

SENSE AND CREATIVE LABOR IN RAINER MARIA RILKE'S PROSE WORKS

by

NICHOLAS REYNOLDS

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Student: Nicholas Reynolds

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This dissertation has been accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in the Department of German and Scandinavian by:

Jeffrey Librett	Chairperson
Michael Stern	Core Member
Kenneth Calhoon	Core Member
Joseph Fracchia	Institutional Representative

and

Kimberly Andrews Espy	Vice President for Research and Innovation; Dean of the Graduate School
-----------------------	--

Original approval signatures are on file with the University of Oregon Graduate School.

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

Nicholas Reynolds

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Although Rainer Maria Rilke is one of the most widely-read poets in the world and there are mountains of secondary literature on his poetry, his prose works are not given nearly so much attention. The present study is a reading of several of those works, with particular attention given to the role that the senses and creative labor play there. I begin with his "Ur-geräusch" essay (1919), in which Rilke reveals a fascination with the phonograph and a certain jealousy of its abilities. The phonograph provides a model for creative labor, as well as clues about Rilke's thinking on the relationship between this process of creation and the senses. There is an original synesthetic moment when, as a child in his science classroom, Rilke *sees* the phonograph translating the vibrations received by the horn and carving them into the wax and in turn *hears* his and the voices of his classmates played back through that horn. This moment in which the senses are blurred together perplexes him and he is left to make sense of this experience for years afterward.

With the *Geschichten vom lieben Gott* (1900), the question turns to the relationship between creative labor and creation as such. The primordially that was revealed in the sound produced by the phonograph is the subconscious for Rilke, which is our connection to the divine. Although we have been severed from that divine source, we

are able to produce it through certain circumstances, viz. through our intersubjective interactions, especially storytelling. We also cultivate it through labor, if we are able to do it: we are stuck in the “Seventh Day,” unable to work for the most part, which is the particular plight of *Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910). He undergoes the necessary transformation to do labor, a certain deconstruction of the self, but is unable to complete the circuit by expressing this change through his works. *Auguste Rodin* (1903), Rilke’s monograph on the sculptor, shows us the ideal artist: able to dig up the tremendous energies of the subconscious and to channel them into great works.

CURRICULUM VITAE

NAME OF AUTHOR: Nicholas Reynolds

GRADUATE AND UNDERGRADUATE SCHOOLS ATTENDED:

University of Oregon, Eugene
State University of New York at New Paltz

DEGREES AWARDED:

Doctor of Philosophy, German, 2014, University of Oregon
Master of Arts, German, 2009, University of Oregon
Master of Arts, Philosophy, 2007, University of Oregon
Bachelor of Arts, Philosophy, 2004, State University of New York at New Paltz

AREAS OF SPECIAL INTEREST:

Modern German Literature

Modern Philosophy

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE:

Graduate Teaching Fellow, University of Oregon, 2007-2009, 2010-2014

Instructor, Pädagogische Hochschule Ludwigsburg (Ludwigsburg University of Education) 2009-2010

GRANTS, AWARDS, AND HONORS:

Astrid Williams Award, University of Oregon, 2014

Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach Fellowship, Pädagogische Hochschule Ludwigsburg, 2013

Philip Hansen Graduate Fellowship in German and Scandinavian, 2010

Baden-Württemberg Scholarship, 2010

Baden-Württemberg Scholarship, 2009

Outstanding Graduate in Philosophy, SUNY New Paltz, 2003

Rotary Exchange Student, Ignatz-Taschner Gymnasium, 1998

PUBLICATIONS:

Reynolds, Nicholas. "A Vessel to Navigate a Terrifying World: Rilke's *Stunden-Buch*." *Studia Austriaca* 22 (2014), 17-37.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

There are a great number of diverse elements that need to be brought together in this introduction both in terms of the texts that I have chosen to analyze and the thinkers whose help I have required in order to illuminate those texts. But it is precisely the fact that this great diversity of angles is required that makes the prose works of Rainer Maria Rilke so appealing. That one cannot accurately say that the following study is purely a phenomenological, Marxian, psychoanalytic or critical theoretical reading, or that it is a deconstruction, speaks to the wonderful complexity of these works, some of which are routinely pushed aside and categorized as Rilke's "juvenilia." Not only would Rilke's works resist any attempt to choose one of these methods and apply it in some systematic fashion, (which would be inappropriate for any of these methods anyway) but an attempt to extract a philosophy from these works would be equally problematic, and is not my intention here.

There are many texts that fall under the category of prose in Rilke's corpus: plays, essays and reviews on art and literature, volumes of correspondences, speeches, etc. In a study on Rilke's prose, one might expect to find the most influential of those works, like *Die Weise von Liebe und Tod des Cornets Christoph Rilke*, his first great success in terms of popularity. There are even texts that specifically address art and look at a specific examples of artists, like *Worpswede*. My only gesture toward *Die Weise von Liebe*, a tale that one might call thematically epic, is in the structure of *Die Geschichten vom lieben Gott*, which is arranged in a way that echoes homeric ring composition. Although I have

made reference to *Worpswede*, it is only in a short section that helps illuminate the role of darkness in the prose works.

Short Summary of the Study

But I have chosen to tell a type of hermeneutic narrative here. It uses the voices of many thinkers, including Rilke himself, to illuminate the role of the senses and creative labor in Rilke's prose works. It follows, approximately, the following arch: The second chapter, on Rilke's "Ur-geräusch" essay (1919), poses the initial problem. Early on in Rilke's life, he builds a phonograph with his classmates in science class. When they record the sound and play it back, there is an initial moment of puzzlement and wonder that sticks with the poet for years afterward. It turns out that in this moment in which the sound of the students' voices was played back, the lines between the senses –specifically sight and sound– were blurred for the young Rilke and he is left to make sense of this experience. This moment opens up several lines of inquiry. First, there is the question of speaking, hearing and understanding in narrative and storytelling, all of which are the subject of the third and fourth chapters, on the *Geschichten vom lieben Gott* (1900). Creation as such is also at issue here and develops into the question of artistic creation, especially writing, a theme that was first opened up by the "writing" of the improvised stylus in the wax of the phonograph. Sculpting is also implicated here, and I begin to introduce this theme through one of the *Geschichten* that is about Michelangelo (perhaps an earlier model for the idealized figure of Rodin), who finds Spirit in the stone that he is carving. The primal sound that Rilke had heard come through the phonograph was Spirit

or Life, and the creation myth that he tells in the *Geschichten* has human beings cut off from this force, stuck in "the seventh day" and unable to do creative labor.

The fifth chapter, on Rilke's novel, *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910), continues with the question of writing and artistic creation, while looking at the role of sight and "learning to see," which Malte states as his goal. While Malte is successful in a sense (he finds God in the contrast of colors in a blind man's outfit), he fails in terms of artistic creation because he is never really able to write. He is an example of being stuck in "the seventh day." He is, in any case, certainly not a positive model for being an artist, but a negative one. He illustrates many of the difficulties that are inevitable if the artist is truly engaged in the process of artistic creation, the most notable of which is anxiety. A perhaps unexpected contour is uncovered in this chapter, because not only the lines between the senses are blurred, but also between self and world. In this dizzying transformation, Malte comes to a new understanding of his relation to the world and the people around him. But his self or ego seems to dissolve into the background.

This dissolution of self is certainly not what happens to Auguste Rodin, which is why I have chosen Rilke's monograph on the sculptor, written in 1903, as the final piece of this study. The equilibrium that Malte (and perhaps Rilke himself) lacks is present in superabundance in the idealized figure of Rodin. Rilke identifies Rodin as a force of nature throughout the monograph, particularly because of his more-than-human ability to work constantly, an ability that Rilke perceives as lacking in himself. Like the phonograph, which picks up on vibrations and translates them from the horn to the tip of the stylus, Rodin is able to pick up on the very motion of Life and translate it through his chisel.

Theoretical Underpinning of the Study

As I mentioned already, there are a great number of thinkers who have provided guidance in my reading of Rilke's prose. Here, I will attempt to bring them together so that the thread becomes visible between lines of thought that might otherwise seem incompatible. The first thinker that I should include here is Karl Marx, not because I have included close readings of his works, but because his notion of *Sinnlichkeit* and his idea of the human being as "historical" has provided a cornerstone for my thinking on the senses and the role that they play in Rilke's work. In short, both of these terms mean that our senses are not fixed, given faculties with which we are born, but that they develop over the course of our lifetime in response to the conditions around us. Through awareness of this fact and conscious manipulation of one's senses in the form of artistic creation, one is able to transform oneself and the human being.

Sinnlichkeit is the idea that our ability to find gratification as human beings has to be opened up and cultivated. A "musical ear" or an "eye for beauty" (Marx 89) are not given but need to be brought into being. This would be a "humanized" person, but, as is evident everywhere in our experience, we are for the most part dehumanized:

The *sense* caught up in crude practical need has only a *restricted* sense. For the starving man, it is not the human form of food that exists but only its abstract being as food; it could just as well be there in its crudest form, and it would be impossible to say wherein the feeding-activity differs from that of *animals*. (ibid.)

Being able to make finer distinctions, which is to say, mediating one's experience, is essential to *expanding* that experience. As we will see in the second chapter, Rilke uses the imagery of the "five gardens of the senses" to communicate this capability. The image

of the garden suggests that the senses are to be cultivated and cared for, and that they grow from seeds into full plants. But it also suggests that they undergo periodic deadening, which may be a reference to the withdraw from the world in a character like Malte, or perhaps to the "interstitial background" behind the senses, of which Jennifer Anna Gossetti-Forencei writes, and that I will explain further in chapter 2. This is a space "between" the senses that reveals their underlying unity.

We are historical, which means that depending on when and where we live our lives, our senses develop in a very different fashion. I take Rilke's commandment, that we must change our lives – "Du mußt dein Leben ändern" (Rilke 2, 257) – to mean that we have to humanize ourselves in the fashion that Marx describes and find the richness of humanity, i.e. make ourselves "*profoundly endowed with all the senses*" (Marx 89). This is what labor means for Marx and throughout this study I look at attempts in Rilke's work to do true, creative labor. Marx writes, "The *forming* of the five senses is a labour of the entire history of the world down to the present." (Marx 89).

Rilke's obsession with Things would raise an eyebrow for most Marxian thinkers, including Theodor Adorno, who calls Rilke (as well as those who share the project of the cultivation of a fine sensibility) a "Sprecher für ungemilderte Grausamkeit" (Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 273). Rilke's want to become a machine like the phonograph would also be viewed with skepticism and we might sooner think of the horrible machine in Franz Kafka's *In der Strafkolonie* than we would of an artist who is able to constantly produce creative artwork. But in order to understand what Rilke is trying to say we need to approach him on his own terms, which are quite as legitimate as any other line of thought. Both Marx and Rilke felt a great urgency to change the world in terms of our

surroundings, to "aesthetic rather than anaesthetic, life-enhancing rather than life-destroying" (Fracchia 65). Although Marx is not usually thought of in this way, it is this that makes his vision "profoundly aesthetic" (ibid.), as Fracchia writes, agreeing with Terry Eagleton. Rilke acknowledges that we are caught up in forces that are larger than the individual can control, but also gives us ways of pushing back against alienation, an idea that I address in the final chapter, where we see Rodin using the very fact that his hands seem to operate independently of his own will in the creative process.

Of the thinkers who assist me here, perhaps the most closely related to Marx are Walter Benjamin and Max Horkheimer. I introduce Benjamin already in the second chapter to describe the strange experience of a machine that can speak by using his thoughts on "aura." But where Benjamin really comes into play is in the third and fourth chapters, on the *Geschichten*. The content and imagery of those stories are absolutely important, but equally significant is the way in which they are told. The narrator of the stories has managed to preserve the art of storytelling, which, according to Benjamin, is something that we have lost.¹ Through stories, we are able to transmit more than information, which is the degraded form in which we find what is communicated through the novel, we are also able to pass on council and wisdom. For Rilke, God is spoken into being in passing on a story.

As with the senses, which are humanized only through a surplus that goes beyond the mere satisfaction of needs, here too there is a certain supplement: "information" would state the mere facts of the case, i.e. what one needs to know in order to meet the

¹ Benjamin writes that World War I was the event that crippled our ability to tell stories and the *Geschichten* are written, of course, well before then. We might think of them, then, as a glimpse into an older world in which storytelling was possible.

needs of a pragmatic scenario or at the very least, to entertain oneself. Council and wisdom go beyond this and make one person's experience another's. Benjamin looks back to epic poetry, which was meant to be memorized, sung, and passed on. He also looks to fairytales, which are not meant to be left on the page, but recalled, embellished, and propagated. The novel is written by an individual, alone, and read by an individual, alone.

As I hinted above with the word "mediated," in order to refine and expand our senses, we need language. A simple example might serve to elucidate this point. If I go outside and look at the trees, knowing absolutely nothing about them except that they are trees, then this is precisely what I will see: an undifferentiated mass. I need to learn how to see trees. When I start taking note of the differences between them and giving names to them – spruce, oak, palm, breadfruit – my experience expands and I see more than I did before. But this is not the only form of mediation that there is. It is not only through words that we mediate: a dancer learns to *articulate* muscles and make gestures that others do not and may or may not know the physiological terminology for those muscles. She or he would be able also to see those developments in a colleague. There are also other forms of mediation, which slowly becomes evident throughout this study. Even if I am not a painter, if I look at a cloud and then attempt to paint it, when I go outside later and look at the clouds, I will see them differently. Each brushstroke – or chip with the chisel – is, in this case, like a word: it allows me to see closer and in a more detailed fashion. Work on the “object” – making it a Thing – is work on the self and the senses.

Being able to articulate my experience (which is always of the senses), then, is being able to expand that experience. It is also being able to be receptive to others' experience, as in the example of the dancer, who is able to see the development of

another dancer because she or he has shared that experience. But there is one experience that we all seem to share, which is that of suffering, and this is where Max Horkheimer's work is valuable in the present study. The tales of the *Geschichten vom lieben Gott* are similar to fairy tales, or maybe to the works of Boccaccio, in that they are not any kind of escape. In a word, they are "inhospitable," as Horkheimer describes the work of Shakespeare, Goethe and Picasso. This is a telling term to use, because the reader finds no comfort, no *Trost*, in them. Instead, they resonate with our own suffering in such a way as to acknowledge the difficulty of human life. But there is no moral at the end which tells us that for this reason we need to "pull ourselves up by our bootstraps" in order to overcome our suffering. It is more of an emotional *Anstoß* that calls for a more fundamental change; one that transforms our relationship to the world and the people around us.

Why then, the reader might ask, does Rilke's write stories? If his purpose is to shock us into changing ourselves by making us look at ourselves the way we are instead of the way that we wish we could be, why not simply write history? Or report the events that were taking place in the world at that time? Surely there is something gruesome enough to give that same push without inventing some fantasy world. "Hospitable" might mean to offer shelter, which, as I have said, these works do not. I have therefore strayed into an irreconcilable contradiction, because I have said that we need to create works that allow us to see ourselves as we are, but then have said that we need to write fictional fantasies. But it is precisely this meaningful contradiction that is the motor for another line of thought that is present throughout this study, viz. the sublime. Particularly the

element of the "safe reserve" that is always present in the sublime is important to my case:²

Kühne überhangende gleichsam drohende Felsen, am Himmel sich auftürmende Donnerwolken, mit Blitzend und Krachen einherziehend, Vulkane in ihrer ganzen zerstörenden Gewalt, Orkane mit ihrer zurückgelassenen Verwüstung, der grenzenlose Ozean in Empörung gesetzt, ein hoher Wasserfall eines mächtigen Flusses u. d. gl. machen unser Vermögen zu widerstehen in Vergleichung mit ihrer Macht zur unbedeutenden Kleinigkeit. Aber ihr Anblick wird nur um desto anziehender, je furchtbarer er ist, wenn wir uns nur in Sicherheit befinden; und wir nennen diese Gegenstände gern erhaben, weil sie die Seelenstärke über ihr gewöhnliches Mittelmaß erhöhen, und ein Vermögen zu widerstehen von ganz anderer Art in uns entdecken lassen, welches uns Mut macht, uns mit der scheinbaren Allgewalt der Natur messen zu können (Kant, *Werke 5*, 333).³

The key part of this passage for the present study is that we have to be at a safe distance. It is the difference between seeing a bear in the woods from a moving vehicle and finding that one has blundered between a mother bear and her cubs. Not only would the latter not be an instance of the sublime in Kant's sense, but we cannot in fact bear raw exposure to nature. We would, like the persona in Rilke's *Duineser Elegien* who encounters an angel,

² David Farrell Krell emphasizes the element of the safe reserve throughout *Contagion*, a work to which I make some reference in the subsequent chapters.

³ Bold, overhanging, as it were threatening cliffs, thunder clouds towering up into the heavens, bringing with them flashes of lightning and crashes of thunder, volcanoes with their all-destroying violence, hurricanes with the devastation they leave behind, the boundless ocean set into a rage, a lofty waterfall on a mighty river, etc., make our capacity to resist into an insignificant trifle in comparison with their power. But the sight of them only becomes all the more attractive the more fearful it is, as long as we find ourselves in safety, and we gladly call these objects sublime because they elevate the strength of our soul above its usual level, and allow us to discover within ourselves a capacity for resistance of quite another kind, which gives us the courage to measure ourselves against the apparent all-powerfulness of nature (Kant 144-145).

perish before the power – the stronger *Dasein* – of nature. Stories are, then, a way of closely looking at the human being, which is always the actual “subject” of the sublime, without raw exposure to ourselves. Raw exposure would cause a recoil of anxiety, which I explain further below.

There are many provisos, qualifications and subsections in Kant's analysis of the sublime. What is important here is that we need to represent the world and other people to ourselves in thought and language, but that they always exceed these representations. There are moments in which these representations recede, which can be epiphanous or anxiety ridden, which is perhaps the true meaning of anxiety. In these moments, we watch as language fails to grasp the "experience" in front of us. The scare quotes are because experience is the realm of the sensual, which opens a new problem. Kant calls this the supersensuous, in the sense that it is beyond our senses, and he refers to the infinite, which we always want to contain as a whole or totality, despite the fact that we cannot. It is precisely this *pathos*-charged attempt, this tragic impossibility, that this inquiry investigates. The supersensuous may correspond, I might add preliminarily, to the "interstitial space" behind the senses, which is uncovered through synaesthetic moments like the one in which Rilke's sense of sight and sound collide through looking at the sight of the etching produced by the sound vibrations in the wax.

The inevitable attempt, despite its tragic impossibility, to say what cannot be said, which is to say, to contain the infinite within the finite, is what necessitates a kind of speech that goes beyond ordinary, everyday language. Everyday language deals mostly with totalities⁴ and indeed, language as such is ultimately stuck within this trap

⁴ This is not to say that a conversation about everyday things is unable to transcend these boundaries. People involved in building or repairing something might share “council” with one another through

(therefore, Kafka.) Philosophy, poetry, and the prose that fills the pages of all the works to be addressed in this study are all different ways of trying to speak a language that invokes the infinite and attempts to resist or allay the necessary collapse of the infinite into the finite. They are the Achillean wrath that will not be satisfied to be stranded within its earthly container but are, nonetheless, always split between two worlds.

This mortal necessity of returning to the finite requires a language that preserves both our need for exposure to the world and others around us, but also to be shielded against them. For this reason, I use the image of the ship, particularly the bulwark of a ship. In order to navigate a ship, the main deck needs to be exposed to the elements in order to see the stars and navigate around dangerous obstacles. The bulwark is above the main deck, providing protection against the elements, but necessary exposure to them. I use this imagery because of the necessity that I see in language. There are moments that exceed language, but, paradoxically, we need to speak about them in order to open them up. Language, perhaps organized into a specific language game, is the ego: the story that I tell about myself makes up that self. The mystical thought that we can give up the self is perhaps true for a moment, but interruptions like these are sure to be reassembled, as I show in relation to Thomas Buddenbrook in the chapter on *Malte*. Art is the occasion for such interruptions; poetry is the conscious restructuring of language and the self in such a way that I can be exposed and in relation to the Other, which always involves some degree of violence against that I, and subsequently maintain a sense of self.

Another thinker who figures heavily into this study is Jacques Derrida. Particularly, the idea of the *pharmakon* helps to understand a number of different issues

discussing the matter at hand. The uncanny experience of the phonograph in the next chapter might be an example.

that are raised by the texts investigated here. Perhaps the most acute instance in which this idea is of service is in explaining the dramatic affect that the narrator of the *Geschichten* has on the people to whom he tells his stories. The stranger, who is somewhat of an allegory himself, is the recipient – the patient, or victim – of one of the narrator's tales. The stranger comes into the house of the narrator, which means that he is the Other-within-the same, like Kant's notion of our tragic attempt to represent the infinite within ourselves (and like Levinas' *psychism*, which I address in detail in the chapter on *Malte*).

The *pharmakon*, like wisdom, is neither good nor bad. The narrator's tales are like the *pharmakon* because they have a powerful impact on his listeners, and ambiguously heal and inflict simultaneously, just like the recipient of a vaccine might show symptoms of the disease against which she has tried to protect herself. Language always wounds to some degree, which is to say, it penetrates the fortification of the ego, challenging one's notion of oneself. A story, or poem, is language that is aware of this fact and is strategically structured to do so in a precise way, like a vaccine contains the contagion that it seeks to eliminate. For this reason, I have introduced David Farrell Krell's idea of the contagion, which he relates to homeopathy.

I have required the idea of the contagion because of the ambiguity of the effect of the tales, but also because of the way that the tales spread throughout the community. The narrator himself does not disseminate the tales, he only tells them to individuals. But soon the entire community has become contaminated⁵ with the stories. The narrator can pick up where he left off with different individuals, confident that the beginning of the tale has

⁵ In the Romantic understanding of health and sickness, these two terms are not mutually exclusive. There is an ambiguity here, which I treat in the chapters on the *Geschichten*, that cannot be collapsed. Preliminarily, one might picture a vaccine that travels like a virus.

spread to her or him already. Like the angels that raze Sodom and Gomorrah, or Mephistopheles, who shows Faust the fullness of experience, calling the narrator simply good or evil becomes impossible. He is certainly a dark character, and, as will become clear in subsequent chapters, darkness and light are not what one would expect. The narrator starts to take the form of a “magician,” “wizard,” “poisoner,” (Derrida 132), and is all the more ambiguous, and maybe even sinister, because his stories are for children. The stories themselves are like a “charm, philter, drug, remedy, poison” (ibid.), i.e. like the *pharmakon*.

It might be helpful to introduce Kierkegaard, Husserl, Heidegger and Levinas as a constellation, rather than individually, because they emerge in interaction with one another in the chapter on *Malte Laurids Brigge*, one of the longer and more difficult chapters of this study. Kierkegaard and Heidegger provide a framework for understanding Malte's anxiety. Heidegger and Kierkegaard have very similar models of anxiety and I understand Heidegger's to be a secularized version of Kierkegaard's, at least in its language. In both models, anxiety is a type of flight from the self and the world, but also constitutes our relation to it. To fit it into the broader context that I am developing here, it is the wounding that we both need and cannot bear. As Kierkegaard states, anxiety ends up being our relation to Spirit, and the task is not to eliminate anxiety but to transform it. I place the idea of anxiety into relation with alienation, and argue that alienation is also to be transformed rather than eliminated.

My instinct in saying that alienation is not to be eliminated, but transformed, is that the self is a living thing and that if we try to eliminate elements of it, we only end up fortifying them because the self protects itself. This idea follows somewhat from Husserl,

the teacher of both Heidegger and Levinas, who proceeded from the model of intentionality, which, simply put, means that there is a self and a world, which are inseparable. It is something like the subject-object relation, which Husserl calls the “natural” worldview, i.e. the way that we have come to view the world because of the natural sciences. There is an *I* that is present here, over and against a world that is outside.

In the phenomenological ἐποχή (epoché), one brackets out this way of viewing the world. It is not erased, but suspended or set aside so that one might view it. The transcendental ego is the sight from which one is able to view the subject-object relation. This evolves in Heidegger’s thought into *Dasein*, which is similar to the transcendental ego in Husserl, in that it lifts the distinction between self and world. But by both models, it seems, we always return to an everyday mode of consciousness, which is better illustrated through the literary example of Thomas Mann’s *Buddenbrooks*, in which Thomas Buddenbrooks experiences a whole new way of being-in-the-world after reading Schopenhauer, but is pulled back into his old mode through his *Bürgerhirn*. I have used the term *Adelhirn* to describe a similar phenomenon with Malte, who wants desperately to transform himself, but is pulled back down through the reassertion of the self. This whole elastic motion – the self approaching itself and its flight away from itself – might be called anxiety.

One might not expect Levinas and Heidegger to play such non-oppositional roles, since the former was rather critical of the latter. Levinas’ critique of Heidegger is mostly a question of the degree to which the Other, ethics or intersubjectivity, is addressed in Heidegger’s works. Although a glance at the table of contents of *Sein und Zeit* reveals

that intersubjectivity is certainly not absent from the work, the priority of the ontological question, Levinas argues, makes ethics, which he calls metaphysics, an afterthought. But what makes *Malte* so powerful is that it forces us to think both philosophers at once. I argue, for that reason, that the question of priority is not really the question at all: coming into relation to Being arouses also a new relation to the Other, or vice versa. It is impossible to say which comes first. The opening that takes place in *Malte* gives him both a new sense of being-in-the-world, a new relation to other people and puts him in touch with a divine being.

But despite this opening, which allows Malte to learn “how to see,” i.e. gives him a new way of perceiving the world, he fails as an artist. He is a dramatization of what happens when the process of mediation is misunderstood. He has opened himself to almost otherworldly forces, but has no way to direct those forces. It is an expression on Rilke’s part of a limit; a limit that may in fact have to be crossed in order to do creative labor. It is, ultimately, the impossible task of the poet to overcome death itself:

Sei immer tot in Eurydike –, singender steige,
preisender steige zurück in den reinen Bezug.

Hier, unter Schwindenden, sei, im Reiche der Neige,

sei ein klingendes Glas, das sich im Klang schon zerschlug. (Rilke 2, 759)

The image of the breaking glass is one of the artist who has crossed the limit and shattered, as we see with the ending of *Malte*. After the moment in which he feels that the existence of God has been proven to him, by virtue of the absurd, viz. the contrast of colors in a blind man’s outfit, his character disintegrates into several minor story lines.

So Malte is replaced, it seems, by narrative, and as I said above, the self is a type of narrative. Malte is transformed in a sense, but it seems that he loses himself in narrative, which is not the kind of transformation that Rilke wants to advocate. We should remember that Malte is a negative; an image that Rilke wanted to dispel from himself so that he would not share the same fate. The *I* seems to disappear from the novel, and perhaps lost in a fantasy that blocks further exposure to the world. Malte's over-exposure to the world and to others ends in a permanent withdrawal from that world. This is, quite simply, because he is a bad writer. He proceeds to the depths of his own being in order to gain contact with something primordial but has no way of mediating his experience, which leaves those forces to feed only on him. It is the complete crippling of self; a self exposed with no protective layer, and the subsequent, malignant formation of a self that has not been consciously constructed.

Malte, like Eurydice, is a part of the self that must be left in the underworld: remembered, perhaps even communicated with, but never to be retrieved. The poem cited above tells us that we are to *be* and simultaneously to know our condition of non-being, which is the glass in the process of shattering: it both is and is not. The shattering is an image of the shattered ego, which is an inevitable result of the encounter with the Other. A shattered ego is exposed and vulnerable to that which harms it, as well as to an incredible source of creative power. It is for the latter that Rilke commands us *to be* this shattering glass, the image of which lays emphasis on the risk and the limit that is being crossed in such an encounter.

The glass is both the recipient and producer of sound vibrations. One might tend to think of an opera singer singing a note that is high enough to break the glass, or

perhaps of someone tracing the rim of a crystal glass until it rings. In both cases, there are vibrations being directed at the glass and the glass is transmitting vibrations in turn. The image of the phonograph is a similar one. The horn picks up vibrations and “translates” them into wax, so it is receiving vibrations and producing them. But further, it can pick up the vibrations from the wax (after being hardened) and transmit them through the horn. The difference in the two images is that the phonograph preserves something in the process and can do so over and over again. It is able to transmit the vibrations without being destroyed in the process.

The phonograph is, in a word, Rodin. It is a metaphor for the successful artist. Rilke was forced to produce in fits and starts, a method that ultimately left a sizable legacy, but which Rilke clearly did not prefer to steady working, as Edward Snow writes in the introduction to his translation of the *Buch der Bilder*:

Most of Rilke’s great works came into being rapidly, in short, creative bursts: twenty-six days in 1899 for the first section of *The Book of Hours*, eight days each in 1901 and 1903 for the last two sections, for a total of one hundred and thirty-five poems; most of the *New Poems* in successive summers of 1906 and 1907; all fifty five of the *Sonnets to Orpheus* and six of the ten *Duino Elegies* in a single February of 1922. (Rilke, *The Book of Images*, x)

The one exception to this, Snow goes on to explain, is the *Book of Images*, which emerged over a seven-year period (ibid.).⁶ It is as though Rilke saw the necessity of the intensity that is present in the image of the shattering glass, and may have seen a certain similarity in himself to that image, but that he wanted to transform himself into

⁶ An interesting study would be a reading of *Auguste Rodin* through the *Buch der Bilder*, in order to see what the idealized figure of Rodin has in common with these poems.

something less volatile. If we think about the image of the needle cutting into the wax, there is a certain destruction that is taking place, but it is meaningful, mediating, and has a certain duration that Malte lacks, with his inability to write.

The poem cited above further states that we should be forever dead in Eurydice. Something of a *memento mori*, this statement reminds us that we are to maintain a connection with death in order to live fully. Life, accordingly, is the principle that guides Rilke's manuscript on Rodin. Creation involves tapping into an ancient darkness within ourselves, which, as Rilke writes in *Worpswede*, is a horrible rage that reaches back through all of our previous stages of evolution. Darkness, as will become clear throughout the subsequent chapters, is often related or even equated with God, but also with the unknowable interior of things, as well as with children and the unconscious. We are separate from God because, as we learn from the *Geschichten*, he is unable to see us in our maturity. We remain closed off to him and he to us, but this mutual unknowability is nonetheless a relation. It is not a matter of knowledge *via negativa*, but of allowing for this dark source to guide the hand, perhaps without knowing at all.

We know the entire world, Rilke wants to say in *Rodin*, through things, although those things remain always ultimately unknown to us. There are remarkable similarities here with the psychoanalytic theory of D.H. Winnicott in his *Playing and Reality*, which I explain further in the final chapter. Briefly, we use "transitional objects," objects that are familiar to us as children like a toy or blanket, as a layer of protection to explore the world. For the child to move into the world without this protection would be over-exposure: there is too much for the small psyche to handle. But by focusing on the single

object, a replacement for the mother's breast, the child learns new objects and finally a whole world of objects. Rilke, as I show in the last chapter, uses precisely this model.

