

Studia austriaca

ISSN 2385-2925

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Echoes of the Absolute
Rainer Maria Rilke's «Buch der Bilder»

Abstract

In this article I examine some of the key poems in Rilke's *Book of Images* in an attempt to elucidate its somewhat elusive order. Moving away from the tendency to interpret this cycle of poems biographically, I use the iconography of Rilke's prose, as well as his other poetry, to uncover a gesture that is the source of the persona's ability to create. Following de Man, I offer that this gesture and its subsequent formulation into poetic language is akin to Hölderlin's distinction between the ontological status of a flower and the becoming of the poetic word that sings it.

Strictly speaking, an epiphany cannot be a beginning, since it reveals and unveils what, by definition, could never have ceased to be there. Rather, it is the rediscovery of a permanent presence which has chosen to hide itself from us – unless it is we who have the power to hide from it.

Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*

Rainer Maria Rilke's *Buch der Bilder* is a rich and subtle cycle of poems that has presented difficulties for many Rilke scholars. In this study, I begin by giving a brief overview of some of these difficulties, which are usually rooted in an adherence to biographical readings. I then move on to read key poems in the cycle, including «Aus einem April», «Fragmente aus verlorenen Tagen», «Die Engel» and «Der Schutzengel». In these poems, there is a theory of poetic language, which I bring out using the backdrop of Rilke's prose works, as well as through comparison with key ideas in his other poetic cycles. I argue that Rilke expresses the complexity of our relationship to the Absolute via poetic language and seeks, to use a phrase from Paul de

Man, to create a «conscious poetic language» (de Man 9) – and a corresponding, restructured ego – that paradoxically shields us from the Absolute and simultaneously connects us to it. We have no direct access to the Absolute, but we are able, through poetry and a very special kind of gesture, to hear its echoes.

As Edward Snow notes in the introduction to his translation of Rilke's *Buch der Bilder*, this cycle of poems is one of Rilke's only pieces written over a long period of time, from 1899 to 1906 (Rilke, *The Book of Images*, x). This reinforces the view, common among commentators, that there is a collage-like heterogeneity of subjects covered in the cycle¹. But it is not the heterogeneity of the poems that needs to be emphasized. The lack of coherence in the cycle is only apparent; it is not a «lost village of words», as Millicent Bell would have it. *Das Buch der Bilder* was composed the way that Rilke wanted to write², but hardly ever could: it is a product of slow and steady labor, at which he chipped away as though at a sculpture in Rodin's workshop, instead of being written in a burst like, for example, the *Duineser Elegien*. Rilke describes how Rodin worked in his monograph on the artist:

Glücklich, wie mit guten Nachrichten, tritt er bei seinen Dingen ein und geht auf eines zu, als hätte er ihm etwas Schönes mitgebracht. Und ist im nächsten Augenblick vertieft, als arbeite er seit Stunden. Und fängt an und ergänzt und verändert hier und dort, als ginge er, durch das Gedränge, dem Ruf der Dinge nach, die ihn nötig haben. Keines ist vergessen; die zurückgerückten warten auf ihre Stunde und haben Zeit. Auch in einem Garten wächst nicht alles zugleich. Blüten stehen neben Früchten, und irgend ein Baum ist noch bei den Blättern. Sagte ich nicht, daß es im Wesen dieses Gewaltigen liegt, Zeit zu haben wie die Natur und hervorzubringen wie sie? (Rilke, *Werke 4*, 476-477).

¹ This contrasts, as Ralph Freedman emphasizes, with the coherence of «spiritual and moral theme» (Metzger 116) that is present in the *Stunden-Buch*, which was ultimately published around the same time as *Das Buch der Bilder*.

² This is supported by the affection that he shows to the collection of poems, for example, in a letter to Gerhart Hauptmann, dated August 19. 1902: «Und daß Sie die Blätter aus der Sturmnacht, die Blinde und das Requiem besonders nannten, sagt mir, daß Sie die entlegenen und leisen Wege meines Buches gefunden haben, die ich selber so sehr liebe» (Rilke, *Briefe I*, 123).

There are many things that we can take from this passage that might help us read Rilke's *Buch der Bilder*. Rodin, at least Rilke's idealized version of him, worked with joy and was able to drop quickly into concentration on his sculptures; his work followed the «call of Things», which means the artist was able to allow the Things themselves to speak and also to speak through him; this calling, though subtle, is like a force of nature, which we see through Rilke's use of the imagery of the garden³. The sculptures grow like plants, organically, which implies that Rodin's work is not the product of a rigid imposition of discipline, but an overflowing and surplus of life. It also suggests that the sculptures «originate» like plants, an idea that I will discuss below in relation to the flower in Romanticism.

This overflowing and surplus of life that is present in both the method of working and the works themselves means that the works are never finished and are in continuous transition. Rilke reports a visit to one of Rodin's workshops:

Ich ging in Gedanken durch die ungeheueren Werkstätten und ich sah, daß alles im Werden war und nichts eilte. Da stand, riesig zusammengeballt, der *Denker*, in Bronze, vollendet; aber er gehörte ja in den immer noch wachsenden Zusammenhang des *Höllentors*. Da wuchs das eine Denkmal für *Victor Hugo* heran, langsam, immerfort beobachtet, vielleicht noch Abänderungen ausgesetzt, und weiterhin standen die anderen Entwürfe, werdend (Rilke, *Werke 4*, 477).

