perhaps what John Llewelyn, following Heidegger, calls the «middle voice,» which is still sensitive to the language of the earth:

[T]he language of poetry, the language we use of the *Macht der Erde*, the *Naturmacht*, Nature “which “stirs and strives”, which assails us and enthralls us as landscape”, enthralls man who lives poetically on this earth, who *dichterisch, wohnet ... auf dieser Erde* (Llewelyn 152).

This language and this sensitivity is available not only to «preachers and prophets but also poets» (Llewelyn 153). This language also, as with the vocative *Du* that I mentioned before, opens the space of the «us», not necessarily in an ethical sense, but in the sense of a figure that is urgently needed to complete the cosmology or mythology so that *poiesis* might enter the world: «The “us” who are needed is the poetic ear in man, needed to save

¹⁰ There are a number of legitimate feminist critiques that come to mind here. The erotic charge between masculine and feminine are essential to the life of Rilke’s poetry and if one allows for this circuit to be completed, one may find that it is precisely the boundaries between masculine and feminine that are being called into question and oftentimes reversed, a move that challenges any essentialist mindset. One may also find that Rilke himself has the same concerns about gender and also suffered heavily from the evils of patriarchy.

what is threatened by the wholly cerebral structures of an increasingly de-sacralized world» (Llewelyn 158). The poems are directed, then, towards the sacred, i.e. something unpronounceable, which leaves us with a single option: «Where we cannot name we can nonetheless praise» (Llewelyn 161). This echoes back to Walcott's statement about gratitude; feeling gratitude for what you feel is a gift, as Walcott puts it, which contains a certain meaningful circularity.

It is the responsibility not only of the poet, but also the reader and interpreter of the poem, to allow this middle voice to come into being and to allow the world itself to speak, a task that we see especially later on in Rilke's works, which emphasize the importance of *things*, but which is already wonderfully latent in *Das Stunden-Buch*. Llewelyn explains further:

That is to say, the saving of the things of the world, preventing them from becoming mere objects, is a task set for us all. In carrying out this task we are at the same time saving ourselves. And it is the poets among us to whom we may look for models of that toward which this twofold task is aimed. The poem is a Noah's ark[,] admission to which is not restricted to sentient creatures (Llewelyn 164).

The middle of the middle voice is present in Greek and Sanskrit grammar, and this is the sense that is consistent with Heidegger's call to let beings *be* (Llewelyn 163). It is also middle in the following sense:

It is middle because the inner space of the world, the "pure space" which the poem itself generates, somewhat as the productive imagination in Kant is the generator of pure time, is the centre, a *Mitte*, where the polarization of opposites is non-dialectically overcome (Ibid).

The middle voice addresses, or perhaps is addressed or spoken through, by the Other, who is not subject to the opposition that plays out in a dialectic. It is a space of pure creativity, the space of the *Artifex*, and the words that are produced from this space do far more than create something beautiful (though they certainly do this as well). They are, as Llewelyn writes, a vessel, like the ark, which speaks meaningfully of the world; indeed, allows a world to speak that is being ignored and abused as if it were not there or worthy of being recognized, which is an ignorance that will ultimately bring about its destruction.

* * *

Now that the urgency that is present in *Das Stunden-Buch* has been laid bare, we can turn to a more detailed reading of the poems themselves. It is

necessary to demonstrate this exigency because it would be easy to accuse the poet, or the fictional monk in this case, of complacency. Given Rilke's view of art and the political world, this is certainly something that needs to be taken into consideration. I would like to assert here that although many of his works are not political, *Das Stunden-Buch* included, there is nonetheless a responsibility within the poetry, one that perhaps supersedes politics. We might remember that Levinas, embittered by what constituted the political in his lifetime, called it simply the art of foreseeing and winning war¹¹. Rilke was similar in his assessment of politics, seeing it as something that interrupted his work and had created a world in which no true creative labor is possible¹². He did not want *art pour l'art* or even art for the people, rather «art for the artist»¹³. This is perhaps an expression of individualism of a Nietzschean bent, but I would like to understand it more in the sense of rebellious, unalienated labor –: one that is so focused upon its work that it acts, as Rilke said of Rodin, and as can be traced through Idealist philosophy, as a force of nature¹⁴.