So the darkness and unknownness in the interiority of the thing is also the unknown in myself – it is the dark unconscious to which I must gain a sort of access in order to break free of “the seventh day,” my inability to do creative labor, and to create genuine artifacts. The hands of the *Geschichten*, separated from God, and the hands of the artist, which have become alienated as in *Malte*, are not reconnected per se, but are realized in their alienated condition. Like the child who has to move from familiar to foreign objects, we have become “at home” in our alienation and cannot simply overcome it in a single leap. As I mentioned above, alienation, like anxiety, has to be transformed and not immediately eliminated, or else we risk simply falling deeper into both. Rodin “takes charge” of his alienation by allowing his hands to work almost independently of himself, guided, as Rilke phrases it, by the thing. The thing speaks through him, with a sort of “middle voice.”

This latter phenomenon, the “middle voice,” gives a further complication to the idea of mediation. I mean “mediation” simply in the sense of giving language to something, although I mean language in an expanded sense, viz. that a person provides a word for something, but I want also to emphasize that it can be a brush stroke or the chip of a chisel. These are all “signs” that mediate. One might also think of a gesture, as in the case of a dancer who “articulates” through the movement of muscles in the body (gesture, too, plays a crucial role in *Rodin*.) The middle voice, a bit of grammar forgotten in the English language, was used reserved for the poet acting as medium, as when a muse spoke through her or him.

The last person that I want to add to the list in this introduction is John Llewelyn, whose idea of the middle voice is present as a backdrop to much of the thinking in this study. I do not often cite him, but he is there in spirit, so to speak. He offers some insight into the 13th Sonnet of the *Sonnette an Orpheus*, which I use to show Rilke's tendency to use the things around him as "amplifiers," i.e. something that will make visible that which would otherwise remain invisible. Where the flavors of the fruits named in the poem become "*namenlos*," we can read it in the face of the child who eats them. The phonograph acts in a similar fashion, amplifying miniscule grooves in the wax (or skull, which is Rilke's bizarre plan for the phonograph). But more generally, Llewelyn tells us what the ultimate task of the poet is: to sing of something in poetry (or poetic prose, which is what Rilke's prose works are) is to set it apart and make it sacred, which is to say, to not let it be simply an object, but a Thing. The world must ultimately be sung – painted, sculpted, written, etc. – which is our greatest responsibility and the nature of the change that Rilke demands of us throughout all of his work.

CHAPTER II

RILKE'S "PRIMORDIAL SOUND": AN IMPASSE OF THE SENSES

Introduction

Rilke's "Ur-geräusch" ("Primordial Sound"), an essay written in 1919 and a reflection on an earlier childhood experience, is perhaps one of the most bizarre moments in Rilke's prose. But it is simultaneously one of the most insightful because of the clues that it provides for knowing who Rilke is as an artist of prose, poetry, and thinking. The purpose of including a reading of the essay in the present work is that Rilke's experience with the phonograph, which I will describe here in detail, confounds his senses and calls them into question, making him realize that his senses have always been in motion and process instead of being static, finished faculties. I have chosen this piece to start with because it reaches back into Rilke's childhood and the experience that he describes echoes throughout the rest of the prose pieces that I will be considering.⁷ The primal sound that he describes is an originating moment in the sense that it disrupts the young poet's idea of how the senses work and introduces to him the odd phenomenon of objects "speaking," a disruption that stays with him through his later years and manifests itself in many different ways. I will consider some of these in this chapter in order to illustrate the significance of this piece to later works, as well as to support my argument, viz. that the senses are not fixed, but variable according to one's circumstances, and that Rilke's prose pieces are a chronicle of this process.

There are several key moments in the "Ur-geräusch" essay: one is Rilke as a child taking note of the eerie silence that is created when his class plays back a recording that it

⁷ Silke Pasewalck, in "Die fünffingrige Hand. Die Bedeutung der sinnlichen Wahrnehmung beim späten Rilke," shows that there are many often-overlooked connections between the "Ur-geräusch" essay and Rilke's later works.

has made with a phonograph, which they have built in their classroom. Another is Rilke's realization, many years later, that the sutures of the skull that he has in his room look like the "writing" – the way in which the improvised stylus⁸ carved into the wax to record their voices – that the phonograph has produced. Still another is Rilke's rather eccentric impulse to play the skull with the phonograph (although he does not actually do so) in order to produce the "Ur-geräusch," the primordial, first sound that is in the background of all sound.⁹ Finally, Rilke's description of the "five gardens" of the senses will lay the groundwork for understanding the importance of the senses in Rilke's prose, a theme that runs throughout the entirety of this study. The experience of the phonograph confounds the senses, merging sight and sound, visible and invisible and provides an early instance of a thing "speaking" to Rilke.

Building the Phonograph

The "Ur-geräusch" essay begins with a description of a scene from Rilke's childhood in which his science teacher resolves to build a phonograph from "dem handgreiflichsten Zubehöre" (Rilke 11, 1085-86).¹⁰ It is a time in which the phonograph stands at the center of public attention and the teacher would apparently like to show them the simplicity of the device, which consists of the following elements:

⁸ "Stylus," as Christian Jany points out in "Schriftkerben / Kerfs of Writing: A Phenomenology of Kafka's Stylus," finds its roots in the Greek *stylos* and the Latin *stilus*, "the instrument of writing originally used for writing upon or, more accurately, incising wax tablets" (Jany 396).

⁹ This is certainly a reference, among other things, to Goethe's idea of the *Urpflanze*, which he explored in his *Italienische Reise*. The *Urpflanze* is something like a Platonic form in which one could find the origin of all other plants. It is a thought-construct, but Goethe does not shut out the possibility of finding an actual plant that has this quality.

¹⁰ This refers to the Insel edition of Rilke's *Sämtliche Werke* in 12 volumes.

Ein Stück biegsamerer Pappe, zu einem Trichter zusammengebogen, dessen engere runde Öffnung man sofort mit einem Stück undurchlässigen Papiers, von jener Art, wie man es zum Verschlusse der Gläser eingekochten Obstes zu verwenden pflegt, verklebte, auf diese Weise eine schwingende Membran improvisierend, in deren Mitte, mit dem nächsten Griff, eine Borste aus einer stärkeren Kleiderbürste, senkrecht abstehend, eingesteckt wurde. (ibid.)

This, as Rilke writes, completes one side of the mysterious machine, and the only thing that is needed now is a wax drum, which they make out of some kind of cylinder and a thin coat of wax from a candle. With the wax barely dried, they test out their experiment by speaking and singing into the cone while turning the cylinder below. They put a coat of varnish over the wax to harden what has been engraved into the wax with the brush-bristle stylus.

It is here that we have the first uncanny moment in the essay:

[...Man ließ] gleich darauf den eifrigen Zeiger seinen eigenen [...] Weg wieder verfolgen, so zitterte, schwankte aus der papierenen Tüte der eben noch unsrige Klang, unsicher zwar, unbeschreiblich leise und zaghaft und stellenweise versagend, auf uns zurück. (Rilke 11, 1086-87)

“[D]er eben noch unsrige Klang”: a tone, that was but a moment ago our own. In this passage we see the machine taking on a type of agency in that it claims the tone that belonged to human beings. Also the needle, as Rilke writes, seems eager to retrace its own path. There is a strange blurring of that agency taking place here in that it is one of the first times (the other being photography) that a *thing* is “interpreting.” Until this time a person had to play music or read music and play it back, read a poem that had been

written down or memorized, etc. There is a “double transcription” here, as Andrea Bachner remarks in her “Between the Visual and the Sonic: Rewriting Rilke’s ‘Urgeräusch,’” viz. “from sound to trace, and back to sound, unmediated by any agent other than the technological apparatus” (Bachner 6).

In the moment after the recording is played back Rilke, as he tends to do, uses the things around him as instruments to gauge the phenomenon that is taking place in front of him. In this instance the instrument is his classmates.¹¹ The perceptive young poet takes note of their reaction:

Die Wirkung war jedesmal die vollkommenste. Unsere Klasse gehörte nicht eben zu den ruhigsten, und es möchten nicht viele Augenblicke gewesen sein, da sie, gemeinsam, einen ähnlichen Grad von Stille zu erreichen fähig war. Das Phänomen blieb ja auch überraschend, ja recht eigentlich erschütternd, von einem Male zum anderen. Man stand gewissermaßen einer neuen, noch unendlich zarten Stelle der Wirklichkeit gegenüber, aus der uns, Kinder, ein bei weitem Überlegenes doch unsäglich anfängerhaft und gleichsam Hülfe suchend ansprach. Damals und durch die Jahre hin meinte ich, es sollte mir gerade dieser selbständige, von uns abgezogene und draußen aufbewahrte Klang unvergeßlich bleiben. (Rilke 11, 1087)

That each time the effect on the students is the utmost (*die vollkommenste*) suggests that repetition does not have the dulling result that it usually has. Further, it is the very fact of repetition here that is so shocking to the students – they can, for the first time, experience something over and over. Even if it is not a perfect reproduction of the original event,

¹¹ There is another instance of this in Sonnet XIII, where we are told to read the flavor of the fruit in a child’s face, which I will consider briefly below.

they can nonetheless hear it in the same way, which was not the case in the entirety of human history before this time. They stand in awe, their wills in abeyance, as if before the Angel of the *Duineser Elegien*.

To reiterate, Rilke is using his classmates here as a sort of resonator; as a gauge or instrument to measure an intelligible background¹² that is available to him, though maybe not available to a person who is not attentive to it. What he cannot see, but can sense and cannot articulate, he can see on the faces of his classmates and hear in their silence. There is a similar moment in Sonnet XIII of *Die Sonette an Orpheus*, which will help elucidate this point. This *Spannung*, a tension or resonance that is the vibration of life itself, is present throughout the *Sonette*,¹³ but is most evident and most linked to the senses here. It seems from the poem that one forgets this *Spannung* as one gets older, perhaps partially due to its liminal nature and our inability to speak directly about it (and the tendency in modernity to want to eliminate the irrational), but can be read through or out of various apparatuses, in this case the face of a child:

Voller Apfel, Birne und Banane,

Stachelbeere . . . Alles dieses spricht

Tod und Leben in den Mund . . . Ich ahne . . .

¹² I am using this in the same sense in which Gabriel Marcel uses it in Chapter IV of *The Mystery of Being*, Volume I: *Reflection and Mystery*. Marcel, following the influence of American philosophers like William James and Josiah Royce attempts a reading of Heidegger's *Vom Wesen der Wahrheit* in the simplest words that he can find. He uses a French translation from Belgian philosopher Alphonse de Waelens in this attempt, where Waelens had elucidated much of the terminology that Heidegger employed (Marcel 59). The intelligible background is, in any case, an expanded region that opens when one reflects on the nature of the senses and their relation to "truth," as well as what this means in an intersubjective context, not unlike a multitude of flavors open up to a wine connoisseur that are unavailable to a person who has not probed the various distinctions and flavors. That Rilke requires another person in the instance of Sonnet XIII as well as in "Ur-geräusch" suggests that there is a type of hermeneutic at work, albeit a strange one in which the other is reduced to an instrument.

¹³ In the first sonnet, for example, the tree spans a distance between a heavenly realm at the tips of its branches and an inert, dead realm at its roots. The tension that vibrates in its body is life itself, not disconnected or independent from death.

Lest es einem Kind vom Angesicht,

wenn es sie erschmeckt. Dies kommt von weit.

Wird euch langsam namenlos im Munde?

Wo sonst Worte waren, fließen Funde,

aus dem Fruchtfleisch überrascht befreit. (Rilke 2, 739)

There is a collision taking place in the first and second lines between tasting and speaking, with the fruit “speaking” life and death into the mouth. It is a collision, first of all, in the sense that Rilke calls attention to the fact that speaking and tasting take place at the same location, viz. on the tongue, an idea that is evidenced by the seventh line, “Wo sonst Worte waren, fließen Funde.”

Secondly, there is a tension created in that it is becoming “namenlos” in the mouth, indicating a certain immediacy and ineffability, but simultaneously an amazing ability of language to surpass itself and its limitations. Assonance and alliteration create the taste of the fruits by rolling off the tongue, an idea that John Llewelyn argues in *The Middle Voice of Ecological Conscience*:

The [...] passages may be read [...] as not about the shortcomings of words before the experiences of taste, but about the way the words in the mouth have the taste and texture of the fruits they name. (Llewelyn 161)

So it is not that language has a limit that cannot be surpassed, rather that we sometimes surprise ourselves by breaking this limitation. In this instance it is the ability of the words, as Rilke has arranged them, to produce the flavors of the fruits within the mouth, which is to say, the sense of taste is re-contextualized and therefore renewed and

expanded through speaking the poem. Speaking and tasting become conflated but in the process they become more refined.

To sum up a bit, we can now say that the sound of the makeshift phonograph produces a confusion of sight and hearing, because Rilke *sees* the writing that the phonograph has etched in the wax and *hears* the sound it produces. There is also an interruption of our expectations of intersubjectivity, and this calls into question all of these experiences. When something is called into question, a distance is created that can allow for examination; there is a contrast produced that allows for expansion, which is not present when one is simply submerged in that thing. The observation that Rilke implies here is not so different from what Socrates¹⁴ tries, through *ἔλεγχος* (*elenchus*), to produce in his interlocutors. Socrates is not interested in taking positions and winning arguments, as some would suggest, but in pushing his interlocutors to an *ἀπορεία* (*aporia*). From this position one is able to see that, for example, virtuous actions are not the same as virtue itself¹⁵; that the certainty that one had had up until this point about virtue is pure hubris. Virtue is not something that can be taught by an expert or even known by human beings, as we find out later in the dialogue. The everyday attitude of the interlocutors is predicated upon the presupposition of a *τέχνη* (*tekhné*)-like grasp of virtue (Kirkland 107), which is impossible. Socrates re-arranges his interlocutors' relation to particulars by calling them into question and forcing an impasse –: What Rilke is

¹⁴ Rilke is like Socrates in this respect, but dissimilar in that he gives precedence to “appearances,” i.e. the things in front of him. It is not consideration of an object's form that allows one to climb a dialectical path out of the cave and into the light of Truth. “Truth” is indeed a spurious concept in Rilke's thinking, but if there is something like truth, it lies in the setting into motion of objects, of letting them “speak,” so to speak.

¹⁵ See Apology 20a-b, where Socrates recalls a conversation with Callias, a man who has paid the Sophists a great deal of money to learn what virtue is.

describing here is an impasse of the senses. The senses are confounded, their boundaries are called into question, and then they re-emerge in their specific differences.

Rilke's experience here with the taste of fruit being created by speech and the eerie sound of the phonograph being produced by a kind of writing (the invisible being produced by the visible; sound being produced by sight) and confusing one's intersubjective sense, produces a similar *ἀπορεία*. S.D. Kirkland defines *ἀπορεία* as "the condition of 'waylessness' before some kind of obstacle or barrier" (Kirkland 109). Kirkland adds, "However, for anything to present itself as an obstacle, one must want or need to reach a destination beyond that obstacle" (ibid). Socrates' interlocutors think that they simply know what virtue, for example, or the Good are - or they do not know and think they can find out by paying someone who claims to own it as a craft-type knowledge that can be learned, bought, owned or sold, like a ware. By bringing an interlocutor to the *ἀπορεία*, Socrates puts the interlocutor in a better position to approach virtue because she sees virtue as a problem and as a *process*, not as a static thing. Similarly, when we no longer see the senses as simply given as they are, and no longer accept the given boundaries between the senses, we are in a better position to develop and expand them.

But there is another limit that is being broken in the Sonnet XIII that I have not yet mentioned, that of life and death, which is being spoken into the mouth through these words. Here we have strange and difficult boundaries being challenged, just as there are with the phonograph and the eerie voice that is somehow alongside the voices of the children on the recording. As we learn in the last stanza of the poem, Rilke is speaking of something "doppeldeutig," which would allow for both interpretations above: he is

speaking both of a limitation of language and of language's ability to surpass itself. It surpasses itself by speaking the flavors of the fruits into the mouth, but it fails in this ineffable relation to death. Language is challenged by this relation, which is suggested by the ellipses and the persona's utterance, "Ich ahne." But there is still a way to detect or "read" what the poet is looking for, which is present in his command for us to read it in the child's face in the last line of the first stanza. Llewelyn translates the "Ich ahne" as "A hint" (ibid), which indicates that we can get an idea of what the poet seeks, this trace of an expanded range of senses that reveals contours of the world that we have not yet imagined, or have perhaps forgotten through years that have not yet affected this child.

The description of the voice that calls from that "noch unendlich zarten Stelle der Wirklichkeit," as Rilke writes in the "Ur-geräusch" essay, is just as foreign and almost otherworldly as the one from the "Engel Ordnungen" (Rilke 2, 685) of the *Duineser Elegien*, but distinctly different: it does not come from a strange beyond that is opened at the cliffs of Duino, the event that sparked the writing of the *Elegien*,¹⁶ an almost Romantic moment that we could imagine Rilke sharing with his predecessors in that tradition like Hölderlin and more broadly, William Blake.¹⁷ With the angel there is something that is almost beyond sense. There is a speaking of sorts that takes place without a physical body. The "beyond" or Other that speaks through other human beings is speaking in this instance without the presence of a human being, a speaking which one might tend to ignore as an aberration if it were not for the pure shearing force of it, i.e. the fact that the persona *cannot* ignore it. But with the machine perhaps it is the very

¹⁶ See, for example, *Rainer Maria Rilke: Masks and the Man*, from H.F. Peters (123).

¹⁷ The angel in Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is associated with a "horrible," "dreadful state," (Blake 17) and in the *Elegien*, "Jeder Engel ist schrecklich" (Rilke I, 445).

absence of this beyond that is so peculiar - there is a voice and no background, *A Voice and Nothing More*, as it were. The experience of the voice of the machine is purely sensual and points to nothing beyond; points beyond to *nothing*. The eeriness of the voice that lies “alongside” the recording, as I have been writing, is precisely that there *is no voice alongside the recording*. There is an absence, not in the sense that the Other is permanently absent and cannot be taken into my grasp through the gaze, knowledge, language, or any other means, but in the sense that there is a trace of the Other when the Other is not there at all.¹⁸ We are thrown back, in this case, on the senses.

Carsten Strathausen argues in *The Look of Things: Poetry and Vision around 1900* that it is precisely this feature that constitutes the peculiarity of Rilke’s gaze and separates him from his Romantic predecessors:

whereas Romanticism specified the mind, or *Einbildungskraft*, of the reader as the locus where words are hermeneutically understood and transformed into the images they represent, Rilke endorses the physiological aspects of vision and thus grants full autonomy to the senses. (Strathausen 195)

The precipice on which Rilke and his classmates stand is that of Modernism with its mass production, the massive wars that it made possible and the *Weltangst* (Peters 122) that plagued the poet all too much. The source here is a machine, an apparatus, i.e. *something* that “interprets” and speaks back, but that is not a subject. This is not dissimilar from the *Dinggedichte* in which the objects in the poems are said to speak or look back, like “Der Panther” (1903) or “Das Karussell” (1906), or perhaps most appropriately, the

¹⁸ In my chapter on *Malte Laurids Brigge*, I discuss a “sixth sense,” that of the heart, which for Rilke is our sense for the Other.

“Archaïscher Torse Apollos” (1908), where there is featured “a marble torso whose inner life makes itself felt as the uncanny ability to return the beholder’s gaze” (Calhoon 143).

If this inner life that Calhoon mentions here¹⁹ is uncanny, the inner life of the machine carries with it something deadly. Calhoon quotes Walter Benjamin on the subject of the daguerreotypy (an early photographic technique), where this same threat to one’s humanity is felt:

Was an der Daguerreotypie als das Unmenschliche, man könnte ja sagen Tödliche mußte empfunden werden, war das (übrigens anhaltende) Hereinblicken in den Apparat, da doch der Apparat das Bild des Menschen aufnimmt, ohne ihm dessen Blick zurückzugeben. Dem Blick wohnt aber die Erwartung inne, von dem erwidert zu werden, dem er sich schenkt. Wo diese Erwartung erwidert wird (die ebensowohl, im Denken, an einen intentionalen Blick der Aufmerksamkeit sich heften kann wie an einen Blick im schlichten Wortsinn), da fällt ihm die Erfahrung der Aura in ihrer Fülle zu. (Benjamin, *Schriften I*, 461)

The person being depicted had to sit for prolonged intervals, staring the machine down.²⁰ Similarly, the students in Rilke’s classroom repeated their recording over and over again, creating the auditory equivalent to staring.

What Benjamin is gesturing towards in this passage is a kind of ethics which is reminiscent of Martin Buber’s *Ich-Du* relation, which is distinct from the *Ich-Es*: the way

¹⁹ This may be the ancient gesture preserved in sculptures in Rilke’s Auguste Rodin, “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, die so frisch geblieben war, als sollte sie hier nur aufbewahrt und eines Tages irgend einem Kinde gegeben werden, das vorüberkam” (Rilke 9, 143).

²⁰ Rodin, who is the culmination of the creative artist for Rilke and the subject of the final chapter of this study, also made people sit for prolonged intervals and liked to sketch them just as their discomfort was peaking.

that we experience other human beings and the way that we experience things is a difference that constitutes a basic division in human experience, i.e. in our *Haltung*, the way that we hold ourselves toward the world. This basic relation is confused in an almost perverse way when there is something there that gives us an indication that there is a human presence, but when there is in fact none. The camera lens, eerily reminiscent of a human eye, provokes in us a feeling of being watched. In the case of “Der Panther,” the panther is something of a machine, a confusion of the basic division in human experience, with the image entering its eye, passing through a network of circuitry, and then ceasing to be:

Nur manchmal schiebt der Vorhang der Pupille
sich lautlos auf –. Dann geht ein Bild hinein,
geht durch der Glieder angespannte Stille –
und hört im Herzen auf zu sein (Rilke 2, 505).

The panther here takes on the characteristics of a thing and particularly a thing that “sees,” almost like a camera, except that it does not seem to record in any way. This could be interpreted in several ways, so I will name only those that are germane to the context that I am developing here: 1) This is a commentary on how animals are situated in the world, viz. that they are far more presence oriented and are not cluttered with the recorded memories that humans carry with them. 2) This is not a comment on the consciousness of the animal, but rather specifically on the animal in a cage. The animal begins to act as a thing, like a machine or a camera does. What could be a serene presence of mind that is not available to humans because of our clinging to the past and our projection of future possibilities instead turns into a dead stillness. The image in this

case moves through a mechanical series that processes the image in a way but does not have the interpretive faculties that would be present in a sentient being. The “great will” of the animal has been deafened and numbed (*betäubt*) by being imprisoned and we are seeing only a sliver of its potential.

The panther has, in the latter case, been reduced to the status of a thing that can be seen, known and controlled. It has “no world”²¹ as a human being and could now be reduced to a description that would be inappropriate at the level of a human being. One can gain an adequate²² gross physical description of a table, for example, by investigating the table from all visible angles. One cannot, however, reduce another human being to such a description. One cannot simply walk around to the other side of a human being and take view of her or his inner life. This side of the human being stays permanently hidden from view. But there is nonetheless something that is there in this very absence in the Other. Benjamin describes this as “aura”:

„Die Wahrnehmbarkeit“, so urteilt Novalis, „ist eine Aufmerksamkeit“. Die Wahrnehmbarkeit, von welcher er derart spricht, ist keine andere als die der Aura. Die Erfahrung der Aura beruht also auf der Übertragung einer in der menschlichen Gesellschaft geläufigen Reaktionsform auf das Verhältnis des Unbelebten oder der Natur zum Menschen. Der Angesehne oder angesehen sich

²¹ Heidegger, in *Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik*, says that the animal is “weltarm,” and that the stone is “ohne welt” (Llweyn 148-9).

²² I mean adequate in the way that Spinoza would use it, viz. that we have to impose a limit upon the infinity of reality in order that we can come to an understanding of the causes and effects that resulted in the phenomenon in question. I include this because one might be tempted to argue that even if one goes around to the other side and looks at the underside of a table that one could always, infinitely look closer with various instruments. In other words, one might argue that a table or any physical thing is just as infinitely opaque as a human being. While this is true in a sense, we must use our judgment to impose reasonable limits to our investigations. Our description can then be “adequate” if not complete, i.e. a description that is complete enough to serve the purposes of the current investigation.

Glaubende schlägt den Blick auf. Die Aura einer Erscheinung erfahren, heißt, sie mit dem Vermögen belehnen, den Blick aufzuschlagen (Benjamin, *Schriften I*, 461).²³

What Benjamin is suggesting at the end of this passage is that a thing's ability to see and speak is dependent upon a passer-by, especially if that passer-by is a poet. The panther, despite its captivity, is rescued in a sense by the poet's ability to allow its numbed will to see and speak again.

But there is still something in the experience of the phonograph that exceeds each of these experiences in the *Dinggedichte*. The thing in this instance is speaking of its own accord, without the assistance of the poet. It has a life of its own that also cannot be the ancient, preserved gesture in the sculptures in Rilke's *Rodin* piece. The aura that Benjamin describes in the passages cited above still springs from the willingness of a subject to invest an object with that aura. There is something almost intrusive about the voice that speaks through the phonograph because it speaks regardless of the receptivity of a listener. But this does not need to be the terrible angel of modernism that produced unimaginable armies and some of the largest wars ever known to humanity: we must keep in mind the potential, albeit unused for the most part, to feed masses and bring other necessities of life to more people than ever before. In this particular instance, the ability to listen to music and other recordings became an everyday reality that had not been present before. But more than that, it may well have planted the idea in the head of a young Rilke that objects can speak and that there is a world available beyond the range of

²³ “‘Perceptibility,’ as Novalis puts it, ‘is a kind of attentiveness.’ The perceptibility he has in mind is none other than that of the aura. Experience of the aura thus rests on the transposition of a response common in human relationships to the relationship between the inanimate or natural object and man. The person we look at, or who feels that he is being looked at, looks at us in turn. To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return” (Benjamin, *Illuminations* 188).

what is immediately, unreflectively given to the senses; that the senses can be pushed beyond the range that is offered to the modern individual, attacked by the noise of the city.

A Hidden Memory of the Visible

Rilke recognizes that there are ways that we can make things “speak” early on, an idea that would eventually culminate in the *Dinggedichte* later in his life. But the experience was not limited to the auditory, despite Rilke’s earlier belief that it was this sound that would never leave his memory:

Damals und durch die Jahre hin meinte ich, es sollte mir gerade dieser selbständige, von uns abgezogene und draußen aufbewahrte Klang unvergeßlich bleiben. Daß es anders kam, ist die Ursache dieser Aufzeichnung. Nicht er, nicht der Ton aus dem Trichter, überwog, wie sich zeigen sollte, in meiner Erinnerung, sondern jene der Walze eingeritzten Zeichen waren mir um vieles eigentümlicher geblieben. (Rilke 11, 1087)

It is not so much the sound, i.e. the invisible that has remained a motor of transformation in Rilke’s mind and senses, but the signs, ripped into the wax – the visible.²⁴ This image remained piggybacked on the memory of the sound and it is the sight of the suture in a skull that dislodges the latent memory. Rilke makes this discovery some fourteen years later as he is studying anatomy at the *École des Beaux-Arts* (ibid). As I will illustrate below, it is the collision of these, the visible and the invisible, the visual and the audible,

²⁴ For a penetrating discussion of the materiality of the record, see Adorno’s “Nadelkurven” (1927/28) and “Die Form der Schallplatte” (1934) in *Musikalische Schriften VI*.

and a field of tension that arises in the background of all senses, that creates the space of poetry for Rilke.

In these passages, Rilke again calls attention to a certain tension or *Spannung* when he says exactly what it is that he finds fascinating about anatomy:

Es war in meiner ersten Pariser Zeit, ich besuchte damals mit ziemlichem Eifer die Anatomie-Vorlesungen an der École des Beaux-Arts, wobei mich nicht so sehr das vielfältige Geflecht der Muskeln und Sehnen oder die vollkommene Verabredung der inneren Organe anzusprechen schien, als vielmehr das aride Skelett, dessen verhaltene Energie und Elastizität mir damals schon über den Blättern Lionardos sichtbar geworden war. (Rilke 11, 1087-88)

Particularly the skull seems to him to be the crowning achievement of the “chalky substance” (*kalkige Element*), a chamber that offers protection to something which, although “im engen Einschluß” has a range of activity that is boundless. It might strike one as surprising that if it is “verhaltene Energie und Elastizität” that captures Rilke’s attention that he is *not* more interested in the interweaving of sinews and muscles, as these are more fitting of having such plastic, supple qualities, than the “kalkige” skeleton. But it is characteristic of Rilke, as it was of his *Sturm und Drang* predecessors, to zoom in on particular aspects that house within them the totality of the whole. Rilke is well aware of the “vielfältige Geflecht,” but, as he writes of the structural whole, “-es war mir zu viel” (Rilke 11, 1088).

As I mentioned, it is the sight of the suture in a skull that triggers his discovery that there is a latent memory beneath the dominant memory of the sound of the phonograph. It is not just the latent memory itself, but the way in which it is discovered

that is significant. It takes unconscious looks in order to uncover the unconscious memory:

Die Bezauberung, die dieses besondere, gegen einen durchaus weltischen Raum abgeschlossene Gehäus auf mich ausübte, ging schließlich so weit, daß ich mir einen Schädel anschaffte, um nun auch so manche Nachtstunde mit ihm zuzubringen; und, wie es mir immer mit den Dingen geht: nicht allein die Augenblicke absichtlicher Beschäftigung haben mir diesen zweideutigen Gegenstand merkwürdiger angeeignet –, meine Vertrautheit mit ihm verdank ich ohne Zweifel zu einem gewissen Teile dem streifenden Blick, mit dem wir die gewohnte Umgebung, wenn sie nur einige Beziehung zu uns hat, unwillkürlich prüfen und auffassen. Ein solcher Blick war es, den ich plötzlich in seinem Verlaufe anhielt und genau und aufmerksam einstellte. (Rilke 11, 1088)

Rilke suggests a deadening of the senses similar to the one that necessitates reading the child's features in Sonnet XIII when he writes, in an almost parenthetical statement, "wenn sie [unsere Umgebung] nur einige Beziehung zu uns hat," and uses the everyday, usually paved over in oblivion, as a poetic tool. He procures a skull, precisely so that his passing glances will, with any luck, yield a fruitful moment. He finds it by candlelight:

In dem oft so eigentümlich wachen und auffordernden Lichte der Kerze war mir soeben die Kronen-Naht ganz auffallend sichtbar geworden, und schon wußte ich auch, woran sie mich erinnerte: an eine jener unvergessenen Spuren, wie sie einmal durch die Spitze einer Borste in eine kleine Wachssrolle eingeritzt worden war! (ibid.)

Rilke's astuteness concerning the nature of the everyday and our tendency to fall into its oblivion prompts him to transform it into its opposite: he takes what has fallen into a nondescript background and brings it into full relief. What was invisible has now become visible, just as the memory of the sound has become the memory of a sight; what was preconscious has now become conscious, but perhaps not yet entirely reducible to language.