We see here Rilke's ideal of the process of creative labor. Works are to be always to be «im Werden», which corresponds also to Rilke's idea of the artist, who works constantly. Even the completed *Denker* belongs to a background that is still in process, still liable to receive «amendments». That poetic language is also «im Werden», – in becoming but not in Being, which is the inevitable failure of poetic language – is an idea in which the present study will culminate.

Because the constellations in the *Buch der Bilder* were in process over many years, they are rather large, and are prematurely collapsed by matching lines with biographical details. But because of the perceived autobiographical nature of much of Rilke's work, it seems to be the consensus among commentators that interpretation means exactly this type of matching. In a

³ The imagery of the garden is heavily present throughout the *Buch der Bilder*, and plays a decisive role in Rilke's «Ur-Geräusch» essay, in which Rilke speaks of the cultivation of the «five gardens» of the senses. This implies that we are capable of changing and expanding our senses, just as Malte Laurids Brigge is in the process of learning how to see.

very informative dissertation on the *Buch der Bilder*, Karl Eugene Webb interprets the cycle of poems almost entirely from this standpoint, noting how important the time in which Rilke composed this cycle was:

The period in question is perhaps the most vital of any in Rilke's life. These years take him from his first extended stay in Italy, through his trips to Russia, the months in Worpswede, his difficult sojourn in Westerwede, and finally to the overwhelming experiences in Paris (Webb 2).

Webb goes on to say that the cycle contains poems from all the stages through which Rilke went from Italy to Paris (Webb 3-4). While these stages are interesting and valuable in themselves, emphasizing them fails to allow us to enter the constellations that the work itself presents.

Webb himself argues that commentators fail to see the artistry of the *Buch der Bilder*: «... many of [the general works and monographs on Rilke] overlook, for the most part, its artistic qualities» (Webb 4). But he then allows himself to get bogged down in the matching game that I mentioned above, which does not allow him to see the artistic qualities of the work⁴. Karin Langenheim, in an unpublished dissertation called «*Das Buch der Bilder. Entstehung und Deutung*», comes closer to seeing these artistic qualities: «Das Hauptgewicht der Arbeit liegt auf der fortlaufenden Interpretation der vom Dichter in einer bestimmten Reihenfolge angeordneten Gedichte» (Langenheim 5). What she implies is that we need to treat the work as a finished product that Rilke himself arranged and as a unified work, a move that Webb says results in «a lack of clarity» (Webb 9). But poetic «clarity», as well as poetic time, is not the same as that of the chronicler. If we are to understand the artistic value of this piece – if we want our analysis to be more than simply informative – we need to enter the consciousness of the poet and understand what «sense», «clarity», and artistic quality mean to him. We are accordingly better served by pulling parts from Rilke's poetry and prose works, which give us an idea of what creative labor was for Rilke and his particular orientation to the Absolute.

The affinity with sculpture is especially evident in a poem called «Aus einem April», and I will quote the entire first stanza, because the form also plays a role here:

⁴ Dr. Marga Bauer writes, in *Rilke und Frankreich*, «Im *Buch der Bilder* beginnt Rilke zu malen» (Bauer 7).

Wieder duftet der Wald.
Es heben die schwebenden Lerchen
Mit sich den Himmel empor, der unseren Schultern
schwer war;
Zwar sah man noch durch die Äste den Tag, wie er
leer war, —
Aber nach langen, regnenden Nachmittagen
Kommen die goldübersonnten
neueren Stunden,
vor denen flüchtend an fernen Häuserfronten
alle die wunden
Fenster furchtsam mit Flügeln schlagen.

(Rilke 1, 371-372)

The form plays a role here, not so much in the rhyming scheme, but in that the lines themselves look like what they describe. The sky, being lifted by larks, was heavy on the shoulders, and if one were to trace the shape of the poem, the line in which «Schultern» appears would look like the shoulders. The waist would appear at «neueren Stunden», below.

That the poem is shaped like a torso is a *Vorbild* of the «Archaischer Torso Apollos» from the *Neue Gedichte* (1907) and suggests that the poem has been *sculpted*, like a statue, which is the subject of another poem in this cycle, «Das Lied der Bildsäule». The German word for sculptor is *Bildhauer*, i.e. one who cuts or pounds⁵ out *images*. Later, in the poem «Die Engel», God is said to have sculptor's hands, which suggests a connection to Rodin, whom Rilke idealized as the master artist and creator. This also further establishes the argument that it is not the heterogeneity of the poems that needs to be emphasized, but the fact that they were composed over a long period of time, instead of a burst of inspiration like other cycles. What Rilke admired about Rodin was his ability to work incessantly: his life was «wie ein einziger Arbeitstag» (Rilke 9, 200). Rodin had escaped the predicament that appears in the *Geschichten vom lieben Gott*, which is that we are «stuck in the 7th day» (Rilke 7, 293), unable to do creative labor. Where the poet fails with language, the sculptor succeeds in preserving an ancient gesture:

Da waren Steine, die schliefen, und man fühlte, daß sie erwachen
würden bei irgend einem Jüngsten Gericht, Steine, an denen nichts
Sterbliches war, und andere, die eine Bewegung trugen, eine Gebärde,

⁵ One cannot help but think of Ezra Pound here, who was associated with the Imagist movement, which also found its origins in French Symbolism, like Rilke.

die so frisch geblieben war, als sollte sie hier nur aufbewahrt und eines Tages irgend einem Kinde gegeben werden, das vorüberkam (Rilke 9, 143).