The question that is aroused here is of what constitutes action, and whether or not further «action» will just bring about the destruction of the earth, which I have mentioned above. One should remember what is too often forgotten: that fascism is a philosophy of action. The monk and the monastic life try to cultivate a voice that is sensitive to the subtle voice of the world expressed in the middle voice, which is, given the reading I have established here, a prophetic voice in the true sense: not a voice that tells specific events of the future, but a voice that speaks the point of view that sees, with 20/20 vision, the condition of the unfolding present and is able to discern that if we continue to act as we do now, we are sewing the seeds of our own destruction. We see at the very beginning of the set of poems

¹¹ «L'art de prévoir et de gagner par tous les moyens la guerre – la politique – s'impose, dès lors, comme l'exercice même de la raison. La politique s'oppose à la morale, comme la philosophie à la naïveté» (Levinas 5).

¹² One of the themes addressed in the *Geschichten vom lieben Gott* is our inability to do true creative labor, illustrated in «Das Märchen von den Händen Gottes», in which there is a primordial argument between God and his hands that results in a severing of the hand from the spirit.

¹³ «Going beyond the principle of *l'art pour l'art*, he postulates an art that exists solely for the sake of the artist: “Know, then, that art is this: the means through which singular, solitary individuals fulfill themselves”» (Schwarz 25).

¹⁴ I want to assert a distance here from natural laws being present in human affairs, like a form of social Darwinism or capitalism and rather as a reclaiming and cultivation of a type of sensitivity that allows the language of the world to be audible again and that can flow through the artist.

this attentiveness to detail, even to the smallest things, and the act of creation that is required of the monk:

Nichts ist mir zu klein und ich lieb es trotzdem
und mal es auf Goldgrund und groß,
und halte es hoch, und ich weiß nicht wem
löst es die Seele los ... (Rilke 1, 253)

To «free the soul» of whomever should walk by this painting is the goal of the monk, a goal that may sound rather abstract. But it is no doubt the concrete task of retrieving a sense of meaning in the world; of not allowing things or the earth itself to become mere objects, and thereby saving the world.

The reference to painting, in the lines just cited, also makes the poems distinctly modern, which is a world that is being forced to consider its own destruction in a more concrete way than any prior civilization had. Its formulations likewise became more concrete – more thing-like. It makes sense, then, that Rilke turned to the visual arts for guidance in his poetry. His poetry becomes like a sculpture that is made of language¹⁵. This comparison with painting will later turn into Rilke's obsession with sculpture, although the principle is the same: he wanted to write poetry as if he were sculpting or painting. There are far-reaching implications that I will discuss later, but for now it should suffice to say that there is a certain parallel between the writing of a poem and the painting of a painting. But there is more – the poem and the painting, indeed the image itself, especially an image of God, are a bulwark of sorts that tempers extremely powerful energies; energies that would destroy if they were not somehow *mediated*. I shall provisionally state that this medium is something like an ego or self, which is a necessary pad for the shearing forces that would be present in raw exposure to the Real. One might also recall that the Sublime is never characterized by raw exposure to the dark and dire forces of nature, but by being able to perceive these forces from a safe remove¹⁶.

There are many subtle instances of this «shielding», the safe remove, throughout the *Stunden-Buch*. «Ich habe viele Brüder in Sutanen» (Rilke 1, 254) reads a line that follows shortly after the above cited stanza. We might

¹⁵ Pascale Petit, in «Poetry as installation, object, painting», discusses her transition from being a visual artist to being a poet, and how she tried to preserve the feeling of the studio and sculpture in her poems. Also, A. P. Swarbrick writes, in «Donald Davie: poetry as music and sculpture», that Donald Davie sought the «certainties of stone» (Swarbrick 50) in his poetry.