This memory, combined with the later experience of the skull, he writes, leads him to envision many bizarre experiments. But he treats this impulse with suspicion. It is unfortunate that he did not simply act on these impulses so that we could determine whether the profundity that he found in thinking about them was legitimate or pure fancy; what had seemed profound to him might have melted into absurdity when he heard, for example, the sound that would have been produced by the phonograph needle in the sutures of the skull, one of the experiments he considers:

Die Kronen-Naht des Schädels (was nun zunächst zu untersuchen wäre) hat – nehmen wirs an – eine gewisse Ähnlichkeit mit der dicht gewundenen Linie, die der Stift eines Phonographen in den empfangenden rotierenden Cylinder des Apparates engräbt. Wie nun, wenn man diesen Stift täuschte und ihn, wo er zurückzuleiten hat, über eine Spur lenkte, die nicht aus der graphischen Übersetzung eines Tones stammte, sondern an sich und natürlich Bestehendes – gut: sprechen wirs nur aus: eben (z. B.) die Kronen-Naht wäre –: Was würde geschehen? Ein Ton müßte entstehen, eine Ton-Folge, eine Musik ... (Rilke 11, 1089-90)

Since he did not perform the experiment, we do not know what would have happened – perhaps complete disappointment. Or, it might have added yet another layer to his insight and uncovered further memories that were buried underneath the unforgettable moment of the children’s voices being played back to them and the memory that had latently piggy-backed itself on top of it, viz. the sight of the figures etched into the wax by the makeshift stylus. He theorizes what might happen:

Gefühle –, welche? Ungläubigkeit, Scheu, Furcht, Ehrfurcht –: ja, welches nur von allen hier möglichen Gefühlen? verhindert mich, einen Namen vorzuschlagen für das Ur-Geräusch, welches da zur Welt kommen sollte ... (Rilke 11, 1090)

His caution in this instance seems uncharacteristic of Rilke and overly careful. He could only know by trying, which does not seem too far-fetched, given the network of people with whom he was in contact. On the other hand, his caution regarding writing too soon seems warranted because of the layers of experience that were uncovered by allowing the memories to incubate.²⁵ One should also allow for the possibility that the fruits of this experiment are precisely in its theoretical nature and that actually performing it would spoil the mystery.

²⁵ Rilke might also be delicately treading about within the intricacies of the production of poetic experience. He does not want to “sterilize” the experience. Benjamin, writing about Baudelaire, uses Freud’s *Jenseits des Lustprinzips* and the work of Paul Valéry to understand the phenomenon of shock and poetic production: “Die Chokrezeption wird durch ein Training in der Reizbewältigung erleichtert, zu der im Notfall sowohl der Traum wie die Erinnerung herangezogen werden können. Im Regelfalle liegt dieses Training aber, wie Freud annimmt, dem wachen Bewußtsein ob, das seinen Sitz in einer Rindenschicht des Gehirns habe, „die ... durch die Reizwirkung so durchgebrannt“ sei, daß sie der Reizaufnahme die günstigsten Verhältnisse entgegenbringe. Daß der Chok derart abgefangen, derart vom Bewußtsein pariert werde, gäbe dem Vorfall, der ihn auslöst, den Charakter des Erlebnisses im prägnanten Sinn. Es würde diesen Vorfall (unmittelbar der Registratur der bewußten Erinnerung ihn inverleibend) für die dichterische Erfahrung sterilisieren“ (Benjamin, *Schriften* I, 434).

The Five Gardens of the Senses

In the final part of the “Ur-geräusch” essay, Rilke moves on to discuss more explicitly the role of the senses in poetry and puts forth something of a theory about what I have called the “impasse of the senses.” He begins by relating his experience of Arabic poems, which he claims are unlike European poetry in that they owe their origin to contributions from all five senses (Rilke III, 548) whereas European poetry makes use only of single senses and overemphasizes the faculty of sight.²⁶ The perfect poem, he writes,

...[kann] nur unter der Bedingung entstehen, daß die mit fünf Hebeln gleichzeitig angegriffene Welt unter einem bestimmten Aspekt auf jener übernatürlichen Ebene erscheine, die eben die des Gedichtes ist. (Rilke 11, 1091)

The five “Hebeln” or levers of which Rilke writes here are the five senses. It is problematic philosophically that Rilke views the senses as levers, i.e. as tools by which we might pry into the world because it suggests a split between an “I” and the senses, or between the I and the body. But it might also unite or equate the I and the body *through* the senses.

Rilke mentions this engagement of all five senses to a woman who relates the experience to falling in love. However, the lover is

in so großartiger Gefahr, weil er auf das Zusammenwirken seiner Sinne angewiesen ist, von denen er doch weiß, daß sie nur in jener einzigen gewagten

²⁶ It is worth noticing, however, that this is precisely what Rilke has done by showing that his memory of the sound, the children’s voices coming through the phonograph, was in fact underlaid by more fundamental memory of a sight, the etching in the wax that looked like the sutures in the skull. This is another reason why I have used language like “confounding the senses”: such language emphasizes a collision and not a privileging of one sense over the others.

Mitte sich treffen, in der sie, all Breite aufgebend, zusammenlaufen und in der kein Bestand ist (ibid.)

Rilke has in front of him the following diagram (figure 1) as he writes, trying to understand what is different about the experience of love and the supernatural plane of poetry:

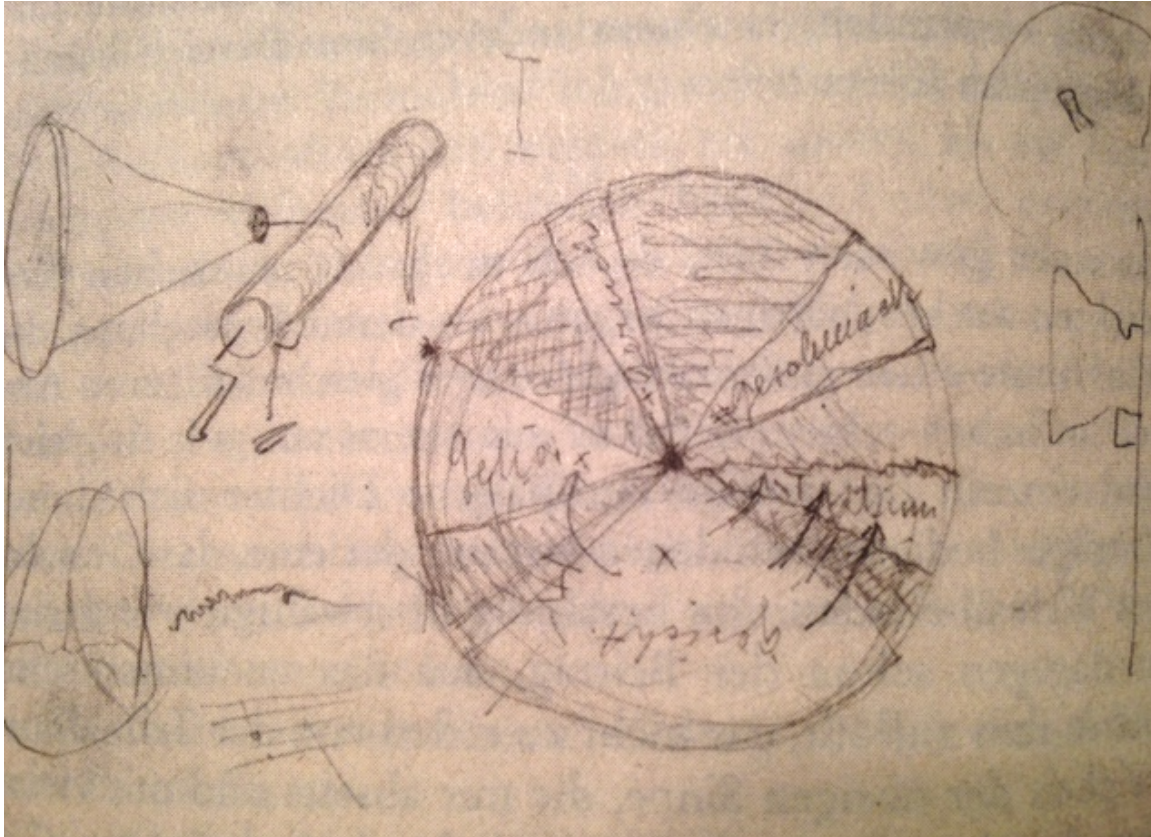


Figure 1. Rilke's sketch of the "field of experience." Pencil on paper, 1919. (Rilke, *Schriften zur Kunst und Literatur*, 200)

In this diagram, Rilke wants to represent the entire "Erfahrungsbereich der Welt, auch seine übertreffenden Gebiete" (Rilke 11, 1091). Rilke shows that he is a better poet than visual artist, because the parts to which we lack access are denoted by the black sectors and are supposed to be far greater than the light areas, which are open to the senses.

The lover, writes Rilke, feels unexpectedly placed in the middle of the circle, where that which is known and the ungraspable are driven together into a single point (Rilke III, 549). This, it seems, is only part of the equation. As I wrote above in relation to Socrates, it is not only that the senses are confounded as the lover's are here, which calls their borders into question, but also that they re-emerge in their specific differences. The position of the lover, confounded at the center of the circle, is not enough to articulate what Rilke has in mind here:

Dem Dichter wäre mit dieser Versetzung nicht gedient, ihm muß das vielfältig Einzelne gegenwärtig bleiben, er ist angehalten, die Sinnes-Ausschnitte ihrer Breite nach zu gebrauchen, und so muß er auch wünschen, jeden einzelnen so weit als möglich auszudehnen, damit einmal seiner geschürzten Entzückung der Sprung durch die fünf Gärten in einem Atem gelänge (ibid).

One's understanding of the senses must be flexible, Rilke seems to be saying here, allowing one to both call their borders into question (as in the instance where the memory of the sound of the phonograph and the memory of the sight of the etching in the wax are bound up with one another and blurred) and through this blurring to achieve greater contrast and expansion in the individual senses. The way that Rilke phrases his understanding of this process here suggests that it is also the opposite: through the extension of each of the individual senses, one (or at least one's *Entzückung*) is able to leap from one to the next or through all five at once with great agility. The lover's standpoint is non-spatiality (*Unausgedehntheit*) with the senses confounded; the poet's is precisely this refined awareness of the interstices, or abysses, between the realms of the senses (*Ordnung der Sinnlichkeit*).

Here Rilke adds a sentence that is somewhat mysterious, but may provide evidence for my argument that the senses are capable of expansion: “...sie [die Abgründe] sind weit und saugend genug, um den größeren Teil der Welt – und wer weiß, wieviel Welten – an uns vorbei hinwegzureißen” (Rilke 11, 1092). The multiplicity of worlds that Rilke mentions here is furthering the already present ambiguity between senses and the world that is present in the text. This means in some sense that the senses *are* the world. The statement could then be read as a statement of the plurality of human experience, which is to say that according to our circumstances our senses develop differently and create different worlds. The poetic imagination that tunes into the abysses that separate the senses and deepen each individual sense is, by this logic, capable of creating a new world.

So how are we to understand this schematic of the senses and poetic experience that Rilke has drawn out for us here? Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei remarks that it is a matter of understanding the relation between space and sound and the possibility of “‘hearing space’” (Gosetti-Ferencei 315), which I understand as developing within oneself a sensitivity to the background of the soundscape, an extension of the auditory faculty.²⁷ Gosetti-Ferencei sees this as a development beyond earlier attempts that Rilke had made to describe the spatial imagination:

²⁷ Will Crutchfield notes in “Classical Music; a ‘Musician’ in Spite of Himself” that Rilke was not particularly musical, did not play a musical instrument and tended to be more inspired by visual artists like Cezanne and Rodin. Ferruccio Busoni, however, dedicated his *Sketch of a New Esthetic of Music* to Rilke and called him a “Musiker in Worten” (Eidt 36).

Rilke had formulated the notion of *Weltinnenraum* and had written “Erlebnis.”²⁸ Now, rather than attributing a perceptual quality to space (the background made audible by personification and attribution of “melody”), he characterizes perception itself as a metaphorical space. The spatial structure is also more complex: the narrator not only proposes that the sense-regions can be translated, but also –beyond synaesthetic consciousness– evokes interstices between the senses that are held to constitute a sub-phenomenal source for poetic expression (ibid).

To characterize perception as a metaphorical space is to emphasize the importance of language in constructing our perception of things. That sense-regions can be “translated” refers here to the blurring that takes place when the the stylus carves (“writes”) into the wax, making a visual (and potentially tactile) experience out of an audible one.²⁹ But here it is more important that Rilke wants to express not just the experience of multiple senses being stimulated simultaneously and even blurred together, but an intelligible background that opens up “between” the senses in such experiences.

{Sense and Meaning – add in}

Gosetti-Ferencei’s assertion at the end of this passage that these spaces “constitute a sub-phenomenal source for poetic expression” is a curious but rich thought; sub-phenomenal would mean below or before the unity of consciousness and its object - an interruption of the thought that consciousness is always consciousness of *something*

²⁸ She is referring here to “Erlebnis I” and “Erlebnis II.” The first was written in 1913 and printed in 1918 and the second was also written in 1913, but not published until 1935 (Rilke, *Werke in drei Bänden, Prosa*, 591).

²⁹ The visible and invisible are important themes here as well as throughout the rest of Rilke’s work. In the background of my thinking on this are Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s sense experiments in *Le Visible et l’invisible*. To make the tension here explicit: The children’s voices are invisible, translated into a visible pattern in the wax, which is in turn played by the phonograph and produces (invisible) sound.

and an assertion of the possibility of an “experience” that precedes phenomena - a realm that is hollowed out by poetic speech. This is a metaphorical space, as Gosetti-Ferencei explains, a

pre-phenomenal region that subtends the phenomenal division of the senses. This region would be undivided, but available for human perception in crossing the interstices between sense-experiences (Gosetti-Ferencei 316).

My concern with Gosetti-Ferencei’s reading here is the degree to which she emphasizes the unity of perception. But this is only a matter of degree. The pre-phenomenal region that Rilke describes would indeed be undivided, but we have to keep in mind that it is not just the blurring together of the senses that is the ultimate result, but also a greater refinement and distinction between the senses, which is why Rilke insists on the difference between the poetic experience and the experience of the lover.

In order to describe accurately Rilke’s model for poetic production, both sides must be emphasized: the blurring together of senses, or “translation,” as Gosetti-Ferencei calls it, as well as the abysses between them. These abysses, according to Rilke, are far greater than the experience that is immediately available to us. This acknowledgment of our difficulty in experiencing wide swaths of the world provides infinite potential for growth and emphasizes not just the “wholeness” of perception but also the difference between the senses. This may be why Gosetti-Ferencei seems to run into contradictions:

As in his earlier works, Rilke’s essay seems to be concerned with what divides up and obscures parts of the world’s whole field of experience, a wholeness which is unknown to ordinary perception (Gosetti-Ferencei 317).

Gosetti-Ferencei is making a leap here and leaving out what must be made explicit: what Rilke is describing is a process, not a one-way street. Rilke's understanding of the world is very bodily, which is already evident in the "Ur-geräusch" essay.³⁰ Rilke is describing a movement here between the confounding of the senses and the refinement and honing of particular senses, a movement that could be compared with breathing.

Gosetti-Ferencei calls the confounding of the senses "an interstitial unity at the origins of perception," (ibid). In this phrase she hints at the movement by juxtaposing interstitial, which is a space between, and unity, which would suggest a lack of space, but at the same time a creation of an inner space. She overemphasizes the unifying aspects in her comparison of "Ur-geräusch" with the *Sonette an Orpheus*:

The song of Orpheus in the *Sonette* seems to indicate a hypothetically possible but extraordinary mode of consciousness, a song which in the first sonnet is evoked as a pure transcendency, a "reine Übersteigerung" (KA II 241).³¹ In light of "Ur-geräusch," this would not be transcendence of the world in favor of some higher metaphysical realm, but the liberation from divided perception, as from a temporal experience divided between presence and absence, life and death.

Orpheus dwells interstitially, between these realms, crossing their boundaries" (ibid).

My difficulty here is that Gosetti-Ferencei's conclusions do not follow from her premises. She first states that the point of "Ur-geräusch" is "liberation from divided perception" and goes on to say that "Orpheus dwells interstitially," which are two very

³⁰ For example, in "The Colors of Prose: Rilke's Program of *Sachliches Sagen*," Anette Schwarz puts together a digestive reading of several of Rilke's works, managing to weave together digestion, melancholia and dialectics.

³¹ She is referring here to the *Kommentierte Ausgabe in Vier Bänden*.

different and contradictory moments. The reason for the confusion is that although these two moments are distinct and contradictory, they are dependent upon one another in the process of poetic production, just as inhalation and exhalation are dependent upon one another in the process of breathing. It is not that Rilke wants to “override” the divided senses through the metaphor of poetic spatial imagination, but rather that there are certain moments that show us that the division between the senses is not absolute. Through this confounding moment, the borders are re-defined and one gains a flexibility with which one is able to move back and forth between the regions, assisted by the very acknowledgment of the divisions between them and a poetic-metaphoric background that subtends them.

In order better to understand “Ur-geräusch,” Gosetti-Ferencei considers Rilke’s short story entitled “Weißes Glück,” in which one of the characters is troubled by an unconscious fear of death evoked by the illness of a loved one (Gosetti Ferencei 318). This is “also a virtual ‘lived’ space in which the obscuring of familiar dimensions provokes a moment of existential panic and potential transformation” (ibid). This transformation is what Rilke is gesturing toward in his question of how many worlds might open up upon hearing the primordial sound of the phonograph playing the sutures of the skull. She also considers “Die Stimme” in which the main character, Erwin, wants to hear a “Liebe Stimme” that would reconcile him with life (ibid). The story turns on the sound of voices that are heard, although the people speaking them are not seen. This event again calls into question or emphasizes the boundaries between the senses, this time showing the difference that is brought out through the presence of a voice and the absence of a speaker. This is not unlike the gramophone that confounds the senses of

Rilke and his classmates. This makes Erwin long “for a sweet human voice according to whose directives he would view differently the world” (Gosetti-Ferencei 319).

Conclusion

Rilke’s “Ur-geräusch” gives us much insight into his view of the senses and of the poetic imagination as well as hints that shed light on the process of poetic production through attentiveness to the senses. What stands out most prominently in these insights is that the senses are in process and can be transformed through poetic work. This process is set into motion through a crisis in which the senses are confounded, which is to say, their boundaries are blurred by a synesthetic experience like the one that Rilke has with his classmates and the gramophone. This experience, as Rilke discovers much later on, has been caused by the collision of an auditory experience (the sound of the recording) and a visual one³² (the etchings in the wax). But this experience only sets the process in motion, it is not the entirety of the process. What is also necessary is the redefinition and honing of the individual senses which are kept distinct by the abysses that separate them, a difference upon which Rilke insists by evoking the experience of the lover and by separating the poetic experience from it. There is a certain unity to the background that is constituted by these abysses which blurs the lines between the senses, but the senses always return to their distinct individuality in a process that I have compared to the breath. These insights will provide a model for looking at the development of the senses in subsequent chapters.

³² This could also be a tactile experience, if one were to touch the etchings. Also, the whole process of building the phonograph is “hands-on.”

CHAPTER III

GESCHICHTEN VOM LIEBEN GOTT, PART I: THE SEPARATION OF HAND AND SPIRIT

Wie aber Liebes? Sonnenschein

Am Boden sehen wir und trockenen Staub

Und heimatlich die Schatten der Wälder und es blühet

An Dächern der Rauch, bei alter Krone

Der Türme, friedsam; gut sind nämlich,

Hat gegenredend die Seele

Ein Himmlisches verwundet, die Tageszeichen.

-Hölderlin, „Mnemosyne“ (Hölderlin 258)

Introduction

In the last chapter, we saw that Rilke had a certain admiration for the phonograph and perhaps even a kind of envy. It is a thing, “dunkel und klug,” which picks up waves and, without a thought to mediate, expresses these vibrations through its stylus. The waves are “translated” without consciousness. Rilke wants for his body, specifically his skeleton, to become receptive (like a kind of antenna) to the subtle energies of the universe and to translate them through his hand and pen in the same way as the phonograph. This urge stemmed from a tension that was set up between different senses. There was a collision between sound and sight, as I explained, which at first made the boundaries between the senses unclear, but ultimately sharpened and deepened the

senses, allowing the poet to jump effortlessly between the “five gardens” of the senses. This collision between sight and sound took place when Rilke realized, years later, that piggybacked on the memory of the eerie sound that was produced by the phonograph in the recording of his classmates voices, there was another odd memory, viz. the scratches in the surface of the wax that were produced by the improvised stylus. These scratches came back into his memory when he looked at a human skull and saw its sutures, which looked like writing. This prompts him to want to play the skull in the phonograph, and produce the “Ur-geräusch.”

In this image, which will figure heavily into the rest of this study, we see already a concern, and perhaps even an obsession with the written word. Writing records in this instance in two ways: 1) the writing of the stylus, which produces scratches that translate into a sound, and 2) the conventional writing with a pen, which Rilke wants to model after the phonograph, or perhaps better said, he wants to emulate the phonograph in his bodily movements through writing. Upon reading about a machine that writes and carves into wax of its own accord, there is something that cannot help but assert itself in the mind of the modern reader: the horrendous imagery of Kafka’s *In der Strafkolonie*, There is no space here for a detailed juxtaposition of “Ur-geräusch” and *In der Strafkolonie*, but simply mentioning it should be enough – writing is also a process of wounding, and a reciprocal wounding between the human and the divine, as is implied in the cross-section of “Mnemosyne” that preceded this chapter. We will see this wounding through speech and narrative in the present chapter.

While the question of writing is certainly not left off in this chapter, the question of the spoken word and of *narrative* is added and emphasized. Derrida can offer us some

insight into the difference between written and spoken language. While asserting the necessity of sophism in Platonism, Derrida writes in *Dissemination* that the difference is in the repetition without the presence of the living soul:

Writing would indeed be the signifier's capacity to repeat itself, mechanically, without a living soul to sustain or attend it in its repetition, that is to say, without truth's *presenting itself* anywhere (Derrida 111).

The question is, in other words, whether or not it is possible that *truth* can be transmitted without the presence of the person telling it.³³ One of the best examples of what Derrida means here is in the title of this section of "Plato's Pharmacy," entitled "The Pharmakon." The Greek word is fraught with nuances, but the standard translation in French by Robin renders it simply as "remedy," which destroys the dynamism and ambiguity present in the word, which can mean both *cure* and *poison*. A better translation in English might be "drug," because this can mean a prescription medication, as in a cure or remedy, but could also mean a narcotic.

In any case, what Derrida wants to emphasize is that there is no drug that one can take without side effects. In the present context, this means that there is no beauty without a certain sting, something that will become evident in the pages to come. Recall the lines of Rilke's first elegy in the *Duineser Elegien*:

Denn das Schöne ist nichts
als des Schrecklichen Anfang, den wir noch grade
ertragen,

³³ The quote here is taken from a broader discussion of Plato, which I cannot discuss at length here. But I should note that Derrida would not be so sure in his assertion of "truth."

und wir bewundern es so, weil es gelassen verschmählt,
uns zu zerstören (Rilke I, 441).

The encounter with the angel, though it is precisely what Rilke has pined for so long, is traumatic in a way that one cannot call bad, although it sounds somewhat perverse to speak of a good trauma. It is the trauma of the Other, a force that breaks the ego – an ego that we simultaneously need to live and need to be rid of in order to live truly. This contradictory moment is what produces poetry, because poetic writing, and, in this case, poetic-spoken narrative, wounds and heals simultaneously, making the poet/storyteller vulnerable to the Other and shielding herself from the Other. These are things that the young poet, in 1900 and only 24 years old, understood viscerally and, in an inspired burst, wrote into being.

In this chapter, we see a similar interest in subtle vibrations, but a different ploy by which Rilke will try to capture and translate them. This time, the persona in Rilke's *Geschichten vom lieben Gott* (1899/1900) weaves a web by "spinning yarns," i.e. telling stories to members of the community. But this persona, who remains unnamed, is wise enough to know that a web woven by himself only will not suffice in order to detect these vibrations. It will have to have the organic δύναμις (*dunamis*) or motion of rumor in order to be woven with the intricacy required.

He cannot do this labor on his own, and he therefore purposely passes the labor of this weaving off to his community. He knows that, just as fish become bigger in fish stories, old wives' tales take on a life of their own, and as in the game of telephone, one ends up with something entirely different than that with which one started, his stories will grow and change as they pass through the community. He seeks to exploit this δύναμις;

indeed, for this persona, meaning itself emerges not from the solitary tale, written down and forgotten in a book somewhere, but through the embellishment of being passed from person to person: the dear lord, it seems, emerges in this very motion.

Reasons for Including “Das Märchen von den Händen Gottes”

The first section of the *Geschichten* was removed from later editions, probably because of some “errors” in the narrative. But I have included it in the present discussion for three reasons: 1) I believe it is an indispensable part of the larger story and I do not understand how later parts of the story could make any sense without it. 2) Moreover, we might also see these errors, even if they are not intentional, as “enthymemes,” which, if we recall Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* (4th Century BCE) for a moment, are a necessary part of a convincing argument:

...we must not carry [the argument’s] reasoning too far back, or the length of our argument will cause obscurity: nor must we put in all the steps that lead to our conclusion, or we shall waste words in saying what is manifest. It is this simplicity that makes the uneducated more effective than the educated when addressing popular audiences—makes them, as the poets tell us, ‘charm the crowd’s ears more finely’ (Aristotle 1417).

In other words, not all the pieces of the argument have to be, or even should be, present if the listener is to be persuaded. Giambattista Vico agrees in *The New Science* (1725), writing that in order to move a crowd, there must be passive and active elements to one’s speech, so that there is a corresponding active and passive participation with the listener. The speechmaker leaves out certain elements so that the listener must provide them,

which keeps the listener engaged in a real way with what is being said. Finally, and most importantly, 3) the stinging beauty of the story that Rilke's persona tells us preserves the original subtle, emotional beauty of the New Testament and delivers it in a different form. From the New Testament, we know the story of Christ from the perspective of human beings and know its sorrow; from Rilke we get a perspective from on high, the perspective of the dear lord.

Die Frau Nachbarin, Pharmakon, Contagion, and Walter Benjamin's "Der Erzähler"

From here it is best if we jump straight into the text, because there will be many necessary detours along the way. In the beginning, the narrator runs into his next door neighbor, his first interlocutor, and they have an ordinary conversation about the weather. When the conversation turns to the neighbor's children, she explains that although they are in good health, they are starting to ask questions, many of them inane, that she has difficulty answering. The ones that seem to catch the interest of the narrator are the ones about God: "Spricht der liebe Gott auch chinesisches? und: Wie sieht der liebe Gott aus? Immer alles vom lieben Gott! Darüber weiß man doch nicht Bescheid –" (Rilke 7, 287-88). She continues, "Oder von den Händen vom lieben Gott, was soll man da –" (Rilke 7, 288). The narrator chimes in at this point, claiming to have some chance epistemic authority on last point. It is important to take note of the next piece of conversation, as it will be important in my analysis of the text. The narrator allows,

„ich will Ihnen erzählen, was ich weiß. Wenn Sie einen Augenblick Zeit haben, ich begleite Sie bis zu Ihrem Hause, das wird gerade reichen.“

„Gerne,“ sagte sie, als ich sie endlich zu Worte kommen ließ, immer noch erstaunt, „aber wollen Sie nicht vielleicht den Kindern selbst?...“

„Ich den Kindern selbst erzählen? Nein, liebe Frau, das geht nicht, das geht auf keinen Fall.“ (ibid).

It may be surprising that the narrator is so quick and insistent with his answer that he cannot tell the stories to the children himself. He does not even let his neighbor finish her question before he insists that it will be impossible for him to do so. He continues by saying that he becomes embarrassed when he speaks to children, which comes off to the children as confusion. This confusion, he tells her, might be taken as an indication that he is lying to them, but he is very adamant about the truth of his story.

We might take note here that although he is insistent upon the truth of his story, it does not seem that he is entirely truthful about the reason why he does not want to tell the stories himself. He wants, as I explained above, to give the stories a certain δόναμις that can only come about if his stories move from person to person. This is what Rilke means by God. This reason remains implicit; he cannot be bothered to explain his theory to the neighbor or to the children that will receive the stories in altered form. Or, it may also be that the narrator does not even have the explicit intention of speaking God into being through the stories and is simply inspired and carried by the λόγος,³⁴ which, as Derrida points out, is neither good or bad:

If the written word is scorned, it is not as a *pharmakon* coming to corrupt memory and truth. It is because *logos* is a more effective *pharmakon*. This is what Gorgias

³⁴ I have left certain words in the Greek script in order to emphasize that they are ancient and foreign and deserve pause for thought. There are also ambiguities present in the Greek words and a semantic range that is collapsed when we render them in English, which is the point of Derrida's entire discussion of the *pharmakon*.

calls it. As a *pharmakon*, *logos* is at once good and bad; it is not at the outset governed exclusively by goodness or truth (Derrida 115).

Derrida goes on to say that the *λόγος* is ambivalent, mysterious and indeterminate, a fact that will become clear later on in the narrator's encounter in the next section, entitled "Der fremde Mann," and appropriately translated as "The Stranger."

The narrator wants to preserve certain ambiguities in telling the story to his neighbor so that she is forced to fill in the blanks herself. The narrator explains:

Und da mir sehr viel an der Wahrhaftigkeit meiner Geschichte liegt – Sie können es den Kindern ja wiedererzählen; Sie treffen es ja gewiß auch viel besser. Sie werden es verknüpfen und ausschmücken, ich werde nur die einfachen Tatsachen in der kürzesten Form berichten. Ja? (Rilke 7, 287).

We are only given the stories first hand and never hear the embellished versions that have been passed on. We do have some evidence that they have circulated throughout the community because "Der fremde Mann" knows the creation story³⁵ of the introduction by the time he speaks to the narrator. But already the prerequisites that are laid out in the passage cited above say much about what it is that the narrator wants to spread throughout his community.

I write "spread" purposely because I want to emphasize that there is no simple "message" that the narrator seeks to transmit, but something else. I said above that it is a matter of a distribution of labor that the narrator puts his story "on the wire" – he knows that there is a certain momentum to be gained by allowing the community to take up his stories and push them along. But there is something else besides a distribution of labor,

³⁵ I will turn to this creation story in greater detail below.

illustrated by the *pharmakon*. The *pharmakon*, as Derrida points out, is both good and bad, just as the sickness that it seeks to destroy has its own life:

For Plato believes in the natural life and normal development, so to speak, of disease. In the *Timaeus*, natural disease, like *logos* in the *Phaedrus*, is compared to a living organism which must be allowed to develop according to its own norms and forms, its specific rhythms and articulations (Derrida 100).

David Farrell Krell, in a book called *Contagion*, pulls a statement from Novalis that offers some needed contrast to the quote above from Derrida:

A note from *Das allgemeine Brouillon* of 1798/99, having to do with “The utility of illness— *the poesy of illness*,” begins skeptically enough (2: 475): “An illness cannot be a life, otherwise the *connection with illness* would have to *elevate* our existence. Continue this bizarre thought” (Krell 48).