This gesture, as we will see, is present in the stroke of the bird's wings in this poem and later in that of the guardian angel in «Der Schutzengel». It is also important to note that in the *Geschichten vom lieben Gott*, Michelangelo, an analog for Rodin, finds the Absolute inside the stones that he carves.

To return to the poem, that the forest smells sweetly again («Wieder duftet der Wald») can be an indication of an objective occurrence in the world, such as the time of year changing and the trees blossoming, or a change within the persona. This ambiguity plays, as this cycle of poems often does, with the boundary between inside and outside, which calls into question the boundary between self and world. These boundaries will later be superseded when a gesture blossoms through the persona in «Der Schutzengel». Rochelle Tobias discusses this tendency in Rilke's work in «Rilke, Phenomenology and the Sensuality of Thought»:

Rilke's poetry and especially his thing-poems draw attention to the «stream» of experiences that flood consciousness and the synthetic labor that transforms them into a unity. But they also do more than that. They call into question the distinction between inside and outside or self and world by revealing the subjective basis of all objective phenomena and even objectivity itself.⁶

This merging of self and world, Rilke calls *Weltinnenraum*, as Tobias indicates. Like the thing-poems that Tobias discusses here, there is no "I" in «Aus einem April» and lines like these suggest that the objects themselves are speaking. There is, however, an "ours" («unseren»), which suggests a common world and a shared condition, viz. one in which the sky itself is heavy. This idea is akin to Kierkegaard's notion of «objective anxiety», according to which it is not just that I feel anxiety, but that it is there in world (Kierkegaard 56). The heaviness of the air recalls Nietzsche's image, in *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, of the first animal that crawled out of the ocean and had to bear the weight of its body in the air, instead of gliding through the water, which is analogous to the human being having to live with the weight of civilization (Nietzsche 76).

The lark would be this animal's, as well as the human's, aspiration – to again glide, but this time through the heavens. Rilke thought that creativity

⁶ From *Konturen*, Volume 8, 2015. This paper was delivered at the "What is a Thing?" conference at the University of Oregon in February of 2014.

– we might call it Life, Eros – comes from being in touch with the darkest regions of the self; the parts of ourselves that have been handed down from the most ancient animals. The artist reaches back into the unconscious, which contains all the rage and hate in these ancient animals, to arrange «nervous words» and things into the language of poetry (see *Worpswede*, Rilke 9, 11). In this unconscious, linked to Nature and to these ancient animals, there is a great darkness, but it is in darkness, as we learn from the *Stunden-Buch*, that God dwells. God *is* this darkness. The lark in this poem puts the human being on a spectrum: we were something – one of these terrible animals, probably floating in the sea – and we will be something else, which is symbolized by the lark. We are in a temporary phase of struggle, bound to the earth and struggling to keep ourselves upright, but we exist on a continuum with the lark, the angels, and the Absolute. We have no access to the Absolute, but we can learn to see the layers of this continuum, which echo its structure.

The lark is a signal of hope after many long, rain-filled afternoons: «Aber nach langen, regnenden Nachmittagen / Kommen die goldübersonnten / neueren Stunden» (Rilke 1, 371). Sunned-over with gold, new hours now emerge. There is a newness and freshness here, which is also denoted by April in the title, a transition into spring. The windows are wounded, which is perhaps a reference to being pelted by rain and other winter weather, and that they are fleeing means that they are opening. We might take the house to be an expression of the ego, specifically the bourgeois ego, and to have its windows open means to allow for something new to come in, just like the Stranger, *der fremde Mann*, is allowed into the narrator's house in *Geschichten vom lieben Gott* (see Rilke 7, 299). The opening of these windows, we might do well to take note here, is a *welcoming* or opening, just as the narrator in the *Geschichten* welcomes the Stranger and offers him tea. However, in the case of Malte Laurids Brigge, the outside world seems to attack and invade his space, leaving him lifeless. He is unable to write verses, which leaves him exposed to the Absolute without the mediation of conscious poetic language. He perishes in the face of the infinitely stronger *Dasein* of the Absolute, like the warning of the persona in the first of the *Duineser Elegien* (Rilke 2, 685).

So there is no guarantee of progress: we can also fall back in the other direction, as Rilke expresses in «Fragmente aus verlorenen Tagen». Life begins to merge with death, or death begins to live, which suggests that opening to the Absolute has an inherent risk and an inevitable failure:

... Wie Vögel, welche sich gewöhnt ans Gehn
und immer schwerer werden, wie im Fallen:

die Erde saugt aus ihren langen Krallen
 die mutige Erinnerung von allen
 den großen Dingen, welche hoch geschehn,
 und macht sie fast zu Blättern, die sich dicht
 am Boden halten, –
 wie Gewächse, die,
 kaum aufwärts wachsend, in die Erde kriechen,
 in schwarzen Schollen unlebendig licht
 und weich und feucht versinken und versiechen, –

(Rilke 1, 445)

The bird's claws are rooted in the soil here – and there are similar images throughout this cycle – and the bird seems to be becoming a plant. Most plants are rooted in the soil, which is a feature that might distinguish them from an animal that can move about. Here, the roots of the plant reach down to a corpse, where they meet the turquoise earring, which in turn kills the red flower that is reaching up towards the heavens above. The entire spectrum that is present, from the mineral (turquoise), the mixture of life and death that is soil, the bird-tree conglomerate, all the way to the flower reaching toward the heavens⁷.