¹⁶ David Farrel Krell emphasizes this aspect of the Sublime in his book *Contagion*.

imagine that this robe is a parallel to this image of God being covered in images or robes, if the monk is supposed to be something of a divine representative. «*Mein Gott ist dunkel ...*», writes Rilke in the next stanza, which is a consistent theme throughout the poems, something that runs against traditional conceptualizations of God, which usually equate him with light. Later on in the poems we see that it is in fact Lucifer who is always exposed to pure light. But it is not a pure darkness that expresses this God, rather a kind of mixture that we might imagine as twilight. We see this in the prose descriptions of the scenes, which Rilke later edited out of the poems, for example:

Auch bei der Heimkehr, da in das schwere Grau des westlichen Himmels eine helle und flammende Röte stieg, welche die Wolken überredete zu einem neuen seltsamen Violett. Und ein noch niegewesener Abend war hinter den zitternden Bäumen. Das empfand der Mönch an der Jahrhundertwende als ein Zeichen, und er wurde fromm davor. 22. Sept. 1899 (Stahl 151).

Besides the immediately pleasing aesthetic quality of the image here, it also underscores the mixed lighting that is present in encounters with this God that Rilke describes. One might also take note of the *Jahrhundertwende*, indicating that the monk, as well as Rilke, is on a threshold of sorts, being a *fin de siècle* man (Rilke includes this in the poem as well: «Ich lebe grad, da das Jahrhundert geht») (Rilke 1, 256). It is accordingly «dark hours» in which the persona feels closest to himself and in which a certain expansion of the senses takes place, which provides another partial answer to the question that I posed earlier about what is brought into the world through prayer: «Ich liebe meines Wesens Dnnkelstunden, in welchen meine Sinne sich vertiefen» (Rilke 1, 254).

One should take note that Rilke says our senses can deepen here, which is a key point: our senses, while providing the constants that one might have in thinking about «human nature» they are also variable. In other words, there are certain things that can be meaningfully said about our «essence», for example that we are upright (a fact that is also mentioned in this cycle of poems), that we have eyes positioned in the front of our heads and not on the sides, etc. But while this is true, there is also room for variation within those senses¹⁷. A cross section of text from Marx might help us to get a sense of how he thought about the senses:

¹⁷ We see the monk-poet becoming aware of this throughout the cycle, for example: «Ich habe auf einmal so viele Sinne, / die all anders durstig sind. / Ich fühle mich an

Die *Bildung* der 5 Sinne ist eine Arbeit der ganzen bisherigen Weltgeschichte. Der unter dem rohen praktischen Bedürfnis befangene *Sinn* hat auch nur einen *bornierten* Sinn. Für den ausgehungerten Menschen existiert nicht die menschliche Form der Speise, sondern nur ihr abstraktes Dasein als Speise; ebensogut könnte sie in rohster Form vorliegen, und es ist nicht zu sagen, wodurch sich diese Nahrungstätigkeit von der *tierischen* Nahrungstätigkeit unterscheidet. Der sorgenvolle, bedürftige Mensch hat keinen *Sinn* für das schönste Schauspiel; der Mineralienkrämer sieht nur den merkantilen Wert, aber nicht die Schönheit und eigentümliche Natur des Minerals; er hat keinen mineralogischen Sinn; also die Vergegenständlichung des menschlichen Wesens, sowohl in theoretischer als praktischer Hinsicht, gehört dazu, sowohl um die *Sinne* des Menschen *menschlich* zu machen als um für den ganzen Reichtum des menschlichen und natürlichen Wesens entsprechenden *menschlichen Sinn* zu schaffen (Marx, *Methode und Praxis*, 81-82).

Marx provides here a radical picture of human nature, sealing the gap – or perhaps reinforcing it – between Rousseau and Hobbes: It is not that we are born good or bad, but that we adapt to our circumstances, specifically in the way that we use our senses. What Marx writes here is the origin of our now dogmatized debate about essentialism. There is no essence to the human being – we form our environment and are in turn formed by it, a fact that makes knowing what we ought to do a more complex problem than it previously had been. It now became clear that through the choices we make, we form the human being: we shape ourselves physically and alter the way in which we use our senses.