The *pharmakon*, then, has something in common with the disease it seeks to treat. The *contagion*, is what Rilke’s narrator is trying to distribute through his community, sinisterly aiming for the children first because he knows they are the most effective carriers. The question that I want to ask here and leave open to investigation is whether he wants to spread the contagion in the form of a vaccination, which is to say, something that “elevates” us in the way that Novalis speaks of here, or directly as disease. This question may or may not receive a positive answer, but given Rilke’s style, this is doubtful. It is more likely, if his later works are any indication of the earlier, that he is trying to describe a raw energy, which first needs to be respected, and then tempered, as are the darker forces that are present in the *Duineser Elegies*.

We might also describe this contagion that Rilke's narrator is trying to disseminate as *Rat* (council), which is a similar kind of placeholder for a something that cannot quite be stated in Walter Benjamin's analysis in "Der Erzähler" (1936). One should keep in mind that advice or council is not always what one wants to hear and is a similar mix of *remedy* and *poison*. The darkness of advice is that it may speak to something in us that *must die* in order that a new part of us may live. For Benjamin, it is a matter of being able to share our experience, which we have lost the ability to do:

Immer seltener wird die Begegnung mit Leuten, welche rechtschaffen etwas erzählen können. Immer häufiger verbreitet sich Verlegenheit in der Runde, wenn der Wunsch nach einer Geschichte laut wird. Es ist, als wenn ein Vermögen, das uns unveräußerlich schien, das Gesichertste unter dem Sicherem, von uns genommen würde. Nämlich das Vermögen, Erfahrungen auszutauschen (Benjamin, *Erzählen* 103).

In not being able to tell stories, we lose the ability to make another person's experience our own. This stems from our experiences far exceeding our ability to express them and our words seeming ridiculous to us by comparison, thus creating a certain embarrassment in the attempt to speak.

After the horrors of the first World War, the combatants came home and were unable to communicate their experience: "Hatte man nicht bei Kriegsende bemerkt, daß die Leute verstummt aus dem Felde kamen? nicht reicher – ärmer an mitteilbarer Erfahrung" (Benjamin, *Erzählen* 104). Benjamin is indicating here a new kind of ineffability, or perhaps an ineffability that was emphasized by our inability to say anything because of a horror that we were unable to escape. The sublime, as Krell points

out in a discussion of Kant, always implies a safe distance – a distance that was now dissolving:

Sublimity, according to Kant, is in fact an experience of nature's *withdrawal* or *evanescence* before the power of the human mind. Kant does concede that this spectacle of nature's putative obeisance or complaisance before the mind of man is best observed from some point of safety, a refuge from the dire natural forces that otherwise would destroy us. Ahab waxes eloquent on the planks of the *Pequod* but has less to say once the whirring line has bound him to the sounding white whale. Kant, like Melville, waxes eloquent at the writing desk (Krell 7-8). There is always a certain safe remove that characterizes the encounter in the sublime. There is a relation to raw nature for sure, but it should not be so raw as to touch us directly. The tension that is set up is that of recoil and contraction in the face of nature and our seeking shelter from it, the pull between *Heimweh* and *Fernweh* which characterizes Romanticism. The resulting expansion that takes place is within the human heart: "the *Erweiterung* or dilation of the imagination and heart" (Krell 8).

This experience of wordlessness before an experience of awe or an encounter with god or nature seems to differ from the experience of the trenches of World War I, perhaps because there is no "safe remove," because the threatening force is the human being itself. This is only reinforced by the *Vernichtungslager* of the second World War, which necessitated that poetry move in a different direction. This is one of the many meanings of Theodor Adorno's famous statement about poetry and Auschwitz in 1949:

Kulturkritik findet sich der letzten Stufe der Dialektik von Kultur und Barbarei gegenüber: nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch, und das frißt

auch die Erkenntnis an, die ausspricht, warum es unmöglich ward, heute Gedichte zu schreiben (Adorno, *Prismen* 26).³⁶

Adorno retracts this statement (a move that is problematic, as the “statement” is within a dialectical net and is non-programmatic) in his *Ästhetischen Theorie* (1970) because of “Todesfuge” (1948) from Paul Celan and works from artists like Kafka, which properly acknowledge this new ineffability. This constellation between Benjamin, Adorno and Celan is in itself something to be explored in detail. But the point, in the context that I have been developing here, is that we suffer from being hit by both sides: not only does our experience become increasingly gruesome and indescribable, we also aggravate this condition by allowing our ability to communicate it fall by the wayside (even if this simply means showing the impossibility of communicating it, as is often the case in the works of Kafka).

What Rilke proves to us with his *Geschichten* is that the direness and darkness were there already before the horrors of the World Wars, but they were paired with an ability to share them. The horrors of the past were certainly nothing to make light of, but along with this suffering came, for example, the tradition of Homer. *The Iliad*, while it at times glorifies violence,³⁷ acknowledges the pain of battle and anger and a world in which no one cares about anything but dominance and prizes. Much later, in the Romantic tradition (which is closer to Rilke), while it is often accused of airy-headed

³⁶ I include these remarks on Adorno and his statements on poetry because it is not possible for us to read materials from before the world wars without reading back *through* those wars. Some level of anachronism in this way is always inevitable.

³⁷ War has been the topic of choice for poetry since the beginning. Socrates says of Homer in the *Ion* that he has “said nearly everything about war” (Plato, *The Great Dialogues of Plato* 15).

contemplation of beauty, there was also an acknowledgment of the direness of life, of which Derrida, as Krell acknowledges, was fully aware:

Indeed, the Derridian thought of holocaust and ashes, *der Aschenhaufen*, is never absent from the minds of the Romantics, or at least of those Romantics named Hölderlin, Novalis, Schelling, and Hegel, no matter how hard we try to turn them into harmless, bemused dreamers, no matter how hard we try to smother the smoldering fires of their meditations (Krell 32).

With this passage we start to get a better idea of the kind of council that Rilke is trying to offer in his *Geschichten*. The *Geschichten* are written for children, but they are much more connected to the Romantic tradition in the passage from Krell above, in that there is an acknowledgment and a grappling with dark and dire forces. It is with the communication of these forces that council can be offered, a council that faces the difficulty in both speaker and listener, that a part of us must die in order that a new part might live.

The Romantic tradition revived German folk tales and Fairytales, especially with the Grimm Brothers and their reading of Gottfried Herder, who advocated *Volkspoesie* over *Kunstpoesie*. This development is relevant to the present discussion for several reasons: 1) Fairytales do not give a simple moral that is easily understood or assimilated (i.e. totalized) into a positive statement. 2) Fairytales, unlike many of the children's stories today, are not light and harmless, but are dark and *uncanny*, which acknowledges the need for warning about a dangerous world and speaks to the dark and dire forces that I mentioned above. 3) Fairy Tales mimic, in a way, the *pharmakon* or *contagion* structure to which I have alluded several times. 4) Fairytales, in which Benjamin places some

hope, even if they are written down, are meant to be read aloud. which is to say, passed from person to person and not allowed to remain stagnant on the printed page, filed away and forgotten.

With this last point, and this goes for the ancient world of epic poetry as well as that of fairytales, we are dealing with a world of oral tradition, as Benjamin points out. But in Benjamin's world, the oral tradition had been replaced by *the novel* and we are no longer able to tell real stories:

Das alles deutet auf die Bewandnis, die es mit jeder wahren Erzählung hat. Sie führt, offen oder versteckt, ihren Nutzen mit sich. Dieser Nutzen mag einmal in einer Moral bestehen, ein andermal in einer praktischen Anweisung, ein drittes in einem Sprichwort oder in einer Lebensregel — in jedem Falle ist der Erzähler ein Mann, der dem Hörer Rat weiß. Wenn aber »Rat wissen« heute altmodisch im Ohre zu klingen anfängt, so ist daran der Umstand schuld, daß die Mitteilbarkeit der Erfahrung abnimmt. Infolge davon wissen wir uns und ändern keinen Rat. Rat *ist* ja minder Antwort auf eine Frage als ein Vorschlag, die Fortsetzung einer (eben sich abrollenden) Geschichte angehend (Benjamin, *Erzählen* 106).

The novel, written by an isolated individual and read by an isolated individual, does not have the face-to-face element that allows for sharing of experience and council.³⁸ To sum up, we have lost our ability to communicate in such a way that we can offer council (*Rat*), which means that we are unable to communicate and therefore to transfer our experience to other people. The speaker is unable to unburden herself through speech and the listener is unable to broaden her experience through listening, which makes the

³⁸ All of these remarks on the novel, the spoken word, etc. have to be taken with a grain of salt because the *Geschichten* are, after all, written and not spoken.

experiences of the story part of one's own experience. The reader should take note here that council is not the answer to a question, but a way of pushing the story into new directions. Rilke, as we have already seen, does the same by demanding that his stories be retold and embellished.

Benjamin continues. "Rat, in den Stoff gelebten Lebens eingewebt, ist Weisheit" (ibid). In losing our ability to communicate through stories, we have lost the ability to transmit wisdom and indeed, wisdom itself. Wisdom, Derrida might point out at this point, like beauty or truth, is not simply good, it is a *pharmakon*, full of (or perhaps beyond or simply other than) the opposition between bad and good. We will see, as Rilke's narrator goes on, that the story he imparts contains this seed of council and wisdom, but that it is not contained just in the facts of the story, but more in the way in which it is told. The reader will recall that in the passage cited above, the narrator tells his neighbor that he will only be giving her the barest facts of the story and that she must embellish them, adding that she will surely tell it better than he can. One difficulty here is that Rilke's narrator claims that he is only passing along *information*, and that a proper story must be made out of these elements. Benjamin argues that this is the state to which we have been reduced - that we cannot offer council, we can only transmit information, which does not allow us to make our experience the experience of others and vice versa. But as we will see, this is another clever bluff on the part of Rilke's neighbor. The "mere facts" of the stories immediately add up to much more.

Das Märchen

To tie this in to the broader discussion at hand: I have argued in the first chapter that our senses are variable; that depending on our place in history, our senses adapt to the given conditions and create radically different types of human beings. But when we are conscious of this process we can manipulate it, viz. through poetry, which, as should be quite evident by now, can speak through prose. We can sharpen and expand our senses and we become conscious of this process through bizarre experiences in which our relation to the *thing* changes; one such instance was Rilke's encounter with the makeshift phonograph in his science class as a child and his subsequent analysis of not just the uncanny sound that it produced, but the *writing* that the machine scratched in the surface of the wax. The question then became, at the beginning of the present chapter, one of how this process of sense expansion can be transferred to other people. What Rilke suggests in *Geschichten vom lieben Gott* is that there is significance in the spoken word and that storytelling plays an important role. Through storytelling, the process of sense transformation and expansion can be shared, indeed spread, like a contagion. But it can also be shared in the sense of the *pharmakon*, as a vaccine. In this case it becomes a question of the proper dosage.

It would sound strange to say that Rilke's narrator is doing "the good work," or spreading "the Good News" (εὐαγγέλιον, "evangel"). He is spreading, as a contagion, or perhaps as a *pharmakon*, stories that offer a strange kind of council, one that deals with dark and dire forces. "Im Anfang" (Rilke 7, 289), the narrator begins his creation story, starting with the creation of earth, then water and light, then moves on to *things* like rocks and trees, and uses these patterns to create others. But it does not take long before

something happens that introduces another major element to the story: *humor*. As I have already mentioned, there is a tension here in that the stories are supposed to be told to children, but they contain this dark and dire element, which we will see shortly, an element that Rilke's *Geschichten* have in common with fairytales (which, as Freud tells us in *Das Unheimliche*, are the proper medium of *the uncanny*).

After the narrator has begun, he starts to take note of footsteps behind him and his neighbor. He is disturbed by this and the disruption ends up being woven into his creation story. Finally, the disturbance overtakes them:

Da endlich waren die Schritte neben uns, und eine nicht gerade angenehme Stimme klebte an uns: „O, Sie sprechen wohl von Herrn Schmidt, verzeihen Sie...“ Ich sah ärgerlich nach der Hinzugekommenen, die Frau Nachbarin aber geriet in große Verlegenheit: „Hm,“ hustete sie, „nein – das heißt – ja, – wir sprachen gerade, gewissermaßen –“. „Was für ein Herbst“, sagte auf einmal die andere Frau, als ob nichts geschehen wäre, und ihr rotes, kleines Gesicht glänzte. „Ja“ – hörte ich meine Nachbarin antworten: „Sie haben recht, Frau Hüpfer, ein selten schöner Herbst!“ Dann trennten sich die Frauen. Frau Hüpfer kicherte noch: „Und grüßen Sie mir die Kinderchen.“ Meine gute Nachbarin achtete nicht mehr darauf; sie war doch neugierig, meine Geschichte zu erfahren. Ich aber behauptete mit unbegreiflicher Härte: „Ja *jetzt* weiß ich nicht mehr, wo wir stehen geblieben sind.“ „Sie sagten eben etwas von seinem Kopfe, das heißt –“, die Frau Nachbarin wurde ganz rot (Rilke 7, 289).

The tension here operates at several levels. There is the deadly seriousness of the narrator, which is humorous in its very seriousness. There also seems to be an allusion to

the *exceptional* nature of the mode of narrative and perhaps its uncanniness. The subject matter of the stories cannot be articulated or received except through accessing a mode of consciousness that stands firmly outside everyday, pragmatic consciousness. This is brought into conspicuous relief through Frau Hüpfers immediate withdrawal into the common by her discussion of the weather. The reason for the narrator's disgust is that this means that they are back to where they started.

Frau Hüpfers represents *das Man*,³⁹ to invoke Heidegger for a moment, which is to say, the idle chatter that works to pave over an exposed region of consciousness and keep a distance from Being. In this instance, however, the language of Kierkegaard, on whose philosophy Heidegger's project is modeled, may be more appropriate. There is here, within the dialogue between the narrator and his neighbor, a *moment* of grace, because their discussion is about God. It is the nature of our condition to fall from this grace, however, and Frau Hüpfers is this fall. If we keep in mind here that in this Christian theological context, one to which Rilke belongs in many ways and idealizes at this point in his life (but also rejects and turns on its head, as is evident in his *Stunden-Buch*, which was being written from 1899-1903, concomitantly with the *Geschichten*, which were written in 1899-1900), Christ is the word. Even in the narrator's choice to tell a story about Creation, there is a certain falling away that is taking place, because God is another name for the pre-linguistic moment upon which Rilke's poetry is based. Speaking about it, therefore is a distancing. The fall, however, into language and thought are necessary as a protective layer, because, as in the encounter with the angel in the *Duineser Elegien*, actual exposure would mean the destruction of the persona. Frau Hüpfers, in other words,

³⁹ See chapter 4 of *Sein und Zeit*, especially section 27, "Das alltägliche Selbstsein und das Man."

is a disturbance, but a necessary one. The listener would not be able to bear the weight of the story that the narrator is about to unfold without this mediating factor.

The narrator continues with his story after this brief interruption, explaining that for a time, God had only made *things* and that he did not have to keep track of them, and he forgets to watch the earth entirely while he is making human beings. During his work, an angel hurries past him, singing “Der Du alles siehst,” (Rilke 7, 290). This startles God, because the angel is lying. God does not see everything, as we will see shortly in relation to the human being. It is also important to note here that God causes the angel to sin in allowing him to lie, just as Frau Hüpfel brings sin into the conversation with her interruption; they *fall away* from talk about God and into the everydayness of the weather. Language of any kind is always a lie in this sense, because it causes a split between the subject and the object, as opposed to *Dasein*, which challenges this split. The task for poetry and poetic narrative, not to mention that of philosophy, is a language that constantly reminds us of this split; a language that acknowledges that it creates the split, but challenges it simultaneously.

God is irritated by the angel and goes to work on the human being in order to remedy himself. God creates the features of the face after his own with some success, but “Viel schwerer wurde es ihm, die beiden Nasenlöcher symmetrisch zu machen” (Rilke 7, 291). Here we see another instance of humor, which is quickly followed by an episode with St. Nicholas, who, when he suggests that God’s lions are too arrogant, receives the snarky reply that he should try making some himself (ibid.)

The chaos⁴⁰ that God has caused, which culminates in St. Nicholas storming out and slamming the door, and a star falling on a terrier, is evidence of a strange limitation in God's power. Because of these mistakes, he vows never to take his eyes off of the earth again. We also see God being curious to find out what the human being will look like, as he has left this labor to his hands. Curiosity suggests a lack, which clearly separates Rilke's God from the omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient Judeo-Christian God. Having left the labor to his hands, he wants to see the finished product and orders his hands to show him the human being. The non-unity of this God is also particularly conspicuous here. His divine body is fragmented and he is not entirely in charge of it, which is what gives us the first clue of what problem faces the human being. Just like these hands, cut off from God, our hands are severed from spirit as well.

At this very moment, he sees something *dark* falling to the earth and the hands show up empty-handed. God of course demands to know why they have lost the human being.

„Wo ist der Mensch?“ schrie er sie an. Da fuhr die Rechte auf die Linke los: „Du hast ihn losgelassen!“ „Bitte,“ sagte die Linke gereizt, „du wolltest ja alles allein machen, *mich* liebst du ja überhaupt gar nicht mitreden.“ „Du hättest ihn eben halten müssen!“ Und die Rechte holte aus. Dann aber besann sie sich, und beide Hände sagten einander überholend: „Er war so ungeduldig, der Mensch. Er wollte

⁴⁰ John D. Caputo argues that “chaos” is not the best word to translate *tohu wa-bohu* (Gen. 1:2) (Caputo 94). “In its most concrete sense, it actually means something barren and desolate and often signified a desert, a wasteland, an arid, barren, and uninhabited” (ibid.) Caputo connects this to Derrida's notion of *Khôra*. Whatever the case may be, God is irritated here that his work is being undone and things are slipping back into the state they were in before he worked on them. Caputo also relates an old Rabbinic tale in which Genesis is the 26th attempt at creation and that as Elohim begins again he exclaims, “Good, good ... very good. But let's hope it works” (Caputo 96). In the *Märchen*, the cascade mistakes would indicate to God that it is *not* working; perhaps that the cosmos will need to be created again.

immer schon leben. Wir können beide nichts dafür, gewiß, wir sind beide unschuldig“ (Rilke 7, 292-93).

It is noteworthy that the hands claim to be not guilty, because the question, “Wo ist der Mensch?” is a parallel to the biblical story. When God asks Adam, however, “Where are you?” Adam’s reply is that he had hidden himself because he was afraid. He now feels shame – feels guilty – because he has no clothes.⁴¹ In the narrator’s story, the human beings have not purposely hidden themselves, but out of impatience have run off, perhaps incomplete, because of the incompetence of God’s hands to handle the job themselves and because of God’s negligence. Whatever the case may be, we have here the origin of the *separation* between God and the human being. It is also the case that human beings are *responsible*, at least partially, for the separation.⁴² We were made in his image, and this separation is a reflection of his own prior self-separateness.

So the first thing that we learn about the human being is that we are impatient in our eagerness to live, but perhaps in so being we have cut off our communication with God before it could ever begin. God will be left to search for the human being, as we shall see, but to no avail, which is the great tragedy of human existence. God is infuriated by this incompetence on the part of his hands and banishes them from his realm:

„Ich kenne euch nicht mehr, macht was ihr wollt.“ Das versuchten die Hände auch seither, aber sie können nur *beginnen*, was sie auch tun. Ohne Gott giebt es keine Vollendung. Und da sind sie es endlich müde geworden. Jetzt knien sie den

⁴¹ Clothing will become an important feature in a later chapter, “Warum der liebe Gott will, daß es arme Leute gibt.”

⁴² The ambiguity of the grammar in the Hölderlin’s “Mnemosyne,” with which I opened this chapter (and closed the last), allows for two possibilities: we have wounded a heavenly entity or it has wounded us. It is this tension that permeates the *Geschichten*.

ganzen Tag und tun Buße, so erzählt man wenigstens. Uns aber erscheint es, als ob Gott ruhte, weil er auf seine Hände böse ist. Es ist immer noch siebenter Tag” (Rilke 7, 293).

What Rilke suggests in this passage, in saying that the hands are unable to do anything completely and instead are constantly kneeling and doing penance, is that there is a certain uselessness in prayer.

But it cannot be without irony, because the *Stunden-Buch*, written at roughly the same time as the *Geschichten*, gives great significance to the role of prayer and even to the role of the hands in prayer. Aris Fioretos notes that the *Buch vom mönchischen Leben*, the first part of the *Stunden-Buch*, has been called a spiritual diary, which centers around the gesture, especially that of placing the hands together in prayer (Fioretos 171). The book itself is “*Gelegt in die Hände von Lou,*” (Rilke 1, 250), meaning in the hands of Lou Andreas-Salomé, which Fioretos takes to mean that the poems are for someone who will pray (Fioretos 172). It is not the place to go into the details here, but it is more likely that the poems are *to* her; that he is prostrated as if before a demi-goddess in his relationship to Andreas-Salomé,⁴³ in the sense that he believes her to be a more highly developed form of human being. Prayer, in that cycle of poems, has the capacity to change the very nature of the human being and Rilke needs Andreas-Salomé as a feminine figure in order to create “ein Menschentyp der Zukunft” (Imhof 77) as Heinrich Imhof argues in *Rilkes „Gott“*. Without undertaking a major exploration of the significance of the prayer in Rilke’s poetic schema, we can safely assert that it is not

⁴³ The urgency of Rilke’s poetic need for Andreas-Salomé is quite apparent throughout Imhof’s book. This is also explored psychologically in Kleinbard’s *The Beginning of Terror*, especially in the chapters “This Lost, Unreal Woman” and “Take Me, Give Me Form, Finish Me” on Rilke’s need for a mother figure to replace the experience with his own mother, which was somewhat cold, distant and problematic.

useless, and that his meaning here will have to be bracketed for later interpretation, as well as this thought that we are permanently stuck “in the seventh day.” I will preliminarily assert that it is because of our inability to do true, creative work.

Rilke’s obsession, as we saw in the first chapter, with the phonograph and its ability to translate the subtle energies of the universe without consciousness to mediate, gives us some insight into this image. We are made in God’s image, as the narrator asserted at the beginning of his story. But we have become alienated from God through a mistake on the part of his hands, a mistake which in turn causes a rift between God and his hands. All of this points towards a *miscommunication* between God and his own hands, and if we make the *Sturm und Drang* move here of conflating the “I” and “God,” we can reasonably assume that Rilke wants to speak to a certain lack of communication between the self and the hands. His story here, as well as the story of the “Ur-geräusch,” expresses a wish for the self to become reconciled with the hands, a move that will perhaps reconcile us with God, or could create a direct link from God to the hands, thus creating an act of pure creativity. The split, it seems, is that the “self” is what we *are*, whereas the “hands” are what we do; the question becomes one of “being” vs. “making.” The task, which will not be fulfilled until Rilke finds the figure of Rodin, is to supersede this opposition.

The neighbor asks the narrator at this point if he thinks that the hands will ever become reconciled with God, to which the narrator replies auspiciously: „O doch,“ sagte ich, „ich hoffe es wenigstens“ (Rilke 7, 293). This reconciliation, however, will not happen until God can see what the human being looks like. As the narrator continues, a moment has passed for God (but generations for human beings) and humans have

propagated into the millions. But they are wearing clothes, and, as the narrator explains, very ugly ones that give God a false impression of what we look like. For this reason, God continues not to know what we look like, which gives the narrator an opportunity to provide some more clues on what the relation to God is. The narrator is thankful, “daß es solche giebt, die es ihm sagen...” (ibid), and explains further, when the neighbor insists, that those who can tell God what we look like are firstly children, then those who paint, write and build. This statement provides evidence that the kind of connection that Rilke is pointing to here is one of creative labor; a labor that expresses who we are as human beings. The neighbor asks the narrator, when he says “building,” if he means churches, but he replies that it is building of any kind. This implies that there is something sacred about creative labor itself, and given the statements that the narrator made above about the uselessness of prayer, perhaps specifically labor that produces *things*.

At this point, the neighbor interrupts with the question that the story itself seems to raise: How are we to justify this lack of knowledge on God’s part? She remarks, “Aber, was für ein Unsinn, Gott ist doch auch allwissend” (Rilke 7, 294). The narrator is confused for a moment, but his reply ends up being quite clever and provides evidence for my claim in the first chapter that Rilke insists not just on synaesthesia, i.e. the collision and confounding of the senses, but also on their subsequent separation, definition, and refinement:

Gott hat *alle* Eigenschaften, natürlich. Aber ehe er in die Lage kam, sie auf die Welt – gleichsam – anzuwenden, erschienen sie ihm alle wie eine einzige große Kraft. Ich weiß nicht, ob ich mich deutlich ausdrücke. Aber angesichts der Dinge spezialisierten sich seine Fähigkeiten und wurden bis zu einem gewissen Grade:

Pflichten. Er hatte Mühe, sich alle zu merken. Es giebt eben Konflikte. (Rilke 7, 295).

Just as the *Ur-geräusch* would shock the senses back into a primordial, undifferentiated mass, as in the case of love (which Rilke rejected in the essay as a mere stage in the process), God's faculties were undifferentiated at the beginning and slowly became specialized as this specialization was required by the *things* that he made.

This implies that sense and the phenomenon are bound: as one's knowledge of a thing expands, i.e. as we acquire more sense data about the thing, our senses expand. The God that Rilke is describing here seems more like a type of first cause that set the universe in motion, but then was not entirely in charge after those initial acts of creation. This stands in conflict with the narrator's assertion that God has *all* properties, by which he surely means omniscience, omnipotence, omnibenevolence, etc. His last statement, which is somewhat cryptic, could mean that he admits some imperfections in his story.

He goes on to explain that if the angel, which I described earlier, who flew by singing "Der Du alles siehst," had in fact sung "Der du alles *weiß*," (Rilke 7, 295) then everything would have been fine. The neighbor adds that then there would have been no need for the story. This exchange, while somewhat puzzling, seems to connote the etiological importance of the stories in a manner reminiscent of Ludwig Thoma's *Ein Münchner im Himmel* (1911). The story, as we learn in the end, is all a critique of the Bavarian government and tells us that the reason for the lack of communication between God and the government is that their appointed messenger, Aloisius, prefers to sit in the *Hofbräuhaus* and drink beer rather than deliver messages to the government. It is etiological in that the narrative exists in order to explain an apparent lack of

communication between the government and God. In the case of the narrator's tale, he reverse-engineers a story to explain our lack of communication with God in the same way. In order for the human being to be a "blind spot" for God, as is apparently the case, there must be some explanation, and this story is such an explanation. There is still a strange conflict, because "to see" would seem to be the same as "to know." But the narrator's last statement, "Es giebt eben Konflikte" could also be an indication that this is a difficulty in the narrative that she is going to have to work out in the retelling.

The narrator and his neighbor part as good friends and do not see each other for some time. After the neighbor tells the story to the children, he receives a reply in letter form from one of them, in which they presumably invite him to tell some stories himself. It is signed "Ich und noch fünf andere Kinder, nämlich, weil ich mit dabei bin" (Rilke 7, 296). He answers with a letter, expressing his joy that they enjoyed the story of God's hands. But he is quite insistent that he cannot come and tell the stories himself, explaining that his nose is not very pleasing to look at and that it may happen to have a pimple, in which case they would spend the entire time staring at it and not listening to his story. He closes his letter with the following: "grüßt euch – Ich, aber auch nur deshalb Einer, weil ich mit dabei bin" (Rilke 7, 297).

The Stranger

In this chapter of Rilke's *Geschichten*, we begin to see more obviously that this little collection of tales is much more than stories for children. It is a work of art that would satisfy even the stringent criteria of the thinkers of the *Frankfurter Schule*; Benjamin because of its extolment of the spoken word and its echoes of the fairy tale;

Adorno in its appeal to look at ourselves as we are in all of our horrors; Max Horkheimer because it is a work like Picasso's *Guernica*, which makes us recoil at our own condition and long for a freedom that we do not even know yet:

Seen at such a distance, the appurtenances of reality fuse into images that are foreign to the conventional systems of ideas, into esthetic experience and production. To be sure, the experiences of the subject as an individual are not absolutely different from his normal experiences as a member of society. Yet works of art – objective products of the mind detached from the context of the practical world – harbor principles through which the world that bore them appears alien and false. Not only Shakespeare's wrath and melancholy, but the detached humanism of Goethe's poetry as well, and even Proust's devoted absorption in ephemeral features of *mondanité*, awaken memories of a freedom that makes prevailing standards appear narrow-minded and barbarous (Horkheimer 275).

Horkheimer wants to say here that true works of art, which for him are produced only rarely and by individuals who have been able to escape an "incalculable social mechanism" and therefore do not unconsciously reproduce it, give us an alarming mirror of ourselves. By seeing our own image in such a light, we have no choice but to want to change ourselves. It will become evident in a few years in the *Der Neuen Gedichte Anderer Teil* (1908) that Rilke has such a change in mind when he writes "Du mußt dein Leben ändern" (Rilke 2, 557). The depth of this change becomes apparent already in "Der Fremde Mann," because it is a story of the human condition. We see a human being who

is subject to incredible suffering; a suffering so acute that even the hand of God is not immune to it or even able to ever recover from it.

I should mention that this is the story of Christ, although it is masked in Rilke's cosmology, and that this masking mimics the element of disclosure that is essential in reading biblical stories. The meaning of Christian biblical stories is not supposed to be immediately apparent, which is something we might glean from Christ's descriptions of the paradoxes he speaks as "seeds" (in Mark 3.4, "The Parable of the Sower," for example.) One might take note here that there is a similarity in Benjamin's understanding of *Rat* and these seeds. Jesus gives the "secret [or mystery] of the kingdom of God" to his disciples, "but for those outside, everything comes in parables; in order that

‘they may indeed look, but not perceive,

and may indeed listen, but not

understand;

so that they may not turn again and be

forgiven.’” (Mark 4.11-12).

It is not just that Jesus is trying to be mysterious here, but one gets the impression that the meaning of the stories cannot be conveyed *except* through mystery. The experience of the stories, which have been composed in order to transmit this experience, is characterized by mystery. The experience cannot be known in the way that we usually understand the word, but nonetheless has, alongside strong feelings, a strong noetic quality and is a state of knowledge (James 414). No story that did not include this paradox would be complete; in fact it is a central point.

As a mystery, the stories are meant to germinate slowly. Through reflecting slowly on the stories' meanings, the seeds are allowed to grow. The stories are deceptively simple at first, which allows them to enter into the psyche easily, but they contain paradoxes that beg reflection. Jesus does not speak except in parables (Mark 4.34), which are not to be absorbed at first glance. This is confirmed by St. Augustine in his *Confessions*:

I therefore decided to give attention to the holy scriptures and to find out what they were like. And this is what met me: something neither open to the proud nor laid bare to mere children; a text lowly to the beginner but, on further reading, of mountainous difficulty and enveloped in mysteries. I was not in any state to be able to enter into that, or to bow my head to climb its steps. What I am now saying did not enter my mind when I gave my attention to the scripture. It seemed to me unworthy in comparison with the dignity of Cicero. My inflated conceit shunned the Bible's restraint, and my gaze never penetrated to its inwardness (Augustine 40).