In «Of Non-Vital Interest», Kenneth Calhoun writes about the continuum present here, «a natural scale along which human, animal, vegetable, even mineral, are continuous» (Calhoun 83). Citing Caillois, Calhoun discusses the human's «tendency to imitate the surrounding world», which «translates into a dissipation of personality» (Calhoun 86). In this dissipation, «the awareness of a distinction between self and world diminishes» (ibid.) which is akin to the *Weltinnenraum* that Tobias discussed above. In the case of animals that imitate their surroundings in order to avoid getting caught by a predator, there is a «withdrawal of life to a lesser state» (ibid.), meaning that the animal acts like a plant or mineral. Calhoun links this to the death drive theorized by Freud, «the impulse, inherent in every organism, to return to the original, inanimate condition prior to the emergence of organic life» (ibid.). The contact with the mineral, the turquoise, and the simultaneous death of the red flower at the top of the tree, suggests the closeness of Eros and Thanatos.

Life and death, then, are not opposites, but marbled, sometimes indistinguishably. It is in sickness that the boundaries between life and death become blurred because sickness itself (we might think of a virus here) is life.

⁷ This spectrum is also present in the first of the *Sonette an Orpheus* (Rilke 2, 731).

It is to this border-dwelling, fungal or viral life toward which Rilke gestures here. For Rilke, part of creative labor is being able to reach into the darkness of the unconscious, where all the rage and hate of primal life still dwells, because God dwells there as well. The artist must descend into the underworld like Orpheus and not be pulled down by the death that one encounters, but somehow gain life from it, as a plant life grows out of the death in soil.

But there is nothing simple about this interaction and it is not clear that the price of creative labor is not higher than what it yields. It may indeed be a deal with the Devil, which is why the Devil's discussion with Adrian Leverkühn in *Doktor Faustus* takes this turn toward the distinction between sickness and health. In this scene Adrian makes a deal with the devil, referring back to the beginning of the book, where mineral «life» had moved Adrian's father to tears and Adrian himself to mocking laughter:

Du hattest recht, ob seiner erbarmungsvollen Tränen zu lachen, – unangesehen noch, daß, wers von Natur mit dem Versucher zu tun hat, immer mit den Gefühlen der Leute auf konträrem Fuße steht und immer versucht ist, zu lachen, wenn sie weinen, und zu weinen, wenn sie lachen. Was heißt denn «tob», wenn die Flora doch so bunt und vielgestaltig wuchert und sprießet und wenn sie sogar heliotropisch ist? Was heißt «tob», wenn der Tropfen doch solchen gesunden Appetit bekundet? Was krank ist, und was gesund, mein Junge, darüber soll man dem Pfahlbürger lieber das letzte Wort nicht lassen. Ob der sich so recht aufs Leben versteht, bleibt eine Frage. Was auf dem Todes-, dem Krankheitswege entstanden, danach hat das Leben schon manches Mal mit Freuden gegriffen und sich davon weiter und höher führen lassen. Hast du vergessen, was du auf der hohen Schul gelernt hast, daß Gott aus dem Bösen das Gute machen kann, und daß die Gelegenheit dazu ihm nicht verkümmert werden darf? Item, Einer muß immer krank und toll gewesen sein, damit die anderen es nicht mehr zu sein brauchen. Und wo die Tollheit anfängt, krank zu sein, macht niemand so leicht nicht aus (Mann 316-317).

The very fact that Adrian's father was moved to tears by the minerals' «reaching» out in life-like fashion and that Adrian laughed in apathy is an indication of the ambiguous, raw power of the realm in which they are probing. Just as in the *Stunden-Buch*, where a dark God is visible only through the contrast provided by light, the realm of Lucifer⁸, we see that the surplus of life that Rilke seeks lies dangerously close to death.

⁸ «Er ist der Fürst im Land des Lichts» (Rilke 1, 287).

Rainer Maria Rilke
Das Buch der Bilder

Zweite sehr vermehrte Ausgabe

Axel Juncker Verlag
Berlin / Leipzig, Stuttgart

Rainer Maria Rilke, *Das Buch der Bilder*, Berlin, Axel Juncker Verlag, 1906.
Title page from the extended version of the original edition, published in 1902.

Opening to the world, to the Real, and to the Absolute requires the distancing of conscious poetic language if one is not to be over-exposed. Over-exposure leads to the various maladies of the *Buch der Bilder*: «Mädchenmelancholie», «Wahnsinn», «Bangnis», «Klage», «Einsamkeit», etc. All of the senses sting, as a Buddhist might confirm, and this is brought to the forefront of consciousness in the process of creative labor. The melancholy acquired through the artist's grappling with the Devil leaves her raw and exposed, like the anxiety-ridden Malte, and like the persona at the end of «Fragmente aus verlorenen Tagen»:

Und mancher Tage Stunden waren so.
Als formet wer mein Abbild irgendwo,
um es mit Nadeln langsam zu mißhandeln.
Ich spürte jede Spitze seiner Spiele,
und war, als ob ein Regen auf mich fiel,
in welchem alle Dinge sich verwandeln.

(Rilke 1, 447)

Rilke's use of «Abbild» here might indicate a malformed image; an image that has been removed from the persona and is used, from afar, to cause him pain. In Werner Herzog's film, *Jeder für sich und Gott gegen alle*, Kaspar Hauser utters the mysterious line: «Mutter, ich bin von allem abgetan» (Herzog), expressing the pain of distance that he feels from the world through learning language.