For example, we do not perceive the world in the same way that the hunter-gatherer did. She or he would have had far more acutely developed senses hearing and seeing as well as a type of situational awareness that is entirely different from the consumer. Indeed, even a person who hunts alongside being a laborer and consumer in today's world is going to have a different way of perceiving the world than a vegetarian city dweller (like the author of this paper). Marx also asserts here that a person in abject poverty will have radically different sense perception than someone who has had the opportunity to develop her or his senses through aesthetics.

Marx says here, in a very basic way, that depending upon what we do, we make ourselves into entirely different kinds of human beings. This implies a radical subjectivity and a plurality of worlds and possible worlds. The

hundert Stellen / schwellen und schmerzen. / Aber am meisten mitten im Herzen» (Rilke 1, 267).

present question becomes, given this context: What is it that is brought into the world through prayer, particularly the ones that are contained in this book? Now we may carve the question a bit closer: In what way are senses changed and what type of human being is produced through this act? In posing this question, we have happened across another discovery: the fact that we can even ask this question shows that the usual understanding of Marx as an anti-religious thinker is wrong. Indeed, Marx saw a definite need for religion, especially under capitalism. The lines that precede his too often quoted «statement» about religion – that it is the opiate of the masses – run as follows:

Das *religiöse* Elend ist in einem der *Ausdruck* des wirklichen Elendes und in einem die *Protestation* gegen das wirkliche Elend. Die Religion ist der Seufzer der bedrängten Kreatur, das Gemüth einer herzlosen Welt, wie sie der Geist geistloser Zustände ist. Sie ist das *Opium* des Volks (Marx, *Kritik*, 71-72).

Religion, to simply reiterate what Marx writes here, is a *protest*. It is an expression of suffering and not to be regarded as simplistic, quaint, or stupid. It is an illusion, he also implies, and one that is not only necessary to tolerate the given conditions, but also a way of resisting them. A monk, with his hands in prayer, is a person who is resisting oppressive conditions at the most fundamental of levels by *not doing anything*. The primary mode of life under capitalism is action; – and one might recall that I asserted above that fascism is a philosophy of action – doing something, at all times, no matter what, even unreflectively. As long as one is doing something, he or she can avoid guilt in all its many forms, internally and externally imposed. All of this is interrupted and a different process is set in motion through the type of prayer described in the *Stunden-Buch* and the possibility of a new world, one that is not consumed by meaningless hustle-bustle, opens itself.

* * *

The tensions that I exposed in Marx's understanding of religion – that it is essential and inessential; necessary and illusory – are present already in a similar way in Rilke's text, especially in the figure of God. There is a tension there in the necessity of God and the person's instinct to push away from that God. God, too, is needed and yet not something to be had – we have access only through images, but those images come between us and God. There is a sense in which the monk in the poem is shut out from God through the walls that we build through images:

Wir bauen Bilder vor dir auf wie Wände;
so Daß schon tausend Mauern um dich stehn.
Denn dich verhüllen unsre frommen Hände,
sooft dich unsre Herzen offen sehn (Rilke 1, 254).

But there is also another sense in which these walls are necessary, as we see in this stanza. The hands, folded in prayer, seem to contain God in these lines. God is veiled in them, which is to say blocked from vision. The heart standing open to him in his fullness is not an option, because the monk would be wiped away by this experience. But this is what sets up the basic tension in the poems: the monk and the poet want that which is impossible: immortality, the unknown, the infinite.