Augustine reads the bible as an educated Roman and determines that, when compared to works by people like Cicero, it is ineloquent and simplistic. But when he returns to it later on in his life, he is overcome by the depth of its meaning, something that he could not see on his first encounter with the text. My suspicion is that this is also the difficulty with Rilke's *Geschichten*, but they are not usually given the dignity of a second reading.

There is another layer to the "disclosure" that I am trying to express here. For people imbedded in the Christian culture, as Rilke was and as many of us are today, the story of Christ becomes so loaded that we are unable to see its essential wisdom. It has

been interpreted and misinterpreted so much and creates so much of the world around us that we are tempted to either take it up as a matter of faith and “believe” in it on the one hand or to reject it out of hand as religious gibberish on the other. Neither of these poles allow us to interpret it and derive its meaning. Many readers take the fact that this is a different version of the Christ story to be obvious; in *Dissonanzen in Orpheus’ Gesang*, for example, there is no mention that it may not be immediately apparent that it is the story of Christ.⁴⁴ The author takes it as obvious that it is the story of Christ. But it is important that the story creates a distance from biblical accounts so that one might experience the emotionality of them without the cultural baggage that would block this effect.

The horrible beauty of this story is that it illustrates that human life is suffering. But there is no way to express this except performatively. In other words, the story (i.e. the *pharmakon* or, perhaps, the contagion) has to both give a taste of that suffering so that one might find resonance in one’s life and one’s experience of humanity and subsequently, maybe for a moment, be relieved of it. One might recall Krell’s statement about the sublime in *Moby Dick* – that Ahab waxes poetic from the safety of the planks of the Pequod – and that the sublime is always characterized by a safe distance from nature rather than raw exposure to it. The story will do all of these things: On the one hand, one is exposed to the human being, as s/he is: selfish, untrusting, incredulous to the suffering of the other. But on the other hand, one gets this in story form, which is to say, through the *logos* and not in its immediacy. There is therefore a safe distance. This distance we might understand in two ways: First, it is that the two men involved in the conversation

⁴⁴ See, especially, “Der Gott, der uns in den Himmeln entflo, aus der Erde wird er uns wiederkommen,” (Richter 98).

are safe, inside, away from the tumultuousness of humanity, at least for now. Secondly, language itself, especially poetic language, can serve as a barrier or shield in that it mediates raw exposure to the world. But that very same language can *wound*, as we shall see in this stranger's response to the story.

Preserving Twilight

The narrator begins by telling about a letter that he received from the stranger. The letter is oddly impersonal and personal simultaneously: It does not tell about his personal relationships, the news, or anything quotidian, rather, "Er erweist mir ein viel, viel größeres Vertrauen, er macht mich zu seinem Bruder, er spricht von Not (Rilke GvIG 19). That evening, the stranger pays him a visit and the narrator notices that his guest is full of fear and that his hands are shaking. The narrator offers his guest tea, asking if he would like to try it with lemon, a habit that the narrator had picked up in Russia. One might take note of the way that Rilke slowly pulls us into an uncanny territory, first telling us about this strange relationship with a person whom he does not know, then making mention of things that would be strange and exotic. Tea itself is from the east; Russia would have been considered a frontier-land (and very much idealized by Rilke at this point in his life).

Even the way in which the narrator maintains the glow of twilight in the room suggests that the situation that is about to unfold is not an ordinary one:

Dann zünde ich eine Lampe an und stelle sie in eine entfernte Ecke, etwas hoch, so daß eigentlich Dämmerung bleibt im Zimmer, nur eine etwas wärmere als früher, eine rötliche. Und da scheint auch das Gesicht meines Gastes sicherer,

wärmer und um vieles bekannter zu sein. Ich begrüße ihn noch einmal mit den Worten: „Wissen Sie, ich habe Sie lange erwartet.“ Und ehe der Fremde Zeit hat zu staunen, erkläre ich ihm. „Ich weiß eine Geschichte, welche ich niemandem erzählen mag als Ihnen; fragen Sie mich nicht warum, sagen Sie mir nur, ob Sie bequem sitzen, ob der Tee genug süß ist und ob Sie die Geschichte hören wollen.“ Mein Gast mußte lächeln. Dann antwortete er einfach: „Ja.“ „Auf alles drei: Ja?“ „Auf alles drei“ (Rilke 7, 299).

Maintaining twilight in the room suggests a period of transition, where lightness and dark mix together. The nervousness of his guest melts into warmth with the lighting and with the narrator’s assurance that he has been waiting for his guest to visit. The recurrence of the number three is also an echo of the fairy tale tradition and the invocation of magical speech and spell; here, it could be an allusion to the holy trinity.

One might be reminded here also of the tradition of the “mysticism⁴⁵ of light” and Abbot Suger (c. 1081 - 1151), who was the first patron of Gothic Architecture, and rebuilt the Cathédrale Saint-Denis in what is now Paris. Suger believed, unlike Bernard of Clairvaux, that God was to be reached through the senses and advocated building ornate structures. But more precisely, he believed in the sacredness of the human labor that it took to build these structures. The inscription on the door of the basilica reads:

Whoever thou art, if thou seekest to extol the glory of these doors,
Marvel not at the gold and the expense but at the craftsmanship of
the work.

Bright is the noble work; but, being nobly bright, the work

⁴⁵ “Mysticism” hardly had the connotations that it does today; It was more closely associated with the secularization and “democratization of devotion” that took place in the late middle ages, most notably by Meister Eckhart (1268-1327). At bottom, it means “encounter with God.”

Should brighten the minds, so that they may travel, through the true
lights,

To the True Light where Christ is the true door.

In what manner it be inherent in this world the golden door defines:

The dull mind rises in truth through that which is material

And, in seeing this light, is resurrected from its former submersion (Frisch 7).

If one thinks about the inside of a Cathedral, there is a great deal of effort put into the vaulting of the ceiling, not only to create a massive amount of empty, interior space, but also to have more surface for stain glass windows. But stain glass windows are not there to allow the most natural light, rather to change the quality of light to try to trigger a meditative, contemplative experience, just as our narrator has done in his home.

Moreover, medieval Christian art in general sought to create an emotional response, compassion with the suffering of Christ, as evidenced by the interior of any medieval Christian church in Central/Eastern Europe and elsewhere. It is through the emotional response to the text that Rilke's piece works, as we shall see shortly.

It becomes evident why the transitional mood has been brought about in the next lines. It is as if the narrator has been preparing his guest for something - perhaps for a poison that, given in the right dosage, will be a cure.

Wir lehnten uns beide zugleich in unseren Stühlen zurück, so daß unsere
Gesichter schattig wurden. Ich stellte mein Teeglas nieder, freute mich daran, wie
goldig der Tee glänzte, vergaß diese Freude langsam wieder und fragte plötzlich:
„Erinnern Sie sich noch an den lieben Gott?“ (Rilke 7, 299).

Both men lean back in their chairs so that their faces are partially covered in shadow and so that there is a contrast between light and dark, known and unknown. The darkness of the room is contrasted by the golden glint of the tea. The tea glass itself is also a mixture insofar as it is a comfort of the home, but also has the exoticism of the unknown with its twist of lemon from Russia. His question is sudden and contrasts greatly with the comfort of the tea, like a doctor speaking comforting words but then quickly setting a bone. The physical response of the stranger is significant:

Der Fremde dachte nach. Seine Augen vertieften sich ins Dunkel, und mit den kleinen Lichtpunkten in den Pupillen glichen sie zwei langen Laubengängen in einem Parke, über welchem leuchtend und breit Sommer und Sonne liegt. Auch diese beginnen so, mit runder Dämmerung, dehnen sich in immer engerer Finsternis bis zu einem fernen, schimmernden Punkt: dem jenseitigen Ausgang in einen vielleicht noch viel helleren Tag (ibid).

We have in this description more mixture of light and dark, with the face partially shrouded in darkness and the pupil glowing in a way. One is tempted here to think of a cat's eyes glowing in the dark while reflecting some light source; indeed, with "Pupillen," one cannot help but hear a foreshadowing of that panther whose own pupil, a few years from when this book was written, will open occasionally to allow an image passage inward.

That the pupils of the stranger are crowned by an arch of light and with an exit on the other side to a "perhaps much brighter day," suggests a passageway and a threshold. There are countless associations that one might make with this liminal situation, but the

one that seems most prominent and pertinent seems to be Dante's *Purgatorio*. There, it is not twilight but dawn, but the theme of transition holds nonetheless:

The gentle hue of oriental sapphire
in which the sky's serenity was steeped—
its aspect pure as far as the horizon—
brought back my joy in seeing just as soon
as I had left behind the air of death
that had afflicted both my sight and breast.

The lovely planet that is patroness
of love made all the eastern heavens glad,
veiling the Pisces in the train she led.

Then I turned to the right, setting my mind
upon the other pole, and saw four stars
not seen before except by the first people.

Heaven appeared to revel in their flames:
o northern hemisphere, because you were
denied that sight, you are a widower! (Dante, *Purgatorio* Canto I, 13-27)

Dante, with his guide, has just left hell “To course across more kindly waters now” (Ibid, 1). Sapphire, one might recall, is a blue stone, but can be any color except for red. But at the other pole, the “four stars not seen before except for by the first people” the sky is as if in flame. The contrast here of deep blue and fire suggests a liminal zone, but Dante ultimately means that human life, specifically the Christian life, is a dangerous in-between. The story that the narrator is about to unfold will confirm this.

“Etwas Schwarzes”

The stranger, answering the narrator’s question of whether or not he still remembers God, responds affirmatively. He also affirms that he knows the story of the hands of God and that he does not know anymore where he heard the story. I should mention briefly that this illustrates a great success on the part of the narrator: his story has anonymously penetrated the community and has even moved beyond “intellectual property rights” in that it no longer bears his name – a status of which Benjamin would surely approve. The narrator begins his next episode, building upon the story of God’s hands. After a period of uncertainty in which God no longer knows whether he has dreamed the previous episode, he calls for his right hand, which God has banished and has not forgiven. He commands,

„Du gehst hinunter auf die Erde. Du nimmst die Gestalt an, die du bei den Menschen siehst, und stellst dich, nackt auf einen Berg, so daß ich dich genau betrachten kann. Sobald du unten ankommst, geh zu einer jungen Frau und sag ihr, aber ganz leise: Ich möchte leben. Es wird zuerst ein kleines Dunkel um dich sein und dann ein großes Dunkel, welches Kindheit heißt, und dann wirst du ein Mann sein und auf den Berg steigen, wie ich es dir befohlen habe. Das alles dauert ja nur einen Augenblick. Leb wohl!“ (Rilke 7, 300).

To recall the mess of the previous episode, God does not know what the human being looks like because his hands let the human being go before God was able to see him. The task seems simple: be born through human woman, live a human life to full maturity, and then stand naked on the mountaintop so that God can see what the human being looks

like. It should, as God says, only take a moment. But a human lifetime is not that easy, which is the point of this story, even for the hand of God.

The right hand takes leave of the left and Saint Paul cuts it off, leaving an archangel to carry it to earth under his robe. God stops the wound with the left hand, so that the blood does not run over the earth “in traurigen Tropfen” (Rilke 7, 301). As God watches, he begins to notice people in “eisernen Kleidern” (ibid) gathering around a particular mountain and presumes that it is where his hand will appear. “Aber es kam nur ein Mensch in einem, wie es schien, roten Mantel, welcher etwas schwarzes Schwankendes aufwärts schleppte” (ibid). What Rilke conceals here, just enough for us to gain distance and see anew, is that this man is Christ. The red overcoat is his blood; the swaying, black thing is the cross that he is dragging. The left hand, as if it cannot bear to see its brother in this condition, becomes restless and loses hold of the wound: “Die ganze Erde aber war rot vom Blute Gottes, und man konnte nicht erkennen, was darunter geschah. Damals wäre Gott fast gestorben” (ibid). With the last of his strength, God calls the right hand back:

...sie kam blaß und bebend und legte sich an ihren Platz, wie ein krankes Tier.

Aber auch die Linke, die doch schon manches wußte, da sie die rechte Hand

Gottes damals unten auf der Erde erkannt hatte, als diese in einem roten Mantel

den Berg erstieg, konnte von ihr nicht erfahren, was sich weiter auf diesem Berge

begeben hat. Es muß etwas sehr Schreckliches gewesen sein (Rilke 7, 301-2).

In this passage is the terrible beauty of the story. One hardly dares comment. We know what happened because of the New Testament, but from this point of view, we see that the suffering of human life is so great that it nearly kills God himself. It cripples his hand

to the point that it cannot ever recover and has no intention of even trying to express the horror of what happened. Read attentively, the story impacts in an emotionally intense way; one cannot help but think of Rilke's terrible Angel in the *Elegien*, who makes the persona perish in front of the Angel's stronger *Dasein*, because the ego retreats and allows a quiet, contemplative (yet lamenting) way.

This is no place to do a detailed reading of the Gospels, so we will have to be satisfied with a short reading that illuminates this *Geschichte*. If one concentrates, not on Jesus as God, but on Jesus as a man, the meaning here becomes clearer,⁴⁶ because it emphasizes the importance of human suffering. A note in the *Harper Collins Study Bible* (Mark 2.10) says that whatever the precise meaning of the phrase "Son of Man" is, it refers to Jesus' earthly authority. But the question of Jesus' earthly authority is vexed, at least in Mark's account; Jesus does not tend to inspire belief, but questioning in the hearts of the people around him. Moreover, it is not only that they do not believe in him as the Son of God, but that they do not even believe in his suffering or in him as a human being. Everyone is caught up in legalistic and pedantic interpretation of scriptures, as is evident in "The Man with a Withered Hand" (Mark 3.1-6).

In the previous section, "Pronouncement about the Sabbath" (Mark 2.23-28) Jesus had remarked that "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath" (Mark 2.27-28). This is, as the latter statement shows, a statement of Jesus' authority as God, but the former statement is meant to give flexibility in the laws of activity on the sabbath. In "The Man with a Withered Hand," Jesus is in the synagogue and the Pharisees watch him intently,

⁴⁶ This may also be the reason for the use of "the Son of Man," which is Jesus "cryptic mode of self-reference" (Harper Collins Study Bible, note for Mark 8:31).

waiting for him to make a mistake. Jesus looks at them angrily, heals a man's hand and "The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him" (Mark 3.6). The Sabbath, Jesus implies, is an important tradition and worth defending, but not at the expense of an increase in human suffering. It is there for reflection and recovery. Healing a person's crippled hand, in God's eyes, could hardly be something to be put off because of a rule that clearly does not apply in this case.

But even more importantly here, Jesus is "grieved at their hardness of heart" (Mark 3.5) as he often is in his interaction with other humans. It is not just that Jesus is alarmed at the lack of faith in him as God, i.e. as sacred, but as a human being. Because in the end, if they believed in him and his pain, they would not be able to torture and kill him. Elaine Scarry argues in *The Body in Pain* that one tends to have a certain doubt about others' suffering because one does not feel it oneself. As an extreme example she takes the torturer, who does not believe even that the other consciousness exists. In "The Structure of Torture," she shows that the reality of a person's pain is turned into the fiction of power. So we have confused what is real and what is fiction in the most inhumane way possible. Her argument comes down to having *faith* where it is appropriate: not in a power structure, but in the face-to-face relation to the Other, as Levinas would surely say. We cannot ultimately prove that the consciousness of other human beings exists and many ethical arguments come down to this fact. Husserl brackets this question, taking it simply as evident that with the presence of my Ego there is an alter-Ego. The issue is not to *prove* this relation but to practice it and constantly remember it.

But we tend to forget, because this knowledge is not like other forms of knowledge. The story of Christ, the biblical version as well as Rilke's version, try to remind us of this fact in a way that is suitable for this different type of knowledge, which is an emotional knowledge. The emotional reaction that we have to clear breaches of ethics is "torn into the blood," as God was through the rose window in Rilke's *Neue Gedichte*. But words fail us in trying to describe it, which leaves us to a delicate crafting and arrangement of words, evident in poetry and stories like the *Geschichten*. They are a way of speaking about the horror, but also respecting it through silence, as is evident in the Hand's behavior upon returning to the side of God. Human life: "Es muß etwas sehr Schreckliches gewesen sein" (Rilke 7, 301-302). Kurt Vonnegut writes, in *Slaughterhouse 5*,

Everything is supposed to be very quiet after a massacre, and it always is, except for the birds.

And what do the birds say? All there is to say about a massacre, things like "Poo-tee-weet?" (Vonnegut 19).⁴⁷

There is nothing to be said after a massacre, Vonnegut wants to say here, referring to the Allied bombing of Dresden and to this same horrible silence. This is also the core of Adorno's statement that there is no poetry after Auschwitz. Those who survived had the terror ripped into their blood, but then see others in the world who insist upon living by the same logic that led up to that terror. To scream at them would be to enter into the violence. They must be gently warned through art, like these stories.

⁴⁷ He continues, "I have told my sons that they are not under any circumstances to take part in massacres, and that the news of massacres of enemies is not to fill them with satisfaction or glee.

I have also told them not to work for companies which make massacre machinery, and to express contempt for people who think we need machinery like that" (ibid.)

The Stranger's Reaction

It is clear from the Stranger's reaction that he has either been vaccinated with the *pharmakon*, or infected with the contagion. Both really. The *pharmakon* is the strange council that can be transmitted through stories. It allows us to share experience, but experience is neither good nor bad, an ambiguity which the *pharmakon* structure emphasizes. Regardless of its status as good or bad, it is something that we need. Vaccination, we might remember, is homeopathic because it uses a small portion of the contagion in order to build our defenses against getting the full-blown disease. A good story, I am suggesting, is just such a vaccination. It also mimics the structure of the sublime, because with a vaccination we are *exposed* to the contagion but simultaneously protected against it. "Misery loves company," the saying goes —: human suffering is a contagion, contained in story form as a *pharmakon* or vaccination. It is a poison, but in the right dosage so that it builds our defenses against that poison.

Which one is yet to be determined, and, as I have already stated, perhaps to be left with its ambiguity intact, as are the parables of the bible and the morals of fairytales. This ambiguity, as I have suggested, is the space of human intersubjectivity, and in many cases collapsing it is a type of violence toward the Other. In any case, the Stranger has been stirred by the story. The Other is a force that shatters the ego and breaks up one's *habitus*, and we see evidence of this after the narrator finishes his story:

Meine Stimme ruhte ein wenig aus. Der Fremde hatte sein Gesicht mit den Händen verhüllt. Lange blieb alles so. Dann sagte der fremde Mann mit einer Stimme, die ich längst kannte: „Und warum haben Sie *mir* diese Geschichte erzählt?“

„Wer hätte mich sonst verstanden? Sie kommen zu mir ohne Rang, ohne Amt, ohne irgend eine zeitliche Würde, fast ohne Namen. Es war dunkel, als Sie eintraten, allein ich bemerkte in Ihren Zügen eine Ähnlichkeit –“ Der fremde Mann blickte fragend auf. „Ja,“ erwiderte ich seinem stillen Blick, „ich denke oft, vielleicht ist Gottes Hand wieder unterwegs...“ (Rilke 7, 302).

That the narrator’s voice quiets (“ruhte”) in the first sentence suggests that he too is moved by his story. It is also a gesture back toward human beings being “stuck in the seventh day,” which is to say, stuck at rest and unable to create. Most of all, though, we see the Stranger covering his face and staying that way for some time - a speechless reaction which is perhaps the only suitable one. One is reminded here of the encounter in *Malte*, where a person on the street is startled and lifts her face out of her hands, but the face stays. There will be more space to comment on this in the reading of *Malte*, but preliminarily I will assert that the person is caught off guard and exposed, without the usual masks that we use to protect ourselves from one another. Such an exposure is the fruit of the story that the narrator has told.

The Stranger has no commentary, but only wonders why it is that the narrator has chosen him as a listener. In the answer to this question we receive only more ambiguity, but we receive confirmation here that Rilke’s Stranger has the same qualities, or lack thereof, that characterize other great Strangers in literature, those of Franz Kafka, Albert Camus, or James Baldwin, just to name a few. The Stranger is the Other, exposed here by the story. This exposure is best expressed by Enrique Dussel in *Ethics of Liberation*:

In a taxi, before he was to speak at a conference in Louvain in 1972 I asked [Emmanuel Levinas]: “What is *exposition*?” And Levinas, opening up his shirt

with two hands, ripping open his buttons, and exposing his chest, exclaimed: “It’s like when you *expose* yourself before a firing squad!” (Dussel 274).

The story exposes its listener in Rilke’s story, leaving him vulnerable. Specifically, the narrator of the story has exposed his listener to a contagion, either in the form of an outright sickness, or as a vaccine. When we reach the chapter on *Malte*, this idea will have to be explored further, but the idea of exposure, as Dussel has expressed it here in his discussion with Levinas, is clearly at work already in the stranger’s reaction.

The stranger is laid bare, like the person in *Malte* who exposes the face without its mask of skin, as in Levinas’ notion of exposure above. The Other is revealed in the face of the person who is vulnerable, like the widow or the orphan, as Levinas tells us repeatedly in *Totality and Infinity*. Levinas’ performance in the taxi cab reminds the student of French literature of Étienne Lantier in Zola’s *Germinal*, who exposes his breast to a soldier’s bayonet, as if to say, “You’ve taken everything from me – what difference does it make if you kill me?” It is a person who has been stripped of everything and reduced to a state of bare life.⁴⁸ Moreover, that Dussel asks what “exposition” is and receives an answer like the one that Levinas gives him reveals a connection between the exposure of the Stranger and the writing of a story. We have collapsed here the difference between writing and speaking, but perhaps in a productive way, as Rilke has by writing a story about a story that is to be told orally.

The narrator’s answer, “ich denke oft, vielleicht ist Gottes Hand wieder unterwegs...” suggests that the hand of God could be at work anywhere, especially in those from whom we may not expect it, like the Stranger. Even if we do not know a

⁴⁸ I am alluding to Giorgio Agamben’s *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, in which Agamben outlines the relations between people within a secularized world that still bears the power structures of the old religious world. The result is bare life; basically the Stranger that I am investigating here.

single detail about a person, there is a way of cultivating a receptivity to this unknown, instead of acting violently toward it. This suggests further a type of ethics that we would have to have in order to relate to this Other, viz. that her or his suffering is real and not to be doubted. We can ignore or spit at her or him, but we run the risk of further interrupting the communication between God and human beings; we do not create a proper place for the gods to return to our realm, as Hölderlin (and Heidegger following him) might say.

There is one final detail that complicates this story. We of course do not hear the version of the story that was told to the children, but the last line of this story reads, “Die Kinder haben diese Geschichte erfahren, und offenbar wurde sie ihnen so erzählt, daß sie alles verstehen konnten; denn sie haben diese Geschichte lieb” (Rilke GvIG 23). The tale is rather gruesome, as many fairytales are, and lacks the comic relief that was present in the “Märchen von den Händen Gottes.” It is therefore surprising that the children could be so fond of it. This does not mean that the story that was told to them was not humorous, but it is of course useless to conjecture. It seems significant, if we think back to the “Märchen,” that the children, and secondarily those who create art, are the ones who are still able to tell God what human beings look like. This suggests a special connection and also that the story resonated with them, despite its seriousness, because children have a sensitivity that is lost over time.

Conclusion

There have been many discoveries in this chapter, many of which will have to be worked out in the next chapter, which will continue with the reading of the *Geschichten*. The first two stories, “Das Märchen von den Händen Gottes” and “Der Fremde Mann”

are a centerpiece of this study and provide many clues for the type of art that Rilke is concerned with producing. The main connection that has been illuminated thus far is the connection between the first chapter and the second, viz. that there is a lack of communication between God and the human beings. To make this explicit once again, this is expressed in the “Ur-geräusch” in Rilke’s admiration of the phonograph, which is able to translate from its horn to the needle and back, which is what Rilke wants to be able to do with his ear and his hand. He wants to reestablish a connection between the ear and the hand, via the skeleton, by which he can record the subtle vibrations of the universe. In the second chapter, we have seen that this lack of connection is a result of a lack of communication between God and human beings. I suggested briefly that this could also mean a lack of self-relation, which is a more secularized way of thinking about the matter.

Whatever the case may be, it disallows us, except under rare circumstances and with great difficulty, to do true creative labor. I have given some examples of what this true creative labor is: Horkheimer with his understanding of Picasso, Shakespeare and Goethe; Adorno with the poetry of Celan. I have also suggested that the bible is such a piece of art, which is perhaps why Rilke chose it as a model for “Das Märchen von den Händen Gottes” and “Der Fremde Mann.” For a Christian, the Bible is a work written by God, so it makes sense that Rilke would extol it by taking it as a model for his stories, because it would be an instance in which spirit is not disconnected from the tip of the pen. I have also tried to situate the poem as pre-WWI because this event is the beginning of a great abyss that separates us from a world in which people were able to tell stories, as Benjamin argues. Benjamin said that men came back from the war without being able

anymore to share their experiences.⁴⁹ We live in this world, without council, which blocks our access to the *Geschichten*, and the goal of these chapters is to work our way back into them.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Today, young men and women come home with pictures on their cellphones of the details of battle. I recently spoke with a young man who showed me several pictures of his experiences in Iraq, some of which included killing human beings against his will. There is a sense in which we have come to terms with our inability to communicate and simply show each other.

⁵⁰ Part of the reason for doing a phenomenological reading, which could describe what I am doing here, is precisely to lift these blocks and gain access to the text again.

CHAPTER IV

GESCHICHTEN VOM LIEBEN GOTT, PART II: THE CONDITIONS FOR THE POSSIBILITY OF SENSE

Introduction

In chapter II, on Rilke's mysterious "Ur-geräusch" essay, we found that Rilke was envious of the phonograph that he and his classmates had constructed out of readily-available materials in his science classroom. The machine had a certain kind of raw connection between its horn and the improvised, brush-bristle stylus and was able to speak the language of things and write them into the wax of the barrel. Rilke wanted ultimately to use his own skeleton as a kind of antenna to pick up this hidden language, his ear and skull being the receiver; using his hand and pen to act as a stylus. The memory of the writing in the wax was hidden below a memory of the sound produced by the machine, and this collision of sight and sound was an impasse of the senses that first blurred the boundaries between two or more senses and then set the senses into motion and expansion. This collision and subsequent re-definition of borders, I suggested, was akin to breathing, which is to say, both moments are necessary and incomplete without one another, just as inhaling requires exhaling. The problem, in short, is how to connect this secret "language of things" with the tip of one's pen or tongue. One might also take note of the fact that the stylus was made out of the bristle of a brush, which hints that it may be the tip of one's paintbrush, something that will be thematized in the present chapter.

As we moved on to the second chapter, the first of two parts on the *Geschichten vom lieben Gott*, we discovered that this concern for this seeming disruption between the

secret language of things and the pen (or chisel, or whatever medium is at issue) was a standing concern in Rilke's prose works. Here, with a mix between humor and deadly seriousness, we found that the origin of the conflict was a disagreement between God and his hands. Out of carelessness, the hands allowed the human being to escape into creation before God was able to see him/her. In order to remedy the situation and catch a glimpse of the human being, God sent one of the hands down to earth. We found a version of the story of Christ, which really was a commentary on the seriousness of human suffering: in attempting to simply live one human lifetime, God nearly bled to death and his hand was permanently traumatized, unable to tell the story of what happened. God never got a glimpse of the human being and we are left in "seventh day," which I suggested was another indication that we are incapable, for the most part, of true creative labor. But this is precisely our task: to bring spirit to the things; to make the things speak, and, ultimately, to allow the earth to speak again, an idea that I will begin to develop in this chapter.

Not only was this story itself of great significance, but also the way in which it was told. The narrator, telling these stories of the dear lord, wove a web of narrative throughout the community, coming up with stories, but also encouraging those to whom he told them to tell them again with embellishments, especially to children. But he refused to tell the stories to the children himself. We uncovered also a perhaps sinister plot on the part of the narrator and noticed a striking resemblance of the stories to a contagion. The listeners were exposed and infected, as was evidenced by the reaction of the Stranger, who is broken down by the story of the hand of God. But I also suggested that it is not merely a contagion, but a vaccination of sorts; a *pharmakon* that has its

benefits but never without its price; a poison that, given in the right amount, is a cure. We concluded with the thought that this is the purpose of literature and of any art: to gently, yet firmly shock the viewer into a type of sympathy that is inevitable when one confronts a trauma firsthand. It creates, as Horkheimer said, an ability to look at ourselves and the longing to create a different world.

Rilke, I believe, would add: to create a plurality of different worlds in which our senses adapt to their new circumstances. However, which is first, these new worlds or new senses cannot be answered. The key to these new worlds, – “und wer weiß, w[ie]viel Welten” (Rilke 11, 1093) – lies in the interstices between the senses, a background which is opened up by a glimpse of these new worlds, through an impasse that can be created by art. So there is a certain circularity here that cannot be avoided, and may be intentional on Rilke’s part. Before we begin this study, which will cover the remaining sections of the *Geschichten vom lieben Gott*, we should benefit, I believe, from seeing what Rilke himself thought about art at the time that the *Geschichten* were written. He wrote a short piece called “Aufzeichnung über Kunst” in 1900 that will give us some clues with which we can start. I will then move on, following structural fissures in the text (I will explain how below), to readings of its periphery and core.

The Art of Darkness

Art for Rilke is not a freeze-framing like photography, but giving a Thing movement toward a certain darkness, as I will explain here in this section. In a studio talk, Richard Freeman is asked by a student what the meaning of the Sanskrit word “vinyasa” is (Freeman, *Studio Talks*). The term, which simply means movement, has

come to describe certain physical movements in Indian meditation practices, but, as Freeman explains, it originally was a word that was used by monks to describe the process in which a normal, everyday word, which has become paved over in its meaning, is transformed into a sacred word through chanting and other rituals. By chanting the word, it gradually loses its associations; its meaning is elevated through giving the word movement. The movement in this chanting is similar to the movement given to things through poetic speech, a phenomenon that Rilke describes in his “Aufzeichnung über Kunst” (1898):

Die Kunst ist der dunkle Wunsch aller Dinge. Bange Worte sehnen sich danach, im Gedicht zu gehen, arme Landschaften vollenden sich im Bilde, kranke Menschen werden schön darin. Das macht: der Künstler hebt die Dinge, die er seiner Darstellung wählt, aus den vielen zufälligen konventionellen Beziehungen heraus, vereinsamt sie und stellt die Einsamen in einen einfachen reinen Verkehr (Rilke 12, 1161).

In the first sentence here, Rilke remarks that art is the “dark wish” of all things. Like the Romantics, whom I have already mentioned as having more predilections toward the dark and dire than is perhaps commonly believed, Rilke uses the converse of the Christian meaning of light and dark in *Das Stunden-Buch* (1899), in a manner that might be compared with Novalis’ *Hymnen an die Nacht*. It is not the proper place to delve into Novalis’ work here, but we can give a quick sketch of what Rilke means by “darkness” in the *Stunden-Buch*.

The most compelling aspect of darkness in Rilke's work is that God himself is dark, not light, and is equated with the unconscious: "Du bist der dunkle Unbewußte" (Rilke 1, 276). The persona wants to be before God like a thing, dark and wise:

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).