So there is the pain of over-exposure on the one hand but also the pain of distancing on the other. Eros, the life forces present in «Aus einem April», is only possible through confrontation with Thanatos, as it appears in «Fragmente aus verlorenen Tagen». The two are not separate and exist on a continuum. Conscious poetic language, as I will elaborate in my discussion of Paul de Man's *Rhetoric of Romanticism* below, is language that addresses this gap and the pain that the persona feels in the lines above and echoes the Absolute. We might say that the Absolute is part of this continuum, or even that it is the entirety of it. Exposure to the Absolute sends a jolt through the continuum that can vivify or shatter. We should note, however, that the last lines also indicate that this is the discomfort in which all change occurs.

Conscious poetic language is in a sense the reassertion of an ego after it has been shattered by the Absolute, but it is a transformed ego, one that is

now permeable. Where language has failed to keep the coherence of the ego, anxiety rushes to reassemble the shattered pieces. If we think back to our earliest preserved narratives from Mesopotamia, like Gilgamesh, the goal of the hero, like κλέος (*Kleos*, i.e. glory) later on in Greece, was to have one's name remembered. The technology of the soul had not yet been invented (nor had any of the imaginary enemies and ghosts that come with it) and, for the Mesopotamians, living on meant having one's name pressed into clay and built into the city walls. For the Greeks, it meant having one's name sung in poetry. Having any meaning at all; having a sense of self, meant that people in the future will remember one's name. A sense of self was already social and linked to social memory.

Furthermore, Rilke wrote in German and the word *Bürger* – the self that was in the process of asserting itself at that time – is linked to the French *bourgeois* and shares roots with *Berg*, meaning mountain, i.e. the place on which one would build a *Burg*, a walled structure, castle or fortress. *Bürger* was originally *Bürgverteidiger* (Duden) the protector of this structure. Our sense of self is bound up in the protection of that self, the maintenance of the structure that separates inner and outer, that which we are and that which we are not. The *Bürger*, however, who eventually became an individual protecting her own house and private property, is not the poet. The poet, although an inheritor of this «protector of the house/ego» consciousness, is the one who sees this structure and seeks to break free from it. We might recall that Homer, although he/they sang the deeds of the heroes, «saw» the mightiness of both the Greek and the Trojan⁹. Achilles, sidelined by his realization of the futility of the zero-sum game of prizes, glory and the advantage of the stronger, is in the position of the poet.

Liberation from this cycle is the task of the poet. But since the poet, like Achilles, is in re-pose (Latin: *re* + *pausere*, to pause), i.e. resigned, at least momentarily from action, that liberation must first be of the self. We might also recall that for Arjuna, time is paused by his friend Krishna and that he steps back from the action, refusing to join again until he can find such liberation in himself (see *The Bhagavadgita*). Both these heroes return to battle, but we must concentrate more on their crises because they seem more peculiarly modern. Again, I do not want to focus here on Rilke's biography, because there is an overwhelming tendency to do so in Rilke scholarship. But I should mention briefly that he was sent to military school by his father and that he briefly participated in World War I later on. Both experiences were enough to make him skeptical of «action» in the world, militarily and

⁹ Classicists refer to this as «Homeric objectivity».

maritally, which is another story altogether. It seems his whole life was suspended – paused – from action, like Achilles and Arjuna in their moments of crisis. He wants to liberate himself from the dominant mode of self at the time, the bourgeois self. Action would mean entrenching himself deeper in the conflicts that define that self¹⁰.

But he cannot simply attack and destroy that self either. An analog from Rilke's time period would be *Effi Briest*, in which Insetten is bound to old cultural codes that he knows are obsolete, but to which he nonetheless is obligated to adhere. Yes – he could simply turn his back on customs that he knows are wrong, but he would lose his social standing and sense of self. Perhaps more subtle and complex is the example provided by Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks*, in which Thomas Buddenbrook has an encounter with a work by Schopenhauer that completely transforms the way that he thinks. After promising himself that he will memorize the whole system contained within the work, he – or better, his *Bürgerhirn* – rejects the change and reigns him back into his old sense of self.

Malte Laurids Brigge is an illustration of Rilke's exploration of such an attack on the self: Malte is from a fallen aristocratic family and tries to be a poet, a clear affront to the values that he has inherited¹¹. The result is not a disintegration of the aristocratic self and the emergence of a new, liberated self. Granted, he does eventually reach some form of liberation when he sees God in the contrast of colors in a blind man's outfit. Perhaps he becomes an artist of a different kind than what he had planned, one that produces no works but is in touch with the Absolute. Malte's path is one of extreme exposure: anxiety, dread, suffering of the worst kind. Rodin, at least Rilke's idealized vision of him, gives us a better picture of the robust, yet transformed self. Rodin is capable of reaching heights completely unavailable to the bourgeois and is capable of producing great works. Rodin is centered, in possession of himself, with a great gravity surrounding his person. He has overcome the bourgeois self and his works – sculptures, i.e. images carved in stone – are what separate him from Malte, who is consumed by the fire of spirit. Malte is the shattered ego, exposed to the world and to spirit.

Creating works of art: poetry, sculpture, is a way of acting in the world and not entrenching oneself deeper in the conflicts that define and defend the pervading ego. It is the creation of a different ego, but one that is not

¹⁰ In «Quietism Now?» an anonymous author explores the quietism-related aspects of *The Sonnets to Orpheus* as well as works from Franz Kafka and Soseki Muso.