Indeed, the wall that separates us from the *Nachbar Gott* is thin, capable of falling at any moment:

Nur eine schmale Wand ist zwischen uns,
durch Zufall; denn es könnte sein:
ein Rufen deines oder meines Munds – und sie bricht ein
ganz ohne Lärm und Laut.
Aus deinen Bildern ist sie aufgebaut. (Rilke 1, 255-6)

Rilke wants to emphasize here that it is only a matter of chance that there is any such barrier between us and the being he is naming «God». The proper «calling» (*Rufen*) would be capable of dissolving this layer, this wall, but without even a noise; without any fuss or effort, as if it had never been there, and one just had to learn to see properly¹⁸. One feels as if one has *arrived*; but the arrival here leads to *exposure*, and, directly, often, to anxiety.

The monk simultaneously wants and does not want this break. It is what he needs, but his habitual consciousness cannot bear it. He wants to break this habitual consciousness, but it is simultaneously that which sustains his life. It is not a tension to be resolved, but one to be expanded. There is something of the same tension that was present in the relation to death in Romanticism here; the *Heimweh* and *Fernweh* that longs for the unknown that constitutes death and a hope that in that death there is a quiet release from the *Klage* that characterizes life. It is the interplay or perhaps identity of *eros* and *thanatos* in Freud. It is the need for illusion that blocks us from the Real, but offers us a certain coherence in return.

In the stanza preceding this one we see a monk knocking on God's door in the middle of the night, but almost in an apologetic mode, and pledging his devotion: «Ich horche immer. Gieb ein kleines Zeichen. Ich bin ganz

¹⁸ This is, of course, Malte's purpose throughout *Die Aufzeichnungen*.

nah» (Rilke 1, 255). Later on, we see that he is allowed, perhaps even supposed, to pine after God in this manner: «Daraus, das Einer dich einmal gewollt hat, weiß ich, daß wir dich wollen dürfen» (Rilke 1, 262). The persona needs the relation to God, but in such a way that he is not completely shattered. This relation is in many ways like language, which wounds us in a way by simultaneously allowing access to the world and blocking that access. In other words, a word may uncover a phenomenon for us by calling it to our attention, but also comes between us and an immediate relation to that object. But on the other hand, it allows for further, finer distinctions to be made and a continuous unfolding of the phenomenon. This tension is present in the next stanza:

Und deine Bilder stehn vor dir wie Namen.
 Und wenn einmal das Licht in mir entbrennt,
 mit welchem meine Tiefe dich erkennt,
 vergeudet sichs als Glanz auf ihren Rahmen

Und meine Sinne, welche schnell erlahmen,
 sind ohne Heimat und von dir getrennt (Rilke 1, 256).

Words, names, again stand here between God and the persona's depths. The light that burns within him and connects him to that God fizzles out on the frames of those images. With this light burned out, the senses are lamed and left feeling homeless. We get a sense from this part of the poem that the persona has perhaps pushed too much. The goal would be, in one's use of poetic language, to simultaneously insulate oneself from God (because we would perish before her stronger *Dasein*) and to allow for a special sensitivity to God. One needs a bulwark, but one that is permeable in some sense, like the «Bulwarks of beryl and chrysoprase» (Benét 795) of Ezra Pound's «The Flame». The persona here has left himself exposed.

* * *

In the context that I have established thus far, I see a kinship between language, the self or ego, and the relation to the Other, which can shatter that self, as well as one's ability to articulate what one has experienced. There is a certain weight to the ego and the self, a parallel to the weight of the body, which has evolved biologically as well as societally, which Nietzsche expresses nicely in *Zur Genealogie der Moral*:

Nicht anders als es den Wasserthieren ergangen sein muss, als sie gezwungen wurden, entweder Landthiere zu werden oder zu Grunde zu

gehn, so ging es diesen der Wildniss, dem Kriege, dem Herumschweigen, dem Abenteuer glücklich angepassten Halbthieren, – mit Einem Male waren alle ihre Instinkte entwerthet und «ausgehängt». Sie sollten nunmehr auf den Füßen gehn und «sich selber tragen», wo sie bisher vom Wasser getragen wurden: eine entsetzliche Schwere lag auf ihnen. Zu den einfachsten Verrichtungen fühlten sie sich ungelent, sie hatten für diese neue unbekannte Welt ihre alten Führer nicht mehr, die regulirenden unbewusst-sicher-führenden Triebe, – sie waren auf Denken, Schliessen, Berechnen, Combiniren von Ursachen und Wirkungen reduziert, diese Unglücklichen, auf ihr «Bewusstsein», auf ihr ärmlichstes und fehlgreifendstes Organ! (Nietzsche 76).