God is the darkness from which the persona originates (Rilke 1, 258) and he believes in nights (Rilke 1, 259). He accordingly loves his dark hours, because this is where, and that into which his senses are deepened: "Ich liebe meines Wesens Dunkelstunden, / in welchen meine Sinne sich vertiefen" (Rilke 1, 254).

Darkness, then, in Rilke's statement about art, is that toward which everything wants to move, i.e. it is, like God, "the End of Things" (Aquinas 315), as Aquinas would have it. The wish to be art is a dark wish, but dark in the sense that it wants to move towards God. But contrary to Aquinas, this God is not simple; it is born, rather, out of the contrast between light and dark. To understand this complexity, or perhaps rather to deepen it, we might remember that in *Die Sonette an Orpheus* (1923) the dark desire of the animals, tamed by the song of Orpheus, is to become civilized. Implied in this is a Nietzschean idea, viz. the wish of the animals to surpass their present form, compelled by a necessity, as Nietzsche writes in *Zur Genealogie der Moral* (1887):

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 ungelenk, sie hatten für diese neue unbekante Welt ihre alten Führer nicht mehr, die regulierenden 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 complexity of Rilke's darkness is present here in Nietzsche's thought: what pushes and moves us "forward" cannot necessarily be understood as progress; there is also a darkness and violence to our development. In this passage, Nietzsche reverses our common assumptions because we tend to think of our consciousness and intellect as the pinnacle of earthly existence, whereas in fact it may be the very force that brings earthly existence to an untimely close. In the case of this mythical animal that crawls out of the water and is no longer supported by the water, but must now hold itself up in the air and drag itself across the land, it would be difficult to say that the heaviness acquired is a simple step forward. The change in the human being that took place as we became civilized, for which Nietzsche uses this mythical animal as a metaphor, came with a weight all its own.⁵¹ The dark desire of this animal to crawl out of the water, as well as the human desire to become "civilized" and to create art, is a desire to become something new. But it is dark because it is a wish to surpass one's present form, which implies a

⁵¹ This "weight" will become particularly pronounced when I move onto my reading of Malte.

memento mori; an acknowledgment that one must die in order to produce this new form, or perhaps that a part of ourselves must die in order to move onto this new step.

This last idea is an extremely delicate and dangerous one, so I should explain a bit further what I mean. On February 15, 2013, Cornel West gave a talk at the University of Oregon. He began the talk by praising the work of teachers in the Humanities, and said that while most people emphasize *humanitas* as the root of the word, which implies being civilized, i.e. a certain surplus that denotes a level beyond mere subsistence, he wanted to emphasize the element of the word that reaches back to *humando*, meaning burial. Humanities, he argued, is bringing back the voices of the dead. To understand the question of what it means to be human, we have to acknowledge the fact that we will die, which is also the frame in which one must discuss philosophy. West cited Percy Bysshe Schelley, who in *A Defense of Poetry* argues that poetry allows us to conceive of a world that is better than the one that we have. To link this back to our brief discussion of Horkheimer in the last chapter, this would be the “rational” world that critical theorists demand. West went on to say that there is no transformative possibility, i.e. there is no hope of a better world, without a recognition that there is something in us that *must die*. This is the darkness that Rilke points to in his conception of God, and the corresponding darkness within things, as well as within the persona in his “dark hours.”

This movement, however, has yet one more complication. It is not unidirectional; it is not merely that we are inclined toward a certain dark progress in the sense of a movement toward the future, the darkness that Rilke describes is also that of the past, as Rilke explains in his introduction to *Worpswede* (1902/03):

Freilich, da könnte mancher sich auf unsere Verwandtschaft mit der Natur berufen, von der wir doch abstammen als die letzten Früchte eines großen aufsteigenden Stammbaumes. Wer das tut, kann aber auch nicht leugnen, daß dieser Stammbaum, wenn wir ihn, von uns aus, Zweig für Zweig, Ast für Ast, zurückverfolgen, sehr bald sich im Dunkel verliert; in einem Dunkel, welches von ausgestorbenen Riesentieren bewohnt wird, von Ungeheuern voll Feindsäligkeit und Haß, und daß wir, je weiter wir nach rückwärts gehen, zu immer fremderen und grausameren Wesen kommen, so daß wir annehmen müssen, die Natur als das grausamste und fremdeste von allen im Hintergrunde zu finden. Daran ändert der Umstand, daß die Menschen seit Jahrtausenden mit der Natur verkehren, nur sehr wenig; denn dieser Verkehr ist sehr einseitig. Es scheint immer wieder, daß die Natur nichts davon weiß, daß wir sie bebauen und uns eines kleinen Teils ihrer Kräfte ängstlich bedienen (Rilke 9, 11).

The artist, and accordingly a true piece of art, reaches into the dark unconscious in the sense that it emerges from it and evokes it when observed. But we can understand more closely what that unconscious means here. This passage from *Worpswede* reaches back beyond Nietzsche's statements about the origin of civilization and back to the origins of life. That hate and resentment that need to be harnessed reach back to the instincts of dinosaurs. There is a touch of a progress narrative to be found in Rilke's explanation here, in that he sees the most alien and terrible creatures to be further back in the past, but, with the complexity added that God is also this darkness, the linearity of the movement is interrupted.

The artist, in touch with her dark hours, is the one who recognizes this dark inclination on the part of things, which reaches into a prehistoric past on one hand and a transcendent entity on the other, and facilitates their arrangement so that it reflects this order. In a second version of his short essay on art, Rilke writes:

Gerne lassen [die Dinge] ihren welken Sinn los, um irgend eine unserer schweren Sehnsüchte zu tragen. Sie drängen sich in unsere zitternden Sinne und dürsten danach, unseren Gefühlen Vorwände zu werden. Sie flüchten aus der Konvention. Sie wollen sein, wofür wir sie halten. Dankbar und dienend wollen sie die neuen Namen tragen, mit denen sie der Künstler beschenkt. Sie sind wie Kinder, welche bitten, man möge sie mitnehmen auf eine Reise: sie werden nicht Alles begreifen, aber die tausend zerstreuten und zufälligen Eindrücke werden einfach und schön auf ihrem Gesichte sein (Rilke 12, 1161-2).

Things want, as Rilke writes, to be the language of the artist (Rilke 12, 1162). Just like the animals that Orpheus lures out of their dens, with their dark longing to become “civilized,” so too are things lured into the order into which the artist arranges them. They want to be a pretense to our feelings, meaning that they want to stand in and serve the function that I have already explained above, viz. a bulwark that stands between us and nature, this time between us and the animal nature in us, here denoted by feelings. The things, rearranged into poetic language, allow a permeable bulwark that allow us to view that nature from a safe reserve, just as the children, brought along on the journey, will not understand “Alles” (to which Rilke calls attention by capitalizing the A), i.e. the All, but will pick up fragments, which we can read in their faces, like the face of the child

in “Apfel, Birne und Banane...” Implied in this is that we can view “the All” in the face of a child in a mediated form.

Dark Stories

It is fully conceivable that one could write an entire book on the *Geschichten* alone, as I have surely demonstrated by devoting two entire chapters to them. The task at hand, however, is to sweep Rilke’s prose works, while thinking on the theme of sense expansion. I would like to start cutting through the text in a less linear fashion, but still along the structural lines that are present in the text. As Thomas Elwood Hart argues in “Simile by Structure in Rilke’s *Geschichten vom lieben Gott*,” there are certain structural symmetries in the text: “Der Fremde Mann,” the first story of this series, corresponds to the final story; the second story corresponds to the penultimate story; the third story corresponds to the antepenultimate, and so on.⁵² These structural features give poetry some commonalities with sculpture, which I will thematize briefly in this chapter and in more detail in the next:

In fact, it is inherently characteristic of verse as a genre to tend toward spatial, painterly, even architectural modes of composition, since the constraints of rhythm, meter and the graphic divisions of line and stanza impose design demands on writers not unlike the organizational challenges that cartoon and blueprint pose for the painter or the architect (Hart 26).

⁵² One cannot help but notice a certain circular or spiral-type motion towards a center here, which harkens back to the spinning barrel of the makeshift phonograph in “Ur-geräusch.” Something that Hart does not mention, however is that this pattern is strikingly similar to Homeric Ring Composition, a structure which the ancients would have expected in epic poetry, and to which Rilke is surely pointing here.

One thing that Hart does not mention is that this type of symmetry to “Der Panther,” which I treated briefly in the last chapter, and in which the lines “um eine Mitte” are directly in the physical center of the text, which suggests that there could be importance also to the middle of a prose collection. I want to therefore concentrate in the present study on the periphery and the middle, and because of space, to cut through some of the other pieces.

I have already addressed the first story, “Der Fremde Mann.” I will skip now to the last story, entitled “Eine Geschichte, dem Dunkel erzählt,” which continues with the theme of darkness and art that the previous section addressed and links back to the first story, which I addressed in the second chapter of this study. I will then move to the two middle stories, “Eine Szene aus dem Ghetto von Venedig” and “Von Einem, der die Steine belauscht.”

Darkness, one should take note, is a lack of vision, which corresponds to the teacher in “Warum der liebe Gott will, dass es arme Leute giebt”, taking off his glasses before the story begins (Rilke 7, 305), as well as the neighbor Ewald, who closes his eyes before a story begins (Rilke 7, 312). This de-emphasis of sight emphasizes listening and hearing, as well as use of the mind’s eye, imagination, which, again, is the proper realm of poetry.⁵³ “Eine Geschichte, dem Dunkel erzählt,” begins, likewise, as it is getting dark in the narrator’s room and he has no one to whom he can tell a story (Rilke 7, 386-7). “So geschah es,” the narrator explains, “daß ich dem Dunkel erzählte” (Rilke 7, 387). The darkness takes on sentient qualities: “Und es neigte sich immer näher zu mir, so daß ich immer leiser sprechen konnte, ganz, wie es zu meiner Geschichte paßt” (ibid.)

⁵³ One might recall that Homer himself is argued by some to have been blind. See, for example, Alexander Beecroft’s “Blindness and Literacy in the Lives of Homer.”

The story must be told in a quiet voice, which calls attention to the tone in the same way as the lighting in “Der Fremde Mann.” In order to hear a quieter voice, one must listen closer, which corresponds to Stefan Zweig’s account of Rilke: “...silence seemed to grow around him, wherever he went, wherever he was [...] he avoided every noise, even his own fame...” (Zweig 114). Zweig writes further,

[Rilke] had an indescribably gentle way of approaching and talking. When he entered a room where people were gathered together, it was so noiselessly that hardly anyone noticed him. He sat there quietly listening, lifted his head unconsciously when anything seemed to occupy his thoughts, or when he himself began to speak, always without affectation or raised voice. He spoke naturally and simply, like a mother telling a fairy tale to her child, and just as lovingly; it was wonderful how, listening to him, even the most insignificant subject became picturesque and important. But no sooner did he feel that he was the centre of attention in a larger circle than he stopped speaking and once again sank down into his silent, attentive listening. Every movement, every gesture was soft; even when he laughed it was no more than a suggestion of a sound. Muted tones were a necessity to him and nothing annoyed him so much as noise and, in the realm of feeling, all violence. “They exhaust me, these people who spit out their feelings like blood,” he once said; “that’s why I swallow Russians, like liqueur, in small doses” (Zweig 115).

It makes sense then, that the narrator in this story tells the story to darkness, so that he can tell the tale as quietly as is appropriate. One might recall the narrator’s reluctance to tell the stories directly to the children, perhaps because he is doubtful he will be able to

bring about the type of silence necessary to tell the tales, the kind that would arise between mother and child, as Zweig writes of the tone of Rilke's own voice.⁵⁴

It is a similar kind of quiet self-possession that the main character, Dr. Georg Lassmann, seeks in this story. He returns by train to his hometown⁵⁵ to try to find something that will trigger some emotion in him, good or bad:

Aber nachts, während er im überfüllten Zuge nicht schlafen konnte, wurde ihm klar, daß er eigentlich um seiner Kindheit willen kam und hoffte, in den alten Gassen irgend etwas wieder zu finden: ein Tor, einen Turm, einen Brunnen, irgend einen Anlaß zu einer Freude oder zu einer Traurigkeit, an welcher er sich wieder erkennen konnte. Man verliert sich ja so im Leben (Rilke 7, 387).

He is not looking, it seems, to be free of sadness or to feel joy, it is rather that he simply wants to experience anything at all. His experience lacks contrast and his life has blurred over into oblivion. There is a tension here between night (*nachts*) and the clarity that comes over him (*wurde ihm klar*), the lack of clarity and feelings of being lost and the clarity that he seeks, perhaps in some object, in his hometown. Dr. Lassmann, it seems, *is* darkness and, when he falls asleep, a name comes to him, which is then repeated after he awakes in the sound of the wheels on the train: "Klara, Klara, Klara" (Rilke 7, 388).⁵⁶

There is a link here between clarity, brightness, denoted by the word "klar" and the name Klara, a childhood friend of Dr. Lassmann's.

⁵⁴ I do not mean to conflate the narrator with Rilke himself in all cases, but it seems appropriate in this instance.

⁵⁵ This returning to childhood to understand one's adulthood will return as a theme in both Auguste Rodin and Malte Laurid Brigge.

⁵⁶ Also, Clara Westhoff is the name of Rilke's wife.

But we should not forget the reversal that Rilke makes on the traditional conception of God as light. In the *Stunden-Buch*, again, God is darkness, and it is in dark hours that the personae in the poem find God and in which they pray. Lucifer, on the other hand, is light:

Er ist der Fürst im Land des Lichts,
und seine Stirne steht
so steil am großen Glanz des Nichts,
daß er, versengten Angesichts,
nach Finsternissen fleht.
Er ist der helle Gott der Zeit,
zu dem sie laut erwacht,
und weil er oft in Schmerzen schreit
und oft in Schmerzen lacht,
glaubt sie an seine Seligkeit
und hangt an seiner Macht (Rilke 1, 287).

Lucifer then, the “Feind” who dwells outside the walls of the city, cannot be taken to be pure evil, just as we have seen that God does not simply play the role of the Good. Rilke effectively deconstructs the meaning of good and evil through verse in the *Stunden-Buch*, and here, in the *Geschichten*, through an admixture of spoken and written word.

This gives a different tone to the arrival of Klara, about whom Dr. Lassmann has heard horrible things. She has left her husband for an artist type: “man sagt ein Künstler, weißt du – ein leichter Vogel, natürlich nur so –” (Rilke 7, 391). There is also some question as to what she is doing for employment, and perhaps an implication that she has

turned to prostitution (though this is not stated directly), or something worse. She lives in *Elend*, in misery. Dr. Lassmann discusses this with the *Rat*, his brother-in-law, over black coffee:

„Was heißt elend? –“ „Nun,“ der *Rat* betrachtete seine Zigarre, „pekuniär und überhaupt – Gott – so eine Existenz – –“ Plötzlich legte er seine gepflegte Hand dem Schwager auf die Schulter, seine Stimme gluckste vor Vergnügen: „weißt du, übrigens erzählte man sich, sie lebe von –“ Der Herr *Rat*, dem die Hand von der Schulter des Schwagers gefallen war, brauchte zehn Minuten, um sich von seinem Staunen zu erholen (Rilke 7, 392).

The ambiguity of this situation is Kafkaesque in its indeterminacy. We are not clear on what she is doing for a living. We only know that she suffers from financial trouble and that she has a type of existence that is difficult for the *Herr Rat* to imagine living. One might take note that his hand is *gepflegt*, that he is a *Rat*, which indicates he has a higher social status. That Georg is a doctor, however, also indicates an elevated social status. Whatever the case may be, the *Rat* delights in whatever suffering has fallen upon Klara, and Dr. Lassmann does not.⁵⁷ After they end the conversation, the *Rat* goes to his wife to complain about what a curious fellow Dr. Lassmann is.

Dr. Lassmann decides to go find her in Munich, where she has moved. Her description, like her name, is full of light: “Eine schlanke Frau begrüßte ihn in einer Stube voll Licht und Güte” (Rilke 7, 392). Dr. Lassmann sees writing materials and books and it turns out that the “*Elend*” that was previously mentioned (Rilke 7, 391) is

⁵⁷ There is some bit of irony here, given the context that I have developed here with Benjamin’s use of *Rat*, i.e. council. To take delight in the suffering of another through conversation is quite the opposite of offering or receiving council.

not that she has turned to prostitution, but to translation. She is translating for a publishing house. This points us back to Derrida, who argues in *Dissemination* that the writer (in this case the translator) is in the position of the scapegoat. Christopher Norris draws out this feature of Derrida's text:

The Greek word in question is *pharmakos*, for which scholars record the various senses 'magician', 'wizard', 'poisoner' and 'the one sacrificed in expiation for the sins of a city (p. 132n).⁵⁸ And the same dictionary that Derrida refers to here gives these following entries for *pharmakon*: 'charm, philtre, drug, remedy, poison'. So Derrida would seem to have good philological warrant for his thesis that writing is in some sense a *scapegoat*, a necessary evil that society tolerates only in the hope of preventing worse ills. Both terms belong to that same paradoxical system that can take a single word (whether *pharmakos* or *pharmakon*) and invest it with meanings so sharply opposed as to render its senses undecidable in any given context (Norris 42).

Norris goes on to point out that *pharmakos* never actually appears in the *Phaedrus*, but adds that this would not concern Derrida, because it is present through the "logic of displacement", the very logic by which Derrida carries out his analysis (Norris 43).

The ambiguity of the Klara figure invites comparison with the ambiguity of the narrator. The entries in Derrida's dictionary for *pharmakos* – "magician," "wizard," "poisoner," – might as well be a list of possible names for the narrator of the *Geschichten*, and the *pharmakon* – "charm, philter, drug, remedy, poison" – could describe the *Geschichten* themselves, which the narrator is spreading throughout the

⁵⁸ This in-text citation by Norris refers to the same translation of *Dissemination* that I have been using.

community.⁵⁹ Especially if one thinks back to the way in which the Stranger was affected because of the emotional nature of the story, one sees clearly that there is an ambiguity. Its *Wirkung* is that of a *pharmakon*, never without its side effects. He buries his face in his hands because it is so horrifying, but it also seems to be something that he needs. In “Simile by Structure,” Thomas Hart asserts that the Stranger is the hand of God, returned in order to appease God and is getting what he needs, viz. an accurate portrayal of the human condition to bring back to God, who never knew what we look like. He also compares *Der Fremde Mann* (The Stranger) and Dr. Lassmann, rather than Klara, because of certain structural parallels. But the figures do not represent polarities, rather each character houses within her or him contradictions, the same admixture of darkness and light that is present throughout the tale, as I have shown with some assistance from the *Stunden-Buch*.

All of the figures, the narrator especially, have the role of bringing the divine into *experience*, which is to say, into the realm of the senses. The identification of the sensuous with evil is clearly something that Rilke toys with here, but in such a way that he disentangles experience from evil. He re-sanctifies experience, torn away from us through religious superstition (which misunderstands religion and religious art).

Experience, the sensuous, if it cannot be purely divine, can be sanctified in a way:

through art, through stories, etc. His figures therefore take on features of Beelzebub, and

⁵⁹ It is worth noting that K., in Kafka's *Das Schloß*, claims that he has special healing powers. This comes out in a conversation with young Hans, when K. finds out that a woman he had seen earlier is Hans' mother. She is from the castle, and, like every character in the novel, K. begins scrambling to find ways of getting a piece of the power that is associated with the castle: “Dagegen könne vielleicht er, K., diesmal ein wenig helfen, es tue ihm leid, daß Hansens Mutter kränkle und offenbar niemand hier das Leiden verstehe; in einem solchen vernachlässigten Falle kann oft eine schwere Verschlimmerung eines an sich leichten Leidens eintreten. Nun habe er, K., einige medizinische Kenntnisse und, was noch mehr wert sei, Erfahrung in der Krankenbehandlung. Manches, was Ärzten nicht gelungen sei, sei ihm geglückt. Zu Hause habe man ihn wegen seiner Heilwirkung immer das bittere Kraut genannt. Jedenfalls würde er gern Hansens Mutter ansehen und mit ihr sprechen.” (Kafka 116).

are *fallen*, as it were. If we recall the conversation that begins the stories, the first “spoken words” of this collection, they are “Was für ein Herbst!” (Rilke 7, 287). While the homonym in English (Fall, autumn; the fall from Grace) is not present in German, it is nonetheless a time of transition and transitoriness. I have already mentioned the importance of twilight and transitional lighting. The same ambiguity is present in Mephistopheles himself, which is evident when Faust asks him who he is in the *Studierzimmer*:

MEPHISTOPHELES. Ein Teil von jener Kraft,
Die stets das Böse will, und stets das Gute schafft.

FAUST. Was ist mit diesem Rätselwort gemeint?

MEPHISTOPHELES. Ich bin der Geist, der stets verneint!

Und das mit Recht: denn alles, was entsteht,

Ist wert, daß es zugrunde geht;

Drum besser wärs, daß nichts entstünde.

So ist denn alles, was ihr Sünde,

Zerstörung, kurz das Böse nennt,

Mein eigentliches Element (Goethe 43).

Mephistopheles is a part of that power that always wants what is evil and always creates, instead, that which is good. He is also the force of destruction. It is hard for an English speaker to not hear the correlation between *Sinn* (sense) and sin, here present as *Sünde*, which is the fall from grace. Our everyday consciousness, lost in the oblivion of habit, is sin, a fallen state. We might say more specifically, to link this closely with the context

being developed here, that it is the state of being constantly stuck in the seventh day, unable to do true creative labor, because the spirit is not connected to our hand.

Jean Starobinski, in his *1789: Emblems of Reason*, points out similar tensions present in Goethe's work, focusing first on his *Beiträge zur Optik*:

Goethe devoted much thought to light and color during his visit to Italy, and when he got back to Weimar he began to experiment. His first published work on the subject, *Beiträge zur Optik*, appeared in 1791. Its central idea, lying behind the whole theory, is that color is the result of the polarity between light and darkness. The principle of polarity is found in the eye itself: In effects of successive or simultaneous contrast, it produces the color complementary to that presented to it from without. (Starobinski 175)

There is more than an outdated theory on optics present in Goethe's account, as many argue about his *Farbenlehre*. In order to have vision – and this is a transcendental statement – there has to be this contrast between light and darkness. Put in another way, the conditions for the possibility of experience are in this contrast. Although Rilke reverses his signifiers through making God the darkness, it is precisely this interplay to which he wants to draw our attention and which he wants to make new.

Starobinski goes on to quote Mephistopheles, who calls himself “the darkness that gave birth to light” (ibid), thereby identifying himself as the “universal source” (ibid). Light is a mere “secondary fount” (ibid), and their struggle produces “the beauty of the world” (Starobinski 176). The human being is not just witness to this cosmic collision, rather,

He is the field in which the encounter takes place; but he is also the medium through which a transcendence occurs. He has his own darkness within, yet his eye possesses a light akin to that of the sun (ibid).

This might remind the reader of the passage quoted from “Der Fremde Mann” in chapter 2, in which the Stranger’s eyes sink into darkness, while a crown of light remains in the pupil. That moment is paired with the “most expressly philosophical statements about God” (Hart 34), which come in the closing dialogue of “Eine Geschichte, dem Dunkel erzählt”, to which I will return to presently.

Hart argues that the two paired stories, the first and the last, are structured around the themes of remembering and waiting for God. The phrasing of the two stories is striking and shows clearly how related they are. Hart cites both, setting the quotes next to each other:

„Erinnern Sie sich noch an den lieben Gott?“

Der Fremde dachte nach. Seine Augen vertieften sich ins Dunkel, und mit den kleinen Lichtpunkten in den Pupillen glichen sie zwei langen Laubengängen in einem Parke, über welchem leuchtend und breit Sommer und Sonne liegt [...] „Ja, ich erinnere mich noch an Gott“ (Rilke 7, 299).

And from the last story:

„Ich hatte ihn [Gott] ganz vergessen. Ich hatte *alles* vergessen. – Erst in Florenz.⁶⁰ Als ich zum erstenmal in meinem Leben sah, hörte, fühlte, erkannte und zugleich danken lernte für alles das, da dachte ich wieder an ihn. Überall waren Spuren von ihm (Rilke 7, 398).

⁶⁰ See “Venice,” from Georg Simmel. Rilke seems to share Simmel’s admiration for Florence .

The reader should take note, first of all, of *Erinnern* in the opening question, a question of which I have already noted the significance above, in chapter 2. This remembering's circuit is completed by the *vergessen*, forgetting, in the second quote. But *erinnern*, remembering, is also paired with *(nach)denken*, as Hart point out (Hart 32). The oblivion that I spoke of above, the evil of the everyday and the sensuous (which, again, Rilke, effectively deconstructs) would correspond to this remembering and forgetting of God. Also in the background here is the notion of miracle in the bible; that the first shall be last, the ascension of the youngest son, etc.

In chapter 1, I alluded to a certain loose affinity to William Blake, and this may clarify the struggle between light and darkness that I have been trying to bring into focus in Rilke's *Geschichten*. My question of darkness here is in the tone of lament, i.e.: Darkness, despite our best efforts, is pervasive in our reality. Why does it have to be so? Rilke is insistent on calling these borders into question and, in a sense, bringing this darkness into the world, like his Romantic predecessors. Why? Starobinski, in his discussion of William Blake, offers a possible answer:

Man has to leave childish innocence behind and face up to evil and sin in order to enter into spiritual life and prophetic vision. *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790) heralded the end of the world and the resurrection of man in his true body, now increased to giant size. But for this to come about the world of desire (the hell of orthodox theologies) must be reconciled with the world of spirit: The fire that burns in darkness, to which hypocritical moralities consign the damned, has to unite with the light of Heaven. New life is born of the "diabolical"

conflagration that destroys fallen existence and induces imaginative vision
(Starobinski 176-7).

While this may not answer the question of why there is darkness in the universe, it does give us a solid stab at the question of why there is darkness in art. Rilke's entire life, every waking moment, was devoted to the creative struggle. "Prophetic vision," as in the case of Blake, is precisely what Rilke was looking for, which is why his God and the hours in which Rilke (or at least his personae in the *Stunden-Buch*) is most truly himself, belong to darkness.

The person of the future (and we might think back here to the passages from Nietzsche cited in the introductory section on art in this chapter) is one that we ourselves have imagined, like the giants in the passage above from Starobinski. But this is only one possible future, and this is where the word "prophetic" takes on the tone that expresses the true meaning of the word: We are destined, it seems, to transformation of the human form; But if we do not become aware of this fact and change what we are doing, we are doomed to strange mutations:

Everywhere in them [Blake's paintings] we see opposition (which with Blake's style itself becomes the implicit opposition between the symbolizer and the symbolized), everywhere we see tension and struggle; but the conflict is resolved in the great harmonious forms of circle, vortex, and spiral. Dramatic gesture, superhuman feats of leaping and flight go far beyond the bounds of earthly reality, and the images of transgression and liberation form part of vast swirlings and ribbed surgings reflecting the way energy circulates within the cosmos. For me Blake's most striking works are not those which fill the sky with flights of angels

or transform a falling body into a flaming torch: These are somewhat stereotyped reminders of the Michelangelo model as transmitted and reworked by Fuseli. Blake affects one more deeply when in contrast with such figures he depicts huge, ill-proportioned, primitively wild beings with great bestial countenances reflecting the inertia and melancholy of the earth, impenetrable darkness, and chthonic heaviness; all this in a universe where air, water, and fire are filled with waves of ethereal beings. Earth is dark, night threatens; the air is unbreathable, and life can be nothing but a long ordeal—unless its bounds are broken through and a universe of light opened up to our freed imagination (Starobinski 177-8).

An extended comparison of Rilke and Blake would be fruitful, but we will have to be content here to extract the elements that Starobinski has provided. First, Starobinski mentions that there is a kind of resolution in Blake's art, which takes the form of circles and spirals, which is a reminder of the structure of Rilke's *Geschichten*, which rotate around a center, (a center to which I will turn in the next section). What Starobinski writes next aligns him with Horkheimer's understanding of art, which I addressed briefly in the last chapter: Blake's best works are not those that imagine a different world of levity and lightness, but are those that look at the darkness and heaviness of earthly life.

It is of course implicit, as Horkheimer also insists, that facing ourselves and the earth as they are, will create a longing for the freed imagination that Starobinski writes of here. But what Blake's work does, as does Rilke's, is also to face a vision of the earth as it could be, gone wrong. This is perhaps a return of the Titans – if poetry is that which allows us to create a space for the Gods to return, as Heidegger would perhaps say, then we need also to warn of welcoming the wrong ones into our world. Our expression of

darkness in art serves in this case as a warning, which is the function of prophecy. The lumbering beasts that Starobinski writes of here are both: they are us, as we are – weighted down with gravity and experiencing this pain, fighting for breath and always approaching death – and a humanity gone wrong, mutated into beasts through inappropriate expression of the darkness.

To return to the story, there is a certain darkness in childhood, as I indicated above, and it is also children (and people who build things) who are still able to show God what the human being looks like. It is accordingly the darkness of childhood that brought Dr. Lassman to his hometown and now to Munich to visit Klara, but he is in search of an *Aufklärung* from looking into this darkness:

„Darum komme ich ja zu Ihnen. Sie sind der einzige Zeuge jener Zeit. Ich glaubte, ich könnte in Ihnen wiederfinden, – was ich in mir *nicht* finden kann. Irgend eine Bewegung, ein Wort, einen Namen, an dem etwas hängt – eine Aufklärung –“ Der Doktor senkte den Kopf in seine kalten, unruhigen Hände (Rilke 7, 395).

Overexposed, the doctor covers his face with his hands. There is something, Dr. Lassmann tells Klara, that has given her a kind of quiet, self-possession that he has missed in life and, after trying to find the right word, he decides it is her piety (*Frömmigkeit*) (Rilke 7, 397), by which he means her relation to God. Klara, though, has a complicated relationship with God:

„Als Kind – Hab ich da Gott geliebt? Ich glaube nicht. Ja ich habe nicht einmal – es hätte mir wie eine wahnsinnige Überhebung – das ist nicht das richtige Wort – wie die größte Sünde geschienen, zu denken: Er ist“ (Rilke 7, 397).

I do not want to call this a negative theology, but there does seem to be some kind of relation by virtue of absence here; that the relation to God is in waiting for him, in his absence. Klara had related a story earlier in which she describes waiting for a Stranger who never came, but nonetheless finding something notable in the holiday-like⁶¹ feeling of waiting for him. She finds God again, as I wrote above, in Florence, notably the imprints of his hands in the statues. It is not surprising that at this point in the story, the doctor looks out the window at the *Schwabinger Kirche*, and it is becoming evening; the sky is “nicht mehr ganz ohne Abend” (Rilke 7, 398).

The narrator ends the story by telling us that there is nothing to be edited out of it for the children. He has not told it to them anyway, but leaves it to the darkness itself to tell them when the time is right:

Ich habe sie nur dem Dunkel erzählt, sonst niemandem. Und die Kinder haben Angst vor dem Dunkel, laufen ihm davon und müssen sie einmal drinnen bleiben, so pressen sie die Augen zusammen und halten die Ohren zu. Aber auch für sie wird einmal die Zeit kommen, da sie das Dunkel lieb haben. Sie werden von ihm meine Geschichte empfangen und dann werden sie sie auch besser verstehen (Rilke 7, 399).