¹¹ The poet was also a noble occupation, but it is difficult to imagine the poet – even a venerated or court poet, like Schiller – as non-marginalized.

flimsy and shattered like Malte's, and not impenetrable like the hero's, but permeable. We might think of conscious poetic language as the process of creating this transformed ego. A bulwark is an image that might help us visualize this: a bulwark is on the top deck of the ship, allowing necessary exposure to the elements (one wants, after all, to explore and see where one is going; to not steer oneself into rocks), but protection at the same time. Rilke therefore requires intermediary figures; figures that both allow for exposure and that limit that exposure simultaneously.

As I have mentioned, a survey of the titles of the *Buch der Bilder* indicates perhaps its most dominant theme, which is intermediary figures: Angels, Guardian Angels, Martyrs, Saints, just to name a few, as well as Jesus himself, who is perhaps the ultimate intermediary. We require these intermediaries because direct exposure to the Absolute – or to the Real – is a shattering experience that no human can bear. Even exposure to the Angel, as in the *Duineser Elegien*, would cause one to perish. At a more concrete level, the infinite input of the senses is even too much for us and we have to mediate it through conceptualizing the Things around us, i.e. limiting and demarcating them through language. At the level of intersubjectivity, which for Rilke is not so different from our experience of Things, we have to limit the infinity of the other, the constantly changing nature of the person with whom I interact. Conscious poetic language layers or insulates from the infinite input of the senses, from the other, and from the Absolute. But it still echoes each of these.

In «Die Engel», the angels' mouths are tired, which indicates that they too give and limit input from their world through signification. Their souls are «without seam», which is to say that they have limited this input to such a degree that they are sealed off from the world. One should keep in mind the contradictory nature of language, viz. that it both puts something between me and the object, sealing me off from it in a sense, but also connects me to it. It homogenizes the world by making my infinite experience into one thing: all clouds, for instance, become one thing when they are subsumed under the word «cloud». But it also separates them from, say, the sky, so it also introduces differences. Accordingly, the next lines, «Und eine Sehnsucht (wie nach Sünde) / geht ihnen manchmal durch den Traum» (Rilke 1, 380), would indicate that this seam or seal of the angel's soul is not perfect. These angels are all almost identical (and I will address this *fast* below), indicated in the next lines, another suggestion of the totality of the angel, i.e. that they lack *difference*. They do seem, however, to be able to find quiet in «God's gardens»: «in Gottes Gärten schweigen sie, / wie viele, viele Intervalle / in seiner Macht und Melodie» (ibid.).

Although the angels themselves seem all the same and they are sealed off to their world through a seamless wall of signification, which seems to be a loud malady from which they suffer, it is noteworthy that God's song is marked by difference: it is split into many, many *intervals*. In music theory, an interval is the difference between two pitches. But perhaps even more significant in this context is that the word «interval» comes from the Latin *inter* and *uallem*, meaning «between ramparts» (Skeat 299). This again indicates a permeability, particularly in the song of God. There is the strength and stability of the ramparts but there is also space between the ramparts. As I have discussed already, poetic language is precisely this: it is a type of language that is created with the awareness that language allows us access to the world – to Things, to the Absolute, to the Other – but also blocks it by building a wall (*uallem* is also related to wall) of *images* between us and the world.

In *Das Stunden-Buch*, Rilke writes: «Wir bauen Bilder vor dir auf wie Wände; / so daß schon tausend Mauern um dich stehn» (Rilke 1, 254). The «dir» here is God and the lament of the monk-persona is that he longs for a unity with the Absolute but knows simultaneously that he would perish, should it be fulfilled. The solace is in knowing that because the walls – the ramparts, the images – are built between him and the Absolute, their structure «echoes» it, like the small waves created by a pebble, dropped in a still body of water. Alternatively, we might think of this like the «wake» a wing creates when flapped, as Rilke indicates in the next few lines of «Die Engel»:

Nur wenn sie ihre Flügel breiten,
sind sie die Wecker eines Winds:
als ginge Gott mit seinen weiten
Bildhauerhänden durch die Seiten
im dunklen Buch des Anbeginns.

(Rilke 1, 381)

Edward Snow's translation into English renders «Wecker eines Winds» as «wakers of a wind» (Snow 31), which highlights a fortuitous connection between *waking* from sleep and a *wake*, i.e. a disturbance created in the water by a ship or in the air by a bird or other flying object.

Both the sea and the sky are traditionally symbols of the infinite or the Absolute. Although the etymological connection present in «wake» and «waker» is not present in the German¹², it feathers in nicely into the image

¹² These are perhaps fanciful, but fun and euphonic connections, which is precisely the acoustic realm in which Rilke operates.

of the book through which God is leafing in the last line. A book, filled with a network of signification, is separated by layer upon layer of pages, like the ripples created in water or air that has been cut through by a ship or a wing. One might also think of the reader, who sits with the book between herself and the world, almost as with a shield that offers protection. In these last lines, God is again likened to the sculptor, the *Bildhauer*, i.e. the one who pounds out an image into stone or other materials. That the «book of the beginning» is dark is a gesture toward the subconscious, which, also in the *Stunden-Buch*, is dark, and, in the introduction to *Worpswede*, to the primitive regions of consciousness. But it ultimately has to do with creativity, which, as it is here, is always linked to divine creation, and to gesture, as I will show in the next section.

Why would Rilke choose to have the angel and the guardian angel as separate figures? As we move on to the next poem, «Der Schutzengel», we see the figure of the angel again, but with key modifications. It is important to note that the angels of the *Stunden-Buch* are aligned with Lucifer and the light – the Latin is *lucifer*, «bringer of light, morning star» (Skeat 343) – but this Guardian Angel has a certain darkness:

Du bist der Vogel, dessen Flügel kamen,
wenn ich erwachte in der Nacht und rief.
Nur mit den Armen rief ich, denn dein Namen
Ist wie ein Abgrund, tausend Nächte tief.