The weight, the discontent that we feel living in civilization is analogous to the weight that is felt by animals that crawled out of the sea and onto land and henceforth had to hold themselves up instead of gliding through the water. We should take note of the necessity involved here: the animals are driven to be land animals or perish. So it is not just that the word, consciousness, and civilization itself are instances in which we have simply gone wrong, it is something that we have had to do in order to preserve ourselves. From what does this necessity arise? What is the danger? We see this in the shearing force of Rilke's God that I mentioned earlier, i.e. in our inability to face him without some mitigating apparatus, but we also see it in the figure of the *Feind*. There is a similar relation to this enemy, which suggests that it may just be an aspect of the God:

Ihr vielen unbestürmten Städte,
habt ihr euch nie den Feind ersehnt?
O daß er euch belagert hätte
ein langes schwankendes Jahrzehnt.

Bis ihr ihn trostlos und in Trauern,
bis daß ihr hungernd ihn ertrugt;
er liegt wie Landschaft vor den Mauern,
denn also weiß er auszudauern
um jene, die er heimgesucht (Rilke 1, 285-286).

We get the sense of an ever-present enemy that does not tire or weaken and sits watching outside of the city. This enemy is also capable of breaking down the walls, which I have suggested are parallels for language, artwork, and the ego: «Er ist der große Mauerbrecher, / der eine stumme Arbeit hat» (Rilke 1, 286).

But who is this enemy? The angels are intermediaries, it seems, and as we see later on in Rilke's poetry, ones that have a similar shearing force and

irresistible attractive/repellent quality to the one that is attributed to God in this cycle. Rilke writes, «Du bist so gross, dass ich schon nicht mehr bin» (Rilke 1, 269). The persona of the first Elegy asks what would happen when «es nähme / einer mich plötzlich ans Herz: ich verginge von seinem / stärkeren Dasein» (Rilke 2, 685). He nonetheless wants the angel like nothing else, even though it would wipe out his existence. The angels occupy an equally ambiguous position in this cycle: «Sie glauben dort dem Lichte mehr / als Gottes schwarzer Kraft» (Rilke 1, 287), and there is a reason why they have taken this turn: «es flüchtete sich Lucifer / in ihre Nachbarschaft» (ibid.). From this it seems that the enemy sitting outside the city in the previous stanzas is none other than *der grosse Gegner* himself. «Er ist der Fürst im Land des Lichts» and also «der helle Gott der Zeit» (ibid.). That he is able to break down the city walls is an indication of his ability to disintegrate the self.

This, then, brings temporality back into the picture, but creates even greater ambiguities than before when we learn more about what time means in this context: «Die Zeit is wie ein welker Rand an einem Buchenblatt» (ibid.), which is to say, the border on which life becomes death. But its next feature is even more puzzling, given the context that we have established here:

Sie ist das glänzende Gewand,
das Gott verworfen hat,
als Er, der immer Tiefe war,
ermüdete des Flugs
und sich verbarg vor jedem Jahr,
bis ihm sein wurzelhaftes Haar
durch alle Dinge wuchs (ibid).

Time is a «radiant garment», and we have a kind of negative of the image one might expect. God is a kind of darkness that is being shielded from us by the luminous dress of time. Time, like Lucifer, has been rejected and thrown off by God, which is an allusion to his timelessness. But it seems also that through this act, God is able to come into the world. His natural place seems to be in the depths, which is another reversal of our common image, since it is usually Lucifer that is thought to be at the bottom (for instance in Dante's *Inferno*). God, we might glean from this image, requires Lucifer in order to come into time and the physical world.