The children close their senses to the dark out of fear. This relates back to Klara’s intuition that God could not have existed in her as a child and emphasizes, which is also a major theme in Rilke’s *Stunden-Buch*, that there is a proper time and place for God to enter into experience (the *Stunden-Buch* is organized as a horologium, i.e. a book that contains prayers that are to be performed at specific times throughout the day.) It also

⁶¹ Hölderlin’s hymn, “Wie wenn am Feiertage...” (Hölderlin 172) displays similar tensions between darkness and light, with Chao and its converses, creativity and self-renewal.

emphasizes, again, that it is the interaction of darkness and light that allows for experience (as Goethe said of vision), because the children, who are in a short period of darkness, are not a proper seat for the darkness of God. It requires the light of adulthood, like Klara who seems to be synonymous with light (and Lucifer, as I have suggested above and as the etymology of the name makes evident) in order to complete a circuit.

A Mystic Vision in the Venice Ghetto

As with all the *Geschichten*, the context in which the narrator tells the story is something to keep in mind. Another layer is added to “Eine Szene aus dem Ghetto von Venedig” through an eavesdropper, Herr Baum, who has listened in on a conversation between the narrator and Ewald, the narrator’s disabled friend (Rilke 7, 337). Herr Baum approaches the narrator, insisting that they must have a conversation because they are the only two people around who have been to Italy. A verbal wrestling match ensues in which they both name landmarks in Venice, until Herr Baum, quite overweight, is exhausted. The narrator realizes this and thinks that he should offer a story as compensation and begins to dovetail this story into their conversation without the Herr Baum noticing: “Verzeihen Sie, welche Geschichte?” (Rilke 7, 339) he asks, after the narrator has begun and does not realize that a story is being told already.

The story takes place in Venice, and it makes sense that this story would be central in the collection, because it has, in the minds of poets – i.e. in the imagination – an almost greater reality than the actual, physical city.⁶² The narrator explains that the

⁶² Thomas Mann’s *Der Tod in Venedig* is one example, among many, of Venice being a place to which one can go in order to plumb the depths of the imagination. One would think that the argument that takes place with the gondolier (Rilke 7, 338) is an implied citation of *Der Tod in Venedig*, in which a similar argument takes place (Mann 22-23), except Mann’s book was not published until 1912. Some other examples of

story takes place in a time under the reign of Doge Alvise Mocenigo IV (1701-1778) and arranges it within the history of painting. Again, lighting and particularly the contrast between light and dark is key here:

Die Bilder von Carpaccio, wenn Sie solche gesehen haben sollten, sind wie auf purpurnem Samt gemalt, überall bricht etwas Warmes, gleichsam Waldiges durch, und um die gedämpften Lichter darin drängen sich horchende Schatten. Giorgione hat auf mattem, alterndem Gold, tizian auf schwarzem Atlas gemalt, aber in der Zeit, von der ich rede, liebte man lichte Bilder, auf einen Grund von weißer Seide gesetzt, und der Name, mit dem man spielte, den schöne Lippen in die Sonne warfen und den reizende Ohren auffingen, wenn er zitternd niederfiel, dieser Name ist Gian Battista Tiepolo (Rilke 7, 339).

The period that the narrator dances about here is clearly the Rococo, which has a light and airy feel to it and stands in contrast with the heaviness and darkness of the Baroque, which was its predecessor. This heaviness and lightness, in the last section thematized as the interaction of dark and light, could describe the tension present in throughout the *Geschichten*. The comic interactions between the narrator and his various interlocutors are contrasted by the extreme heaviness of many of the stories. The fact that they are supposed to be for children and yet contain all the complexities and tragedies of the cosmos is another manifestation of this quality, as well as another testament to Rilke's virtuosity.

Venice imagination adventures are Edgar Allen Poe's "The Assigination" and Derek Walcott's *Tiepolo's Hound*.

The narrator claims that this short introduction via art history has nothing to do with the story, but this lightness is a needed contrast for the darkness of the Venice ghetto. The light, bright Venice, is the “real Venice”:

Es geht nur das wirkliche Venedig an, die Stadt der Paläste, der Abenteuer, der Masken und der blassen Lagunennächte, die, wie keine anderen Nächte sonst, den Ton von heimlichen Romanzen tragen. – In dem Stück Venedig, von dem ich erzähle, sind nur arme tägliche Geräusche, die Tage gehen gleichförmig darüber hin, als ob es nur ein einziger wäre, und die Gesänge, die man dort vernimmt, sind wachsende Klagen, die nicht aufsteigen und wie ein wallender Qualm über den Gassen lagern (Rilke 7, 340).

While “real Venice” is contrasted by the ghetto, within the ghetto there is a lack of contrast. We see here the same malaise that Dr. Lassmann has in the final story of the *Geschichten*, a type of everyday consciousness, uninterrupted by anything that could make it “real.”

Georg Simmel, in his essay “Venice” writes something about the whole of Venice that is similar to what the narrator says about the Venice ghetto:

...in Venice, where all that is cheerful and bright, free and light, has only served as a face for a life that is dark, violent and unrelentingly functional, the city’s decline has left behind a merely lifeless stage-set, the mendacious beauty of the mask (Simmel 44).

The ghetto, in which Jews were forced to live both to keep them and their perceived illnesses away from Christians, but also to keep the Jews safe from the violence of the Christians, is the ghetto of Shylock in Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*, to which

there are several allusions in this story.⁶³ The lifelessness described here corresponds to a malaise, not unlike the one that the narrator attributes to the ghetto. But for the narrator there is a “real” Venice, which is not the case for Simmel:

There is probably no city whose life is carried out so fully in a *single* tempo. No draught animals or vehicles attract the attentive eye with their alternating speeds, and the gondolas entirely follow the pace and rhythm of people walking. And here is the true cause of Venice’s dreamlike character which has long been noticed. Reality always startles us. The soul would remain in a certain balance if left to itself or some ongoing influence, and only a change in feelings will indicate an external being which occasions an interruption in its state of rest. For this reason we are hypnotized by continuously uniform impressions. A rhythm that we are subjected to without interruption takes us into the twilight state of the unreal (Simmel 44-45).

The “twilight state of the unreal,” the state in which the entirety of the *Geschichten* takes place corresponds here to the dusk that falls shortly after the story begins, which would also be the time that the Jews had to return to the ghetto for curfew.

The narrator mentions Jewish girls going to the well, which is a reminder not only of the fact that every time there was an outbreak of some disease in the city, the Jews were blamed for putting something in the wells⁶⁴ but also of the theme of *contagion*, which is a clue about the way in which these stories are spread throughout the community by the narrator. We are introduced at this point to Melchizedek, the rich goldsmith who

⁶³ For example, Herr Baum mentions Antonio at the end of the story, alluding to a Marcantonio that is mentioned earlier in the story.

⁶⁴ Jews were blamed in 1494 for the spread of syphilis because they were driven out of Spain in that year, but the new explanation that caught on was that it was the Native Americans (Sennett 223).

has enjoyed high esteem in his own community and respect from the Christians as well, to a certain extent,

aber er hatte auch immer wieder den Rückschlag erlebt. So oft ein Unheil über den Staat hereinbrach, rächte man sich an den Juden; die Venezianer selbst waren von viel zu verwandtem Geiste, als daß sie, wie andere Völker, die Juden für den Handel gebraucht hätten, sie quälten sie mit Abgaben, beraubten sie ihrer Güter, und beschränkten immer mehr das Gebiet des Ghetto, so daß die Familien, die sich mitten in aller Not fruchtbar vermehrten, gezwungen warne, ihre Häuser aufwärts, eines auf das Dach des anderen zu bauen (Rilke 7, 342-3).

Here the narrator's story takes a short detour from historical reality in that the Jews in Venice were in fact used for commerce. They were necessary in the economy because of their ability, barred within the Christian community by their own law, to practice usury. Venture capitalism was on the rise and merchants needed lenders for their projects. They are tolerated, like Klara in the last story, as a kind of necessary evil.

In the narrator's story, however, the Jews have been forced, by taxes and limitations on space, to build upwards. They cannot build out, so their buildings get higher and higher, and accordingly more and more top-heavy. This constitutes the main premise of the story. The narrator continues:

Und ihre Stadt, die nicht am Meere lag, wuchs so langsam in den Himmel hinaus, wie in ein anderes Meer, und um den Platz mit dem Brunnen erhoben sich auf allen Seiten die steilen Gebäude, wie die Wände irgend eines Riesenturms (Rilke 7, 342).

Old Melchisedech wants, at all times, to be at the top of this giant tower. This is as an allusion back to “Wie der Verrat nach Russland kam,” where the narrator tells Ewald, the disabled friend, about the strange boundaries of Russia:

„Im Osten?“ warf mein Freund ein. Ich dachte nach: „Nein.“ „Im Norden?“
forschte der Lahme. „Sehen Sie,“ fiel mir ein, „das Ablesen von der Landkarte hat
die Leute verdorben. Dort ist alles plan und eben und wenn sie die vier
Weltgegenden bezeichnet haben, scheint ihnen alles getan. Ein Land ist doch aber
kein Atlas. Es hat Berge und Abgründe. Es muß doch auch oben und unten an
etwas stoßen.“ „Hm“ – überlegte mein Freund, „Sie haben recht. Woran könnte
Rußland an diesen beiden Seiten grenzen?“ Plötzlich sah der Kranke wie ein
Knabe aus. „Sie wissen es,“ rief ich. „Vielleicht an Gott?“ „Ja,“ bestätigte ich, „an
Gott“ (Rilke 7, 309-10).

That Ewald is referred to here as “der Kranke,” i.e. the sick one, is another indication of the “medicine-man” or magician-like qualities that the narrator seems to possess. The narrator goes on to say, responding to Ewald’s questions, that God is not a country, but calls attention to the fact that it is sometimes called the Kingdom of God, and that many “simple folks” cannot tell the difference: “Einfache Völker können ihr Land und ihren Kaiser oft nicht unterscheiden; beide sind groß und gütig, furchtbar und groß” (Rilke 7, 310). We again see the contrast of heaviness and lightness in this very sentence with the comical repetition of “groß” – the word itself is heavy, but it is made light through its repetition.

So this is the realm in which Old Melchisedech always wants to live. It is noteworthy that the narrator only gives pieces to each neighbor, and that the story is not

particularly complete unto itself. The community seems to be taking up the stories as a whole, even though the parts are told only to isolated individuals. In chapter 2, I had mentioned the enthymeme, an argument in which premises are purposely left out in order to create active participation on the part of the listener. Here, pieces of the stories are missing, which forces the listener to participate in a community, because they need to keep listening in order to piece together a proper narrative. The narrator introduces a kind of pluralological structure: It is not dialogical because it goes beyond the face-to-face relation of self to other, reaching into the community. Face-to-face is a visual ethical mode; this is mouth-to-ears, a separate and different style ethics.

This mode of intersubjectivity is precisely what the narrator, and perhaps Rilke, mean by God. Through imaginative discourse with others in a community, we speak the Other into being. On the back cover of Michael Kohn's English translation of the *Geschichten* there is a quote from a letter, without a citation, which prevents me from finding it in its original context. Nonetheless, it gives us some insight into what Rilke means by "God":

These youthful fantasies [the *Geschichten*] were almost entirely improvised out of an instinct which, if I were to specify it more particularly, I might describe as busied with transferring God from the sphere of rumor into the realm of direct and daily experiencing; the recommending by every means a naïve and lively talking-into-use of God with which I seemed to have been charged since childhood (Rilke 2003, back cover).

As I have already suggested, there is somewhat of a division of labor that the narrator depends upon. He knows that he will be unable to spread the stories to the entirety of the

community by himself and instead depends upon the pre-existing potential of rumor in order to allow them to spread “naturally.” Here he relies even on the fact that he wants God to be a part of experience, which is to say, part of the sensual realm, as something to be created through storytelling and sharing stories. “Talking-into-use” denotes a certain readiness-to-hand and tactility; a materialist understanding of God. It is not some God, squatting outside the universe, but a word that describes something that happens every day in our acts of creation and communication.

Through moving from apartment to apartment, Old Melchisedech always tries to reach the Kingdom of God:

So siedelte der Greis zwei bis dreimal im Jahre um und Esther, die ihn nicht verlassen wollte, immer mit ihm. Schließlich waren sie so hoch, daß wenn sie aus der Enge ihres Gemachs auf das flache Dach traten, in der Höhe ihrer Stirnen schon ein anderes Land begann, von dessen Gebräuchen der Alte in dunklen Worten, halb psalmend, sprach (Rilke 7, 342).

The old man’s words are dark and half-psalming, which draws attention back to the closeness of poetry and prayer, a theme which is prevalent in the *Stunden-Buch*. Derek Walcott also attests to the inseparability of prayer and poetry 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. What I described in *Another Life*—about being on the hill and feeling the sort of dissolution that happened—is a frequent experience in a younger writer. I felt this sweetness of melancholy, of a sense of mortality, or rather of immortality,

a sense of gratitude both for what you feel is a gift and for the beauty of the earth, the beauty of life around us. When that's forceful in a young writer, it can make you cry. It's just clear tears; it's not grimacing or being contorted, it's just a flow that happens. The body feels it is melting into what it has seen. 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 the text itself,⁶⁵ he writes of a compulsion to kneel, as if directed from an external source, with one's will held in abeyance by that force, a moment that is akin to Rilke's encounter with the Angel in the *Duineser Elegien*.

Melchisedech is confronted, after the passage cited above, with the ultimate view; a view akin to Walcott's early vision and Rilke's late encounter with the Angel at the cliffs of Duino. Esther, his youngest granddaughter, has just born a child, and the view that Melchisedech sees is the child's first sight:

Es war ein Herbstmorgen von unbeschreiblicher Klarheit. Die Dinge dunkelten,
fast ohne Glanz nur einzelne fliegende Lichter ließen sich, wie auf große Blumen,
auf sie nieder, ruhten eine Weile und schwebten dann über die goldlinigen

⁶⁵ "I was seized by a pity more profound / than my young body could bear, I climbed / 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.) Salient to the present discussion is also the "extinction of sense," which is perhaps the confounding of sense that I wrote about in chapter 2, the moment of love that Rilke acknowledges as significant, but does not accept as being the entirety of the poetic moment. Also necessary is, of course, the mediation that takes place in formulating the impressions into words and imagery, which corresponds also to the deepening and sharpening of individual senses. In other words, Walcott kneeling on the hill is indispensable, but so is his poem.

Konturen hinaus in den Himmel. Und dort, wo sie verschwanden, erblickte man von dieser höchsten Stelle, was noch keiner vom Ghetto aus je gesehen hatte, – ein stilles, silbernes Licht: das Meer (Rilke 7, 344).

This, it seems, has been Melchisedech's goal from the beginning: to see the sea. But it is not enough to see it, he has to see it from the ghetto itself, because of the contrast that is created. Melchisedech takes on a posture of receptivity or praise, like Walcott's compulsion to kneel:

Er erhob sich mit ausgebreiteten Armen und zwang seine matten Augen in den Tag zu schauen, der sich langsam entfaltete. Seine Arme blieben hoch, seine Stirne trug einen strahlenden Gedanken; es war, also ob er opferte (ibid).

The "Stirn," a word often used in German poetry as site of expression, is not often thematized in English-language thought, but here the physicality of thinking is emphasized by using the verb "tragen," to carry. The ambiguity of the last word, "opfern," which could mean "sacrifice" or "worship," draws attention back to *The Merchant of Venice*, in which Antonio is nearly sacrificed for Shylock's revenge. This allusion is present in the appearance, earlier on in the story, of a wealthy aristocrat named Marcantonio, who would tell Melchisedech stories (Rilke 7, 341), and confirmed by Herr Baum referring to him as "Antonio" after the story has come to a close.

There is another ambiguity explicitly stated in the last line of the story: "Hat er das Meer gesehen oder Gott, den Ewigen, in seiner Glorie?" (Rilke 7, 345). The narrator's listener, Herr Baum, shows his misunderstanding of the question by giving it a definite, quick answer: "Das Meer Wahrscheinlich," – sagte er trocken, "es *ist* ja auch ein Eindruck" – wodurch er sich besonders aufgeklärt und verständig erwies (Rilke 7, 345).

Instead of preserving the ambiguity of the question, Herr Baum collapses it, thereby missing the point of the question entirely. The sea, or God? is a question that preserves a certain materiality to the question of God that Rilke hints at throughout the stories, because God seems to inhere in the darkness of Things and the conversations that take place between the infinite darkneses that exist within the relation of one human being to another, expressed through stories. The question, posed in this manner, makes the sea and God one and the same thing, as well as preserving the important difference between the two: the sea, by itself, is not enough; the contrast that Melchisedech seems to know is going to be there when he is able to see the sea from the ghetto is what creates the experience that he calls “God.”

Herr Baum objects to the story being told to children, even though the narrator reminds him that children come from God (*ibid*). The children hear it anyway. Their reply to the same question, however, preserves the ambiguity of the question and the matter itself: “Oh, das Meer auch” (*ibid*). The answer is logically absurd because the disjunction in the question demands an answer of either/or, but the children understand the question by ignoring logic and answering, simply, that it is both. It is clear to the children that God inheres in the Things, which is perhaps a Spinozistic understanding of the universe: it does not take a miracle in order to prove the existence of God – in fact the entire notion of “proof” shows a certain misunderstanding of the question – he is right there, in front of Old Melchisedech, in the newborn baby behind him and in the water, given a certain cerulean contrast by being seen from the highest building in the ghetto.

Artistic Vision: Listening to Stones

The present section, the final section of this chapter, will also serve as somewhat of an introduction to the next chapter, which will be about Rilke's monograph on Auguste Rodin. Michelangelo, it seems, serves as a prototype figure for Rilke's encounter with Rodin, and much of the analysis in the next chapter will reach back to this section. The title of the story, "Von einem, der die Steine belauscht", recalls the ecological concern that was briefly brought into consideration in the first chapter in relation to John Llewellyn and his book, *The Middle Voice of Ecological Conscience*. Llewellyn's concern there, in a nutshell, is that we cultivate a certain kind of receptivity that will allow us to hear the earth "speak" again, a project that is closely aligned with Rilke's effort to hear the voice of Things. Stones, however, are not just any *Thing*; we might think of the heaviness that is present within them because of all of the years of compression of materials. In every stone there is a heaviness that can only be brought about by nature – it makes sense then, that we would attach a certain significance to them or that we would be able to sense somehow, phenomenologically, that there is a high amount of potential energy lodged within them.

Ancient peoples sensed this energy and were fascinated by it, as David G. Horrell and Dominic Coad point out in "The stones would cry out' (Luke 19:40): a Lukan contribution to a hermeneutics of creation's praise":

It is by no means surprising, in the context of the ancient and Near East, that stones should be cast in this role. Not only were stones often venerated and seen as animate beings, but also appear to have delivered oracles. Indeed, some texts from Ugarit 'mention an announcement... and a whispering... of stones...

paralleled by the speech of trees', an interesting parallel to Habakkuk's stone and wood imagery (Horrell 33).

The article itself is a commentary on Luke 19:40, in which Jesus approaches the city of Jerusalem on a colt. He has a large following at this point and the multitude of disciples praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen [...] Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."

Horrell and Coad consider many different possibilities of interpretation for this passage, including as "a cry of accusation or protest, a warning of judgment..." (Horrell 35) or that "what the stones might do in v.40 is take up the crowd's cry of *praise*" meaning it cannot be "silenced or contained" (ibid). In other words, if the crowd were somehow to be silenced, the earth itself, embodied in these stones, would offer praise to God.

The commentators cited by Horrell and Coad take it for granted that the stones which Jesus mentions are stones that have been carved for buildings or used in construction. But the text itself gives no indication that the stones are not simply naturally occurring stones. What the lines suggest, ultimately, is that even without the presence of human beings, creation itself would praise God. The stones would serve as a replacement for the crowd's praise. Horrell and Coad respond to tendencies within biblical scholarship, especially ecotheological perspectives, which take this passage in the bible to mean that we should consider leaving the earth be and not to carve every stone for our own use:

The call to ‘leave alone’ might help us, say, in pressing for an end to the destruction of the Amazonian rain forest, on the theological grounds that the praise of that wondrous and complex ecosystem, and of the individual elements of it, is in each act of destruction cruelly curtailed (Horrell 42).

Horrell and Coad disagree with such an interpretation in the present context, because there is no such thing as an earth that has not been shaped by contact with human beings. “It simply makes no sense,” they argue, “to call for Dartmoor to be ‘left alone’” (Horrell 42).

While I find their interpretation interesting and useful, I think that Horrell and Coad have misunderstood what it means to “let be.” I take this more to be a gesture toward a phenomenological understanding of the world: to let be is to let the Thing speak. I offer an alternative interpretation to Jesus’ words here, which does not assume that Jesus is rejecting the Pharisees’ advice, but agreeing with them. I offer too, that this might be precisely the way in which Rilke would have read the passage, with his sensitivity to loud noises and voices and the insensitivity and barbarism of the people around him. Zweig’s account, we might recall, tells us that Rilke had an extremely gentle way of talking and listening and was viscerally disturbed by those that tried to railroad him in conversation: “They exhaust me, these people who spit out their feelings like blood” (Zweig 115). Jesus’ concern might be the same one here: the crowd, we are told, are praising God in a loud voice. Jesus’ reply could mean, then, that if the crowd would simply pause for a moment and *listen*, they would hear a voice that is *other* than their own thoughts and voices. They are trying to praise, but are doing the opposite – they

drown out the voice of God through the loudness of their minds and voices; driving him out of the world instead of allowing a space for him to enter it again.

The stones that speak in the narrator's story are somewhat different, but carry a similar weight, as we shall see presently. The narrator is telling this story, again, to his friend Ewald, who wants to hear a story about Italy as well. He closes his eyes as the story begins, which again emphasizes darkness and parallels other emphases on the auditory, like the teacher who takes off his glasses in order to listen in "Warum der liebe Gott will, dass es arme Leute giebt" (Rilke 7, 303). The narrator begins the new tale, "Von einem, der die Steine belauscht," by saying that the Spring, for God, is like a smile passing over the earth. God's gaze on the earth is a dark movement (Rilke 7, 346). We see again the contrast between light and dark in these passages:

Das Land unten war hell, die Zeit glänzte wie Gold, aber quer darüber, wie ein dunkler Weg, lag der Schatten eines breiten Mannes, schwer und schwarz, und weit davor der Schatten seiner schaffenden Hände, unruhig, zuckend, bald über Pisa, bald über Neapel, bald zerfließend auf der ungewissen Bewegung des Meeres (Rilke 7, 346).

There is something extremely fascinating for God about these hands, which we learn are Michelangelo's. His hands are in prayer, which draws attention to prayer and its connection to creativity. I linked prayer and poetry together, via the *Stunden-Buch* and Derek Walcott's statements on the matter above and this emphasizes the link to creative acts as such.

Indeed, it seems to be the peculiar power of Michelangelo's prayer that allows him to do truly creative labor. He is not stuck, as other human beings are, in the seventh

day; he does not lack the connection between the spirit, his ear, and the tips of his tools.

There is something special about his prayer and his hands, which God cannot ignore:

Viele Gebete waren zu dieser Stunde von der Erde unterwegs. Gott aber erkannte nur eines: die Kraft Michelangelos stieg wie Duft von Weinbergen zu ihm empor.

Und er duldet, daß sie seine Gedanken erfüllte (Rilke 7, 347).

Michelangelo's power here seems to be akin to some force of nature, but, one might note, not a tornado or the crashing waves of the sea. It is the subtle, quiet scent of vineyard.

This is not simply nature, but nature transformed and cultivated by human hands, like a garden. There is a similarity here to the sensitivity that Jesus exhibits to the loud cheers of the disciples in that God only pays attention to the subtle, quiet prayers of Michelangelo.

If one listens, the narrator is trying to tell us, with a sharpened sensitivity, there are other things to be heard besides our own loud voices and thoughts. He is advocating a cultivated sense of receptivity. God himself is surprised by this revelation when he sees that Michelangelo is listening to stones:

Er neigte sich tiefer, fand den schaffenden Mann, sah über seine Schultern fort auf die am Steine horchenden Hände und erschrak: sollten in den Steinen auch Seelen sein? Warum belauschte dieser Mann die Steine? Und nun erwachten ihm die Hände und wühlten den Stein auf wie ein Grab, darin eine schwache, sterbende Stimme flackert: „Michelangelo,“ rief Gott in Bangigkeit: „wer ist im Stein?“ Michelangelo horchte auf; seine Hände zitterten. Dann antwortete er dumpf: „Du, mein Gott, wer denn sonst. Aber ich kann nicht zu dir“ (Rilke 7, 347).

God himself, it seems, does not know that he is in the stones. Rilke, and here, his narrator, want again to emphasize a limitation on God that gives credence in the challenge of being human. Before, in the creation myth, we saw that the hand of God was crippled by trying simply to live one human lifetime and now God himself is puzzled by his own creation as well as his role in it. This speaks to the difficulty and lack of obviousness that a Thing should be able to speak.

God himself is dark, as we have seen in these stories; there is a darkness in the human being because God's gaze cannot seem to penetrate our being; there is a darkness in the Thing, as the persona in the *Stunden-Buch* tells us (he wishes to be like the Thing, *dunkel und klug*). Now, we see that God himself is in the stone, i.e. in the Thing, as well as all the heavens, and God does not know it or understand how that can be the case:

Und da fühlte Gott, daß er auch im *Steine* sei, und es wurde ihm ängstlich und enge. Der ganze Himmel war nur ein Stein, und er war mitten drin eingeschlossen und hoffte auf die Hände Michelangelos, die ihn befreien würden, und er hörte sie kommen, aber noch weit (Rilke 7, 347).

The responsibility of the artist becomes clear, in that he has to free God from the stones. God was so fascinated by the hands of Michelangelo because he sensed that they would liberate him from a trap he did not even know he was in yet.

Michelangelo's, as well as other artists', heavy responsibility is clear from these passages, but there is a corresponding power that accompanies this weight, as we see in an episode in the stone quarry, after this strange encounter with the dear Lord. He starts to be able to see God in the objects around him:

Umrahmt von Oliven und welkem Gestein erschienen die frisch gebrochenen Flächen wie ein großes blasses Gesicht unter alterndem Haar. Lange stand Michelangelo vor seiner verhüllten Stirne. Plötzlich bemerkte er darunter zwei riesige Augen aus Stein, welche ihn betrachteten. Und Michelangelo fühlte seine Gestalt wachsen unter dem Einfluß dieses Blickes (Rilke 7, 348).

The view is framed (*Umrahmt*) for Michelangelo by the natural objects around him, which allows the face to show through to him. Through the vision, Michelangelo starts to grow in size and soon is towering above the landscape, with the mountain standing next to him like a brother. From the mountain Michelangelo gets an impression of unity, but lack of completion: “Michelangelo dachte nach: ‚Man kann dich nicht zerschlagen, du bist ja nur Eines,‘ und dann hob er seine Stimme: ‚Dich will ich vollenden, du bist mein Werk‘” (Rilke 7, 349).

It would seem that the power relation between God and Michelangelo is reversed here, but this is called into question as the latter returns to his home: “als er sein Haus betrat, da wußte er sich in dunkeln Händen, denen er nicht entgehen konnte” (Rilke 7, 349). Here we see that his will is still not his own and that God is still controlling his actions, despite his being trapped in the stones. Michelangelo is forced by his own walls back into his previous, limited form, and he allows this change. He feels compelled, like Walcott in his trance, to kneel:

Er drückte sich in die Knie und ließ sich formen von ihnen. Er fühlte einen nie gekannte Demut in sich und hatte selbst den Wunsch, irgendwie klein zu sein. Und eine Stimme kam: „Michelangelo, wer ist in dir?“ Und der Mann in der

schmalen Kammer legte die Stirn schwer in die Hände und sagte leise: „Du mein Gott, wer denn sonst.“ (Rilke 7, 349).

First, we have another figure here with his face in his hands. This time, instead of blocking the sight of receptivity to other human beings, he covers the *Stirn*, which is perhaps the site of receptivity to God. But also, Michelangelo has seen things now from the perspective of God and now happily returns to his old form, but now transformed by God. Implied, it seems, is that he had to take this step in order to free God. It is not clear that God has now left the stones – he is, I would assume, still present there – but he is now inside the human being and able to see, presumably, what he could not.

The argument between God and his hands is now over with this story, thanks to the artist who has bridged the gap between spirit and hand, though none of this is explicitly stated in the story. It is left, rather, for the reader to piece together through wondering about the various disparate pieces of the *Geschichten*. That the hands of the artist are key in this process is confirmed by the conversation that the narrator has with his neighbor after the conclusion of the story:

Mein lahmer Freund hob seine Blicke und duldete, daß die Abendwolken sie mitzogen über den Himmel hin: „Ist Gott den *dort*?“ fragte er. Ich schwieg. Dann neigte ich mich zu ihm: „Ewald, sind wir denn *hier*?“ Und wir hielten uns herzlich die Hände (Rilke 7, 350).

The receptivity that the narrator is advocating is present in the gaze of his friend, who allows his gaze to be pulled along by the evening clouds.⁶⁶ The narrator does not want to answer the question negatively, because he quite likely thinks that God resides in the sky

⁶⁶ Rilke is dovetailing the next story in here by giving the clouds some agency, because the clouds themselves will be the narrator's next audience in "Wie der Fingerhut dazu kam, der liebe Gott zu Sein," a story about children who decide to make God into a thimble.

as well, but, similar to the way that the children add an “auch” instead of giving an either/or answer in the previous story, he answers the question with a question. His question, and the gesture of joining hands, implies that God is within and between human beings, expressed by the hands of the artist and in the art of storytelling.

CHAPTER V

LEARNING TO SEE: *DIE AUFZEICHNUNGEN DES MALTE LAURIDS BRIGGE*

Introduction

We have now spanned the distance of many of Rilke's major prose works, showing the importance of the senses in each, as well as the necessity of recovering real, creative labor. We have already done a detailed reading of the work that prompted me to write this study on Rilke's prose works, viz. *Die Geschichten vom lieben Gott*, specifically the section "Der Fremde Mann," to which we will return briefly in the present chapter. When Rilke began writing *Malte*, he wanted it to be the second part of *Die Geschichten vom lieben Gott*, as he wrote in a letter to Lou Andreas Salome (Rilke, *Letters*, 43-44). He also writes here that perpetual work, instead of intermittent bursts, is his ultimate goal, a thought that I will continue to thematize in this chapter. It makes "sense" then that we should address the work with which the more specific theme of sense expansion found its *Ausgangspunkt* for me: *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*, where the narrator explicitly states this as his central activity and goal:

Ich lerne sehen. Ich weiß nicht, woran es liegt, es geht alles tiefer in mich ein und bleibt nicht an der Stelle stehen, wo es sonst immer zu Ende war. Ich habe ein Inneres, von dem ich nicht wußte. Alles geht jetzt dorthin. Ich weiß nicht, was dort geschieht. (Rilke 11, 710-11)

The first line suggests, as I argued in the "Ur-geräusch" chapter, that for Rilke the senses are not fixed faculties, but are a *process*, i.e. they can be set in motion, cultivated, refined, and renewed. Malte becomes a beginner again, learning the world anew, as a child would

for the first time: “Habe ich schon gesagt? Ich lerne sehen. Ja, ich fange an. Es geht noch schlecht. Aber ich will meine Zeit ausnutzen.” (Rilke 11, 711)

The second sentence in the cited passage, that everything goes deeper into him and does not stay where it used to end, is reminiscent again of “Der Panther,” in which the image enters through the eye of the panther, passes through a network of tensed muscles, and has a definite end:

Nur manchmal schiebt der Vorhang der Pupille
sich lautlos auf –. Dann geht ein Bild hinein,
geht durch der Glieder angespannte Stille –
und hört im Herzen auf zu sein (Rilke 2, 505).