(Rilke 1, 381)

The persona awakes in the night and calls out, which at first seems like an indication of desperation. But the call takes the form of a gesture, calling out with the arms, because of the impossibility of saying the angel's name, which is an abyss.

We must imagine this calling out in the form of a gesture to be spontaneous. The persona seems ripped out of sleep, gesturing with the arms, prior to any willing. While this seems like desperation, it is also an expression of the simultaneous need to name this experience and the impossibility of doing so. The waking gesture is produced directly out of dream; out of the subconscious, like Rodin was able to take his dream and put it into his hands (Rilke 9, 147). In Rilke's «Ur-Geräusch» essay, a strange encounter with a makeshift phonograph provokes Rilke to want to write in the same way as this machine: he wants to pick up vibrations, not just with the ears

but using the entire skull and ultimately the full skeleton as an antenna or resonator. He wants to transmit these vibrations through his pen, like the needle on the phonograph etched into the wax to produce a recording. Such writing would be without a thought and the writer would act more as a medium than as an artist with intent.

This writing, like a machine, albeit a very makeshift and tactile one, is the modern rendition of the Romantic vision that Paul de Man critiques in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, specifically in the first chapter, «Intentional Structure of Romantic Image». Here, he comments on the image in the history of Western literature and the emergence of imagination in critical and poetic texts. He traces the progression by which the image «comes to be considered as the most prominent dimension of the style» (de Man 2) and quotes from stanza 5 of Hölderlin's «Brot und Wein»:

... nun aber nennt er sein Liebstes,
Nun, nun müssen dafür Worte, wie Blumen,
entstehen.

De Man notes that Hölderlin does not speak of images but of words, but that there is the image of the flower within the lines. The «wie», de Man points out, is the «simplest and most explicit of all metaphorical structures» (ibid.). He goes on to say that «The fundamental intent of the poetic word is to originate in the same manner as what Hölderlin calls “flowers”» (de Man 3).

The persona in Rilke's «Guardian Angel» makes a gesture straight out of sleep and out of the subconscious, which names the angel without speaking. This gesture is the same origination as that of the flower – it is a blooming. It is here that the guardian angel exists, in this gesture, like a prayer, inseparable from the persona. De Man describes the origination of the flower as rising «out of the earth without the assistance of imitation or analogy» (de Man 4). The flower is a natural object, so its «origin is determined by nothing but [its] own being» (ibid.). Words, on the other hand, «originate like something else (“like flowers”») (ibid.), so the «intent of the poetic word is to originate like the flower, [...] it strives to banish all metaphor, to become entirely literal» (ibid.). The intent of poetic language is to remove the «like» (*wie*) and to originate at an ontological level, without the *becoming* that is inherent in language. The «Ur-Geräusch» essay expresses this same desire, as does the persona in the «Guardian Angel», to not have words be «like» some *Thing*, but to have the *Thing* speak through the word, indeed, to *be* in the word: a desire that can never be fulfilled, like the desire for the Beloved, forever trapped in the underworld.

In the next lines of «Der Schutzengel», we see the relation of the angel to the gesture of the persona, which «names» the angel without speaking:

Du bist der Schatten, drin ich still entschlief,
und jeden Traum ersinnt in mir dein Samen, –
du bist das Bild, ich aber bin der Rahmen,
der dich ergänzt in glänzendem Relief.

(Rilke 1, 381)

We see here that it is the «seed» of the angel that devised the persona's dreams, which then bloom as the gesture of the previous lines. This angel does not have the stronger *Dasein* of the angel in the *Elegien*, but *is the image*. It is not, in other words, the Absolute, but a layer that is situated between the persona and the Absolute, paradoxically shielding her from the Absolute and connecting her to it simultaneously. We also see in these lines an interdependence: the angel needs the persona as «frame» that provides a necessary contrast and allows the angel to show and shine.

De Man writes about the paradox that Rilke expresses here through his imagery of the Angel and the Absolute to which it allows a complex access, which brings me back to the epigraph of this paper:

Strictly speaking, an epiphany cannot be a beginning, since it reveals and unveils what, by definition, could never have ceased to be there. Rather, it is the rediscovery of a permanent presence which has chosen to hide itself from us – unless it is we who have the power to hide from it (de Man 5).

According to de Man, we have a desire to forget the «transcendental nature of the source» (ibid.). It is not just poetic language that is at stake here, but the source of human suffering. The poet writes from the paradoxical experience of the epiphany, an experience in which she is struck by a knowledge that this mode of consciousness was always already here. But the writing itself, or speaking or gesturing, is an attempt to grasp that which cannot be grasped.