We get a glimpse here of the turn that Rilke later takes towards *things*, because it seems from the stanza just cited that God resides in the things of the world, as he does in the ancient gesture expressed in sculpture in *Auguste Rodin*, and God himself is the «Ding der Dinge» (Rilke 1, 265). The

monk also seems closest to God and to his purpose on earth when he is like a thing:

Ich bin auf der Welt zu allein und doch nicht allein genug,
um jede Stunde zu weihn.
Ich bin auf der Welt zu gering und doch nicht klein genug,
um vor dir zu sein wie ein Ding,
dunkel und klug (Rilke 1, 260).

It might help to remember here that things are inaccessible to us – there is always a side of them or a center that we cannot see. Other human beings are similar in this respect, though Rilke does not seem to have much use for them at this time in his life, except for Lou. God is also consistently paired with the unknown, as well as that part of us which is inaccessible, the unconscious:

Du bist der raunende Verrußte,
auf allen Öfen schläfst du breit.
Das Wissen ist nur in der Zeit.
Du bist der dunkle Unbewußte
von Ewigkeit zu Ewigkeit (Rilke 1, 276).

Here we have another image of darkness and light, with soot and fire. But more importantly, we have knowledge being paired with time, which we know is Lucifer's realm. In the previously cited passage, the monk wants to be a thing among things, dark and intelligent. He wants, in other words, to be in touch with his subconscious, which is the link, it seems, between the eternity of God and the eternity within the self, where one can take refuge in the shadows, in dark hours.

There is one final image that gives us further understanding of the dangers faced and the way to protect oneself from them. I have mentioned the importance of the feminine figure and the importance of Lou Andreas-Salomé at this time in his life, who was a sort of idealized mother replacement for his own non-affectionate mother (see *The Beginning of Terror*). Later on in Rilke's life, in the third Elegy we have the mother being the one who should make the child's room (which is ambiguously blended with the womb) safe, and here in the *Stunden-Buch* we have a similar image:

Ich will mich beschreiben
wie ein Bild das ich sah,
lange und nah,
wie ein Wort, das ich begriff,
wie meinen täglichen Krug,
wie meiner Mutter Gesicht,

wie ein Schiff,
 das mich trug
 durch den tödlichsten Sturm (Rilke 1, 260).

One might take note here of the persona's desire to describe himself as a picture, which provides evidence for my hypothesis that the self or ego and the picture (which is similar to the poem and the word, and is indicated in the fourth line cited here) serve the same purpose in this schema. His daily mug also relates this to everydayness and the nourishment of the home, which is where this necessary ego is established. But most importantly we have the mother being linked to this safety, as well as her face, which is where mirroring takes place at a young age and plays an important role in whether or not one feels that he or she has a stable self-image. It is this early establishment of safety that locks in an ego with steady walls, like the walls of the city that keep Lucifer at bay, and like a ship that can carry one through the storm.

* * *

With all of this established, we can make one final attempt at answering the question that I have posed throughout this essay: If language, used properly, has the surprising ability to surpass its capacity as a mere sign that signals something in the outside world and instead has the ability to speak things into being, as it did with the flavor and texture of the apple, what is it that is being brought into being through these poems, which are a form of prayer? The most important thing seems to be the *Tröst* that is brought about through the poetic word. The feminine figure (which implies, again, nothing essentialistic), which completes the circuit for Rilke, allows for him to be a creator and allows creativity to enter the world, a responsibility that is of utmost importance in a world to which we are increasingly becoming deaf. It is much like the *Tröst* that was such a prevalent theme in Romantic poetry, providing protection from raw exposure to nature, the safe reserve that was necessary in the experience of the Sublime. Rilke's fear of disintegration was very real and his poetry provided for him a protective layer, a vessel through which he was able to move out into and face the world. These artworks also provide their readers with a similar vessel, a model for an ark that we have already needed and will need again in order to navigate humanity's most troubled times. They help us cultivate a receptivity to an ancient language spoken by the world, a language that must be heard if we are to save that world.

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