Poetic language is the conscious resituating of language in order that it should properly echo the Absolute: we cannot bear direct exposure and must rely on a «guardian angel» who is an intermediary. The echo is the blooming of the gesture, the wordless word, a movement which de Man says is «essentially paradoxical and condemned in advance to failure» (de Man 7). In «Ur-Geräusch», Rilke ultimately thinks he can find the primordial sound by playing the coronal sutures of the skull with a phonograph, but notably *does not do so*. The poetic word, as de Man writes, is an admission of

the absence of the Absolute: «The existence of the poetic image is itself a sign of divine absence, and the conscious use of poetic imagery an admission of this absence» (de Man 6). He continues:

It is clear that, in Hölderlin's own line, the words do *not* originate like flowers. They need to find the mode of their beginning in another entity; they originate out of nothing, in an attempt to be the first words that will arise as if they were natural objects and, as such, they remain essentially distinct from natural entities. Hölderlin's statement is a perfect definition of what we call a natural image: the word that designates a desire for an epiphany but necessarily fails to be an epiphany, because it is pure origination. For it is in the essence of language to be capable of origination, but of never achieving the absolute identity with itself that exists in the natural object. Poetic language can do nothing but originate anew over and over again; it is always constitutive, able to posit regardless of presence but, by the same token, unable to give a foundation to what it posits except as an intent of consciousness. (de Man 6)

De Man writes here about the natural object, but it is intimately related to the supernatural object, in this case, the Absolute and the guardian angel that echoes it, blooming through the gesture of the persona. Language cannot be the flower, the natural object, but in Rilke's poem, the gesture is the supernatural object, i.e. the guardian angel itself. The failure that de Man writes of here is, however, present because even if there is an identity here between gesture and supernatural object, the gesture is still not a word, it is only reported in words via the poem. Moreover, it is ultimately the Absolute that Rilke would express, but consciously distances himself through the intermediary figure of the angel. Rilke successfully fails, in a de Manian fashion.

The identity of the angel with the gesture is not only another expression of the *Weltinnenraum*, which is ultimately what Rochelle Tobias speaks of above in the blurring between self and world, but a link back to a dominant tendency in Romantic thought, as de Man writes in a discussion of archetypal Hellenic myths:

At times, romantic thought and romantic poetry seem to come so close to giving in completely to the nostalgia for the object that it becomes difficult to distinguish between object and image, between imagination and perception, between an expressive or constitutive and a mimetic or literal language. (de Man 7)

The object, we should remember, is nature, and nature and the Absolute are not separate matters in Romantic thought. The blurring of boundaries

between inner and outer worlds, which I discussed earlier in this study, becomes even more complex when it is not a Thing but a supernatural object that is at issue. Where the persona ends and the angel begins is a difference that is *aufgehoben* through this gesture.

The gesture of the persona is certainly mimetic, prior to any willing on the part of the persona. He is woken from sleep through the gesture and only subsequently begins to wonder how the event is to be sculpted into words:

Wie nenn ich dich? Sieh, meine Lippen lahmen.
 Du bist der Anfang, der sich groß ergießt,
 ich bin das langsame und bange Amen,
 das deine Schönheit scheu beschließt.

(Rilke 1, 381)

Here Rilke calls the angel «the origin», which is to say the transcendental source about which de Man writes, and expresses the problem of his words not being able to perform the origination, which was perhaps present in the preceding gesture. We might take note also of the distinct absence of the Absolute so far in the poem and the seeming identity of the angel with the absolute that is implied by calling it the beginning or source.

The failure of the poet to perform the Absolute in language or her ability only to echo the Absolute, we learn in the last stanza of the poem, is a difficulty that is also present for the guardian angel:

Du: der von Wundern redet wie vom Wissen
 und von den Menschen wie von Melodien
 und von den Rosen: von Ereignissen,
 die flammend sich in deinem Blick vollziehn, –
 du Seliger, wann nennst du einmal Ihn,
 aus dessen siebentem und letztem Tage
 noch immer Glanz auf deinem Flügelschlage
 verloren liegt ...
 Befiehst du, daß ich frage?

(Rilke 1, 382)

The angel speaks easily of miracles, which seems to be a task that would be subject to the same failure if the persona would attempt it. The angel, it seems, can do what the poet cannot. De Man sums up this failure in his discussion of poetic language and the desire to move closer to the ontological status of the object: «There can be flowers that “are” and poetic words that “originate”, but no poetic words that “originate” as if they “were”» (de Man 7).

But in the same way that the mimetic gesture of the persona is successful in ways that her words are not, the success of the angel's expression is not entirely through language. The events, so elusive to the persona, culminate in the gaze of the angel. «Blick», here, is ambiguous because it could be understood to be in the angel's gaze in the sense of the angel's perspective, or in the sense that the persona sees them light up in the gaze of the angel from an outside perspective. This again is a blurring of outer and inner worlds, *Weltinnenraum*, but even further complicated by the fact that Rilke writes here of a supernatural object. But it is ultimately in the stroke of the wings, in the angel's gesture, that the Absolute (ihn) appears, paradoxically, as a loss¹³.

As I have attempted to show here, Rilke's *Buch der Bilder* is not a heterogeneous conglomerate that loses its power through the vastness of its constellations. It is a subtle expression of a continuum that stretches from death, through life and gestures toward the Absolute. In this cycle of poems is contained a theory of poetic language by which the poet is able to craft a conscious language that simultaneously shields him from the maladies that are the risk of grappling with death and the Absolute and allows him to instead gain life from this encounter. The poetic word, as we have learned from Paul de Man, always fails in its task, but this failure is exactly the task of poetry. This failure is expressed in the *Buch der Bilder* as intermediary figures that allow the persona to «echo» the Absolute through a bodily gesture. This gesture, like the ancient gesture preserved in the sculptures of Rodin, can only be reported through poetry. But it may be picked up by a passer-by: an attentive reader of the *Buch der Bilder*.

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¹³ Edward Snow's translates this line as «Him / from whose seventh and last day / shards of glory can still be found», (Snow 33) which loses the sense of paradox that is present in Rilke's «auf deinem Flügelschlage / verloren liegt ...» (Rilke 1, 382).

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