The ending place also points to a central motif in *Malte*, which we will investigate in this chapter – the heart. In these lines Rilke seems to admire, perhaps, the way in which the image stops in the heart of the panther. I say “perhaps” because, as I have mentioned before, it is difficult to determine whether he is admiring the animal, or if he laments the “numbed will” of the animal. The location of the poem, not often mentioned in the secondary literature, is after a series of poems on medieval topics. Right before “Der Panther” is “Der Gefangene” – the prisoner. It is as if modernism emerges with this prisoner and with it a new kind of imprisonment, just like Malte, who emerges from royalty, i.e. from an old world that was centered around the sovereign, but faces a new kind of nightmare.

Malte, like the panther, is a prisoner. He is a prisoner to many things, for example, that he is a vestige of an old world, since his family is a fallen aristocratic family. There is no use for him in this new world. But more importantly to this context is his inability to

create, which makes him a prisoner of the seventh day. It is as if Rilke admired the panther's ability, despite its imprisonment, for the image to come to rest within its heart.⁶⁷ There is a certain stillness there, and a silence that is, as we shall see, markedly absent in Malte's life. We see in the passage cited above that Malte does not know why, but nothing stands still in him anymore. The images do not cease to be in his heart, as they do with the panther. He has a new "inside" (*ein Inneres*) that he did not know about and he also does not know what happens there. Malte has a new inside, a darkness within himself that he himself does not understand. It is important that he says that he *did not know* about it before, which means that it was there, but he had not yet uncovered it, which indicates something of a preconscious; it was at work inside him, even though he was not aware of its presence (or, more precisely, its absence). He has exposed a new region of the self, a part to which he does not have access. The task at hand for him will now be to come to terms with these dark forces.

The emphasis in this chapter, as it has been in all the others, is on the senses. But we have to explicitly add another sense here, which I have been developing throughout this study. *Malte* gives us a good opportunity to explicitly thematize this sense, particularly when he looks at several tapestries, *La Dame à la licorne*. Malte tells his dear Abelone, his beloved, about them:

Es giebt Teppiche hier, Abelone, Wandteppiche. Ich bilde mir ein, du bist da,
sechs Teppiche sinds, komm, laß uns langsam vorübergehen. Aber erst tritt
zurück und sieh alle zugleich. Wie ruhig sie sind, nicht? Es ist wenig
Abwechslung darin. Da ist immer diese ovale blaue insel, schwebend im

⁶⁷ There is a contrast here with the lions that still go free in the fourth Elegy: "Und irgendwo gehn Löwen noch und wissen, / solang sie herrlich sind, von keiner Ohnmacht" (Rilke 2, 697).

zurückhaltend roten Grund, der blumig ist und von kleinen, mit sich beschäftigten Tieren bewohnt (Rilke 11, 826-27).

He goes on to say that there is always the same woman in the tapestries, with a servant, and the animals that carry the coat of arms, a lion and a unicorn (Rilke 11, 827). “Hast du gesehen, willst du beim ersten beginnen?” (ibid.), Malte asks. He goes through, carefully describing the scene in each, which all represent one of the five senses and then a sixth sense, depicted in “*A mon seul désir*,” the only one that is explicitly named.

Here is another instance in which positively naming things is not always the best way of helping the reader or listener to understand. Not explicitly naming the tapestries makes one have to look at the tapestries themselves and decide which one Malte is talking about. Naming only “*A mon seul désir*” also gives us a clue that it is this sense that will be particularly important in the book. He describes this tapestry in detail:

Die Insel wird breit. Ein Zelt ist errichtet. Aus blauem Damast und goldgeflammt.
Die Tiere rafften es auf und schlicht beinah in ihrem fürstlichen Kleid tritt sie vor.
Denn was sind ihre Perlen gegen sie selbst. Die Dienerin hat eine kleine Truhe
geöffnet, und sie hebt nun eine Kette heraus, ein schweres, herrliches Kleinod, das
immer verschlossen war. Der kleine Hund sitzt bei ihr, erhöht, auf bereitetem
Platz und sieht es an. Und hast du den Spruch entdeckt auf dem Zeltrand oben? da
steht: „A mon seul désir.“ (Rilke 11, 828)

Gabriela Reuss offers a history of criticism of the tapestries: Schneeberg-Perelman argued that the tapestry is an allegory of the free will, and Alain Erlande-Brandenburg linked the tapestry with the neo-platonic meaning of the sixth sense (Reuss, 59-60).

Citing Helmut Naumann, Reuss gives us further insight into the reasons why the senses are thematized in the tapestries:

Den Auftakt der Serie sah Naumann in der Tapissérie ‚A mon seul désir‘. Für seine Gesamtdeutung wichtig ist die Tatsache, daß die Sinne, trotz aller negativer Bedeutung, als Vermittler der Welt im mittelalterlichen Minnesang durchaus positiv konnotiert waren. Neumann hob die heraldische Komponente der Tapissérieserie hervor, die er besonders auf dem Bildteppich ‚A mon seul désir‘ erkannte. (Reuss 61)

All of these ways of reading the tapestry point to how we interact with the world and with others. Taking the senses to be a mediator between the self and world suggests a split, which invites Heidegger into the discussion, as I will discuss further throughout this chapter.

What is also important in the passage above is the mention of the negative meaning associated with the senses in the Middle Ages. This is important in Malte’s case, because he is royalty and has to learn how to navigate a modern world with its new values. The negative connotation of the senses in the middle ages, and even later with Kant, could be a part of the reason for the backlash that takes place in Malte; his new openness to the world gives him an entirely different perspective and a new sensitivity, but, as we will see, also exposes him to dark forces that are at work within him. He is at war with himself in a “sense,” and it is the war not only between an old self and a new self, but also between an old world order and a new one. He must now navigate as an individual instead of as a subject under a sovereign. This individuality and strength of

ego would have been an affront to both God and the sovereign in the middle ages and this struggle now rankles within Malte.

The struggle, naturally, changes the way that he interacts with others – the sixth sense, after all, is the heart. As I promised in my analysis of “Der Fremde Mann,” now we are again facing a question of what it means to be *exposed* to the Other. Before I go further, I would like to investigate this phenomenon a bit more in order to set up the line of inquiry. Emmanuel Levinas can be of some service here, specifically with his thought on the *psychism*. He writes, in *Totality and Infinity*,

The separation of the Same is produced in the form of an inner life, a psychism.

The psychism constitutes an *event* in being; it concretizes a conjuncture of terms which were not first defined by the psychism and whose abstract formulation harbors a paradox. The original role of the psychism does not, in fact, consist in only *reflecting* being; it is already *a way of being [une maniere d'etre]*, resistance to the totality. Thought or the psychism opens the dimension this *way* requires.

The dimension of the psychism opens under the force of the resistance a being opposes to its totalization; it is the feat of radical separation. (Levinas 55)

Malte, now exposed to mass culture and its stifling noise, begins to resist these leveling forces, the totality that Levinas mentions here. The inner life⁶⁸, the psychism, i.e. the site of this resistance, is a place within us to which we ourselves do not have access. In the language of Levinas, it is the Other within the same; in the language of Husserl it is the

⁶⁸ The inner life, for Max Horkheimer, is the very source of individuality and what allows one to create true works of art. See “Art and Mass Culture” in *Critical Theory*. See also Reynolds, “Family, Inner Life, and the Amusement Industry.”

Alter Ego⁶⁹; it is, in any event, the part of the self that I myself do not know, but it is also the way that I relate to other human beings. It is, on the one hand, the image that I have of the other person and, on the other hand, the absence of complete knowledge of the other person, both because I cannot see the world from her or his perspective, and because he or she is constantly changing and cannot be known as a fixed entity.

I cannot know other people completely – there is always a part of them that remains masked to me, but I come into relation to this unknown Other through the part of myself that I do not know. I am separate from others in this sense and only by understanding this basic fact am I able to come into relation with others. It is the part of me that resists totalization, as Levinas writes, because it is the always-missing piece. One cannot objectify the Other because that would suggest being able to understand her or him completely, or take her or him into one's grasp, which can never be the case, precisely because of this missing piece. Objectification of the Other, totalization, is always only a fantasy. The psychism is interiority⁷⁰ – *das Innere*, of which Malte speaks above.

Malte, because of this new discovery, has become aware that things are not as straightforward as he had previously thought. Uncovering this element of himself has

⁶⁹ See *Cartesianische Meditationen*, § 42, “Exposition des Problems der Fremderfahrung in Gegenstellung gegen den Einwand des Solipsismus.” Here, quite basically, Husserl argues that for one ego, there is always another and that there is simply not much we can say about it. In a conversation with John Russon at Boston College, he told me that it is “like a pair of pants,” i.e. ego and alter ego simply go together. The question itself of whether or not we can prove it is quite beside the point phenomenologically, because the task of phenomenology is to describe how the phenomenon appears. The question of whether or not it exists is bracketed, as Husserl says quite plainly states at the beginning of the Fifth Meditation. The innumerable attempts in secondary literature to show that Husserl did not prove that the Other exists are therefore not only fatuous, but ethically questionable. See Reynolds, “Intersubjectivity in the Work of Edmund Husserl and Martin Buber.”

⁷⁰ To get a sense of the logic of Levinas' ethics: we would never catch him considering the psychism of the Other. To do so would be to make assumptions about her or him. I can only know myself, and even there, I cannot know the psychism, except to know that it is the unknown part of myself, that it is the source of true thought, and that through this bit of unknown in myself I relate to the unknown without, to the Other.

introduced into his life ambiguity, lack of clarity, *Différance*. So, on the one hand, he has a new and more “authentic”⁷¹ or genuine relation to the world and to the Other. Horst Wittmann explains this transformation:

“Sehen,” “Erkennen” und “Sagen” bilden die drei Bereiche des Versagens, wie sie sich für Malte auf das Erfassen und die Vermittlung von Wirklichkeit und Wesentlichkeit beziehen, und so handeln seine Aufzeichnungen dann vom wahren Erkennen, dem “richtigen” Sehen und Sagenlernen. Seine Sprachkritik kreist schon am Anfang um den Begriff der Präzision, deren Vernachlässigung sich als die tiefste Ursache der im Roman beklagten Entfremdung des Menschen von den Dingen, vom Du, vom Tod, ja von Gott herausstellen wird (Wittmann 15-16).

Not only does this passage give us some insight into what “authenticity” means in *Malte*, it also gives support to the argument, which I am developing here (and which also undermines any kind of disagreement between Heidegger and Levinas) that alienation (*Entfremdung*) is not just an inauthentic relation to Being and being lost in the realm of the ontic, but also a lack of relation to the *Du*,⁷² to death, and to God, all of which are central questions in *Malte*. Something else that these lines suggest is the extreme

⁷¹ I introduce this term somewhat reluctantly, given the context that Theodor Adorno has established in *Jargon der Eigentlichkeit: zur deutschen Ideologie*. He argues there that fascism can take residence and be transmitted through language, using Heidegger as an example. One cannot deny the piercing insight in Heidegger’s work, however, and I will use it to analyze certain parts of *Malte*.

⁷² While there are significant differences between what Levinas writes about the relation to the Other and Martin Buber’s analysis of the *Ich-du* relation, they are quite similar in spirit. Their main point of contention would probably be on the point of reciprocity, which, by Levinas’ understanding cannot be part of an ethical relation because one is expecting, i.e. demanding something of the Other. He advocates a unidirectional, a-reciprocal kind of action in which I give, for example, to the Other and do not have a thought of the something being returned. Conversely, if the Other attacks me, for example, I cannot return that violence. It is only in this way that violence as such can be overcome in the world. Buber would include a certain expectation from the Thou, and perhaps, in limited circumstances, even violent action against others (when one is being treated as an *Es* by those others). If we look, for example at his correspondence with Gandhi on the topic of concentration camps, we see that he does not believe anything can come of non-violent, passive resistance in that context. See letter 523 in *The Letters of Martin Buber: A Life of Dialogue* (Buber 476-86).

dynamicity of these *Aufzeichnungen*: while it is about learning the senses, it is also metaphysical (in Levinas' sense as well as the traditional sense), it is ontological, ethical, poetical, and psychoanalytical, as we will see shortly.

So, on the one hand, he is achieving this transformed relation to the world. On the other hand, he is left exposed. Malte, in a letter, writes about the doubled nature of his new experience:

Eine vollkommen andere Auffassung aller Dinge hat sich unter diesen Einflüssen in mir herausgebildet, es sind gewisse Unterschiede da, die mich von den Menschen mehr als alles bisherige abtrennen. Eine veränderte Welt. Ein neues Leben voll neuer Bedeutung. Ich habe es augenblicklich etwas schwer, weil alles zu neu ist. Ich bin ein Anfänger in meinen eigenen Verhältnissen (Rilke 11, 775).

One should note here that the change taking place here also *separates* him from others, which, for Levinas, is a precondition of an ethical relation. But it also simply means that he is, at least temporarily, out of touch with the people around him because he does not yet know how to relate to them in this new world.

Malte tacks a short sentence on the end that is completely mysterious, except if we view the book as the second part of the *Geschichten vom lieben Gott*, which is what Rilke intended the novel to be when he started it. If we think back to Old Melchisedech, the line makes more sense: “Ob es nicht möglich ware, einmal das Meer zu sehen?” (Rilke 11, 775). He wants, in other words, not just the experience of the senses, i.e. to see the sea, but to see God in the sea – to see God in the Thing – and, moreover, to see it from *his own home*, as Old Melchisedech does in his mystical experience. If I could compact Levinas' entire philosophy into a single formulation, it would be this: *The ethical relation*

is to be at home with oneself in the face of the Other. We need *exposure* to the Other, but we require the safety of the home, that is, of the Ego,⁷³ in order to face that Other without being shattered. This, ultimately, is value of the *safe reserve* in the sublime; the constant tension of *Heimweh* and *Fernweh* in Romanticism; the need of a ship in order to brave the sea, or, in the case of Old Melchisedech, the need to be at home in the ghetto in order to see God in the sea.

Let us look again at the scene in the taxi⁷⁴ with Levinas and Enrique Dussel from the latter's *Ethics of Liberation*, to remind ourselves of what exposure means:

In a taxi, before he was to speak at a conference in Louvain in 1972 I asked [Emmanuel Levinas]: "What is exposition?" And Levinas, opening up his shirt with two hands, ripping open his buttons, and exposing his chest, exclaimed: "It's like when you expose yourself before a firing squad!" (Dussel 274).

This quote is important enough to repeat for a number of reasons. As I commented already, it brings out a connection between *exposure* in the sense that Levinas uses it here, i.e. a radical exposure⁷⁵ to the Other, several instances of which we will see in *Malte*, and *exposition*, i.e. writing. Malte is a poet who has royal roots, but now lives in

⁷³ There would be a point of contention here between Heidegger and Levinas, because Heidegger would want to move away from an ego because it would land us back in the opposition between subject and object. For this reason he uses the language of *Dasein*, i.e. "being here," because it does not annunciate such a split. Levinas, in *Totality and Infinity*, argues that we do require it, ultimately for the reason that I just gave – to be able to face the Other without being shattered. He writes, "'Thought' and 'interiority' are the very break-up of being and the production (not the reflection) of transcendence. We know this relation only in the measure that we effect it; this is what is distinctive about it. Alterity is possible only starting from *me*." (Levinas 40). The history, in my understanding, would look something like this: Descartes argued, "ego cogito, ergo sum," "I think therefore I am; Husserl boiled it down to even finer elements, viz. "I am"; and Heidegger even dissolved the I, leaving only "am," or more precisely, *Being*. Levinas reasserts the necessity of the I or ego, but subordinates it, in a sense, to the Other.

⁷⁴ I too had an interesting encounter with Dussel in a taxi cab in San Francisco, when we discovered that it was much easier to communicate in German than in English.

⁷⁵ There is another sense of exposure that I am suggesting here, which is the exposure to a contagion, which I would like to suggest has the possibility of acting like a vaccine or homeopathically.

Paris, so his transformation is not just that of a single individual, but of humanity overcoming an important stage:

Aus dänischem Adel stammend und aufgewachsen am Ende einer traditionsbewußten und damit zur Vergangenheit offenen Zeit, steht Malte im Zwiespalt zweier Epochen (Eifler 109).

The two eras that Eifler mentions here are the world of monarchy and the triumphant bourgeois world. But there is more going on here than just a change in political organization and the deposition of the figure of the sovereign, it is also a world that is increasingly secular. Deposing the King is also deposing the notion of God in a person. As I mentioned, a strong ego and a focus on the individual, which in the middle ages would have been an affront to both God and the sovereign, now becomes necessary. Malte exists in somewhat of a vacuum between these two stages – his world has been shattered and he need to rearrange his ego in such a way that he can relate to the outside world. His writing brings about a transformation within him and, as with the phonograph in the “Ur-geräusch” chapter, sets his senses into motion, instead of being fixed, given faculties. He now lives in a world of process and change and struggles to get his “sea legs” in this new environment, with the old world reasserting itself within him.

Blurring of Self and World

From almost the very beginning of the *Malte*, there is a blurring between self and world. As we have already seen in the “Ur-geräusch” section, the blurring between senses led later to more defined individual senses, which Rilke emphasizes by differentiating between a state of being in love, which is akin to synesthesia, and the state of mind of the

poet. Here, instead of a blurring between senses, there is *Verschmelzung* of self and world, subject and object. The story begins in a reeking, fearful city, with its stifling impressions attacking Malte's senses:

Dass ich es nicht lassen kann, bei offenem Fenster zu schlafen. Elektrische
Bahnen rasen läutend durch meine Stube. Automobile gehen über mich hin. Eine
Tür fällt zu. Irgendwo klirrt eine Scheibe herunter, ich höre ihre großen Scherben
lachen, die Kleinen Splitter kichern. (Rilke 11, 710)

We see here already that the line between self and world is blurred. As Veronika Merz writes in "Die Gottesidee in Rilkes 'Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge,'" "Inneres Erleben und äußere Tatsächlichkeit fließen ineinander" (268). Malte's room, here an extension of himself, has trains and automobiles driving through it. The home, in Levinas' work, is the ego; to be at home with oneself is to be undisturbed by the Stranger, by the Other. Malte's room, we might take note, is not really a home, but a room rented somewhere, and is set upon on all sides by the noise, stink, and glaring light of the city. We see also a blurring of subjectivity, with a Thing speaking in the form of the laughing shards of glass. Interesting, though, is that what comforts him is not the consoling of another human being, but of a dog: "Ein Hund bellt. Was für eine Erleichterung: ein Hund" (ibid).⁷⁶ This suggests that the ethical relation, which Malte is struggling to discover, extends not only to humans but to other beings. To allow the world to speak, Rilke's ultimate goal, can also mean allowing the animal to speak, or recognizing its speech as a language.

⁷⁶ Dogs play a comforting role throughout the *Aufzeichnungen*.

After explaining that he is learning to see, in the passage I cited in the introduction, we have a clearer instance in which self and world melt together. Malte tiptoes around a poor woman, trying not to disturb her in her thoughts:

Die Straße war zu leer, ihre Leere langweilte sich und zog mir den Schritt unter den Füßen weg und klappte mit ihm herum, drüben und da, wie mit einem Holzschuh. Die Frau erschrak und hob sich aus sich ab, zu schnell, zu heftig, so daß das Gesicht in den zwei Händen blieb. Ich konnte es darin liegen sehen, seine hohle Form. Es kostete mich unbeschreibliche Anstrengung, bei diesen Händen zu bleiben und nicht zu schauen, was sich aus ihnen abgerissen hatte. Mir graute, ein Gesicht von innen zu sehen, aber fürchtete mich doch noch viel mehr vor dem bloßen wunden Kopf ohne Gesicht. (Rilke 11, 712)

There is a lot going on in this passage, so I will start with the first sentence and slowly work through the rest. We have an instance there of what Kierkegaard, or more precisely Vigilius Haufniensis, calls “objective anxiety,” which is prevalent throughout *Malte*. It is not the place to get into the details of the theological and psychological study that Kierkegaard, through Haufniensis, delineates there. Let it suffice to say that through the sin of Adam, the entirety of creation was endowed with anxiety. If one does not feel it, one is simply ignoring it, as Malte has been doing up until this point in his life:

By coming into the world, sin acquired significance for the whole creation. This effect of sin in nonhuman existence [*Tilværelse*] I have called objective anxiety. (Kierkegaard, *Anxiety*, 57)

It is perhaps oversimplified to express it in this way, but the simple feeling that Kierkegaard wants to express here, if we apply it to Malte, is that it is not Malte who feels that the street is empty or that it is bored, but the street itself.

The street, in other words, comes alive. It is an instance, not only of a Thing speaking, but of coming alive and acting against Malte, and this is the resistance that Malte faces from the world wherever he goes. The street pulls his stride out from underneath him, which startles the woman. The woman then exposes what is underneath her mask. Malte has just finished explaining different kinds of masks that people wear, and that there are many people in the world, but even more faces, because we all wear so many different ones. Some people wear the same one too much, others switch theirs at the drop of a hat. This woman is lost within herself and is startled out, so that the face remains in her hands, which Malte wants to avoid seeing at all costs. His gaze is drawn toward and repelled by the sight at the same time. We might understand Malte as being this figure: lost in thought and submerged in a type of fantasy, and now, too quickly, being exposed to a new type of relation with the world.

Up until this point, the reader might have been able to ignore or miss the incursions of the world into the self and vice versa. But here it is clear that Malte has guided us into a world that is radically transformed, and the boundary between self and world is no longer clear. The descriptions become, accordingly, *phenomenological*, i.e. the subject-object relation is now superseded and it is no longer an *I* that sees its world, but something more like *Dasein*. “Phenomenology” is a useful expression for the transformation that takes place in Malte, for his new way of seeing, especially in its historical sense, which Heidegger, in “Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie” (1919-

1920) outlines. He traces its origin, of course, to Hegel's *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (1807) (11), but more salient to the present discussion is its broader origin:

Das Wort findet dann verstreute Verwendung (eine exakte Nachforschung darüber gibt es nicht) in der protestantischen Theologie, und zwar begegnet es da in den achtziger Jahren in der Bedeutung einer *Beschreibung* der immanenten *und* transzendent-historischen Entwicklung des religiösen Bewußtseins. Der Nachdruck ruht aber schon sichtlich auf der Funktion des „Beschreibens“, die in dem Wort mitgemeint ist. (Heidegger, *Grundprobleme*, 12)

As we move on, we will see that Malte's transformation is ultimately a religious one, it is therefore appropriate that we should use a language with such a history. Levinas writes, pertinently, "We propose to call "religion" the bond that is established between the same and the other without constituting a totality" (Levinas 40).

Since it is in the background of the conversation here, I should pause for a moment to look at the dispute between Heidegger and Levinas. There are differences in the ways in which they proceed and what they choose to emphasize, with Heidegger privileging ontology, i.e. our relation to the world and to Being, and Levinas giving primacy to metaphysics, which for him is the ethical relation to the Other. Levinas is justified in his insistence that ethics is first philosophy and with privileging the revelation of the Other over the disclosure of Being, but as Malte's experience shows us, these lines of inquiry are not separate. The term *χώρα* (*khora*) may be useful to introduce here, because it houses a similar ambiguity. David Appelbaum writes in "At the discretion of the thing: Derrida and German thought,"

The trouble that we are encountering in trying to constitute the nature of the thing is that a thing that will have arrived despite its failure to arrive will have happened in the virtual sphere, the *khora*, a term that Heidegger and Derrida both extract from Plato's *Timaeus*. It is the place of no thing actual and all things virtual, a convenient storehouse of possibility. Prior to distinguishing the 'what' from the 'who', its invocation allows us to see the coming equally as of an entity or a person, or of the shuttle that moves between the two. (Appelbaum 5-6)

Disclosure of Being and Revelation of the Other arouse one another, perhaps because of the indeterminacy of both processes. There is a darkness in the being of the Thing, forever closed off from my view, just as the Other forever eludes the grasp of sight and knowledge. One process sets the other in motion.

So Malte's confusion about the boundary between himself and the world also calls into question his boundary between himself and the Other. Which comes first does not seem to be the issue, rather that both processes are inextricably intertwined. Malte is experiencing the effects of a ruptured ego, one that no longer knows what is itself and what is other, but has not yet come to terms with this fact of existence. I should also note that description also plays a key role in the passage from Heidegger, cited above. Malte has reached a point at which it is no longer accurate to say that the street feels boring to him; it is a more accurate description, more faithful to the phenomenon, to say that the street itself is bored. That the street turns against him is a key fact as well. One cannot help but think of Kafka in this context and *Das Schloß*, where the world itself conspires against K. in order to keep him out of the castle:

So ging er wieder vorwärts, aber es war ein langer Weg. Die Straße nämlich, diese Hauptstraße des Dorfes, führte nicht zum Schloßberg, sie führte nur nahe heran, dann aber wie absichtlich bog sie ab und wenn sie sich auch vom Schloß nicht entfernte, so kam sie ihm doch auch nicht näher. (Kafka 9)

Also, through his intimacy and exposure to other people, as in Malte's sudden exposure to the woman with her face in her hands, K. is led into depths that he is drawn into and repelled by at the same time. We see this specifically in his intimacy with Frieda:

Dort vergingen Stunden, Stunden gemeinsamen Atems, gemeinsamen Herzschlags, Stunden, in denen K. immerfort das Gefühl hatte, er verirre sich oder er sei so weit in der Fremde, wie vor ihm noch kein Mensch, einer Fremde, in der selbst die Luft keinen Bestandteil der Heimatluft habe, in der man vor Fremdheit ersticken müsse und in deren unsinnigen Verlockungen man doch nichts tun könne als weiter gehen, weiter sich verirren. (Kafka 33)

As this passage opens, we think (and one might again think back to "Ur-geräusch" here) that this will be a description of a story-book love, of romance in the crude and naïve sense. But this of course is not Kafka's style. As the paragraph continues, we see a character like Malte, who is not yet capable of relating to the Other without destroying her or him being destroyed by her or him.

We see also the simultaneous revulsion and attraction that K. feels, which is akin to Malte's need for the transformation that he is undergoing and the simultaneous *Angst* that seemingly cannot be separated from it. In Kafka, one suspects that there is no supersession of this state of affairs; that we are closed up within ourselves and cannot venture out; that we cannot come into a relation with the Other without destroying him or

her or ourselves. There is no outside, no transcendence in Kafka's work. In Kafka we are permanently locked out, or perhaps locked in; we have no access to the castle. The question of the present inquiry becomes: is such a relation possible in Rilke's work? Does Rilke manage to come into relation to the Other, without reducing that Other to his own inwardness (i.e. destroying it) or destroying that inwardness? We might also think back here to the imagery of Ahab and the sea: the goal is to venture out and explore the sea, but if the ship is the "safe reserve" that Krell discusses, present in the Sublime, the ego needs to be reinforced and restructured in such a way that it can withstand the force of the sea (traditionally a symbol for the infinite or Other).⁷⁷ This restructuring, I will state preliminarily, comes through creative labor; through writing in this case, specifically writing poetry, but also through painting and sculpting (or building, as was the case in the *Geschichten*) as is evident in other places in Rilke's works. The type of labor is not important, it is whether or not the labor gets us out of "the seventh day" and repairs the ancient rift between God and his hands, between spirit and the tip of the pen.

We must also consider the possibility that Malte is a *bad writer*, in the classical sense (see Derrida 149), at least in the beginning of the novel. Margaret Eifler writes, in "Existentielle Verwandlung in Rilkes Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge,"

Im letzten Teil der Aufzeichnungen verlieren sich Maltes Gegenwartseindrücke und Erinnerungen mehr und mehr. Es überwiegen Nachzeichnungen von

Lebensausschnitten bedeutender, vielfach historischer Gestalten. E. F. Hoffmann

⁷⁷ *Moby Dick* begins with Ishmael speaking of a solidifying over of habitual life that is blocking his access to the world. It is also making him begin to doubt the existence of others: "Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people's hats off—then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can" (Melville 23). He requires access to the sea (the infinite) in order to again gain access to the Other.

sieht Malte als Romanperson jetzt gewissermassen ausgeklammert und seine dichterischen Versuche ins Zentrum seines Anliegens gerückt (Eifler 108).

According to this, the novel is then not only a story of self-discovery, but also one of developing into a good writer, and, in the broader context that we are developing here, of reconnecting *Geist* to the hand; being able to express or perhaps to translate spirit.⁷⁸

However, I do not see Malte becoming a good writer. He will have his moments of connection to spirit, but does very little in the way of translating it. This task will be left to Rilke's idealized vision of Rodin, the subject of the final chapter of this study.

Derrida claims that it is in this very opposition, between good writing and bad writing, that philosophy plays out (Derrida 149). He writes,

While presenting writing as a false brother – traitor, infidel, and simulacrum – Socrates is for the first time led to envision the brother of this brother, the legitimate one, as *another sort of writing*: not merely as a knowing, living, animate discourse, but as an *inscription* of the truth in the soul. It is no doubt usually assumed that what we are dealing with here is a “metaphor” (Derrida 149).

John Llewelyn writes something similar in his chapter on Rilke in *The Middle Voice of Ecological Conscience*, citing a statement that Rilke made in a letter from March of 1922: “...there is not a single word in his poems that has the sense it has in ordinary speech” (Llewelyn 147). The meaning must slowly be pulled out and the reader cannot think that she or he has understood too quickly. The Parable of the Sower also comes to mind here, and the bad writer would correspond to the seed sown on rocky ground

⁷⁸ While this may not be an exclusively modern problem, Rilke brings the problem into a modern framework by posing the question in an increasingly secularized and post-monarchical context.

(Matthew 13:20): the person hears the words with joy, but they do not take hold in her or him.

Of course, we have here also a question of what is bad speaking or writing, and simply bad listening. A story has to be heard as well, as the *Graf* insists in an episode of the *Aufzeichnungen*:

„Die Bücher sind leer“, schrie der Graf mit einer wüstenden Gebärde nach den Wänden hin, „das Blut, darauf kommt es an, da muß man drin lesen können. Er hatte wunderliche Geschichten drin und merkwürdige Abbildungen, dieser Melmare; er konnte aufschlagen, wo er wollte, da war immer was beschrieben; keine Seite in seinem Blut war überschlagen worden (Rilke 11, 848).

Alternatively, it could simply be that bad writing is direct, pushy. Instead of planting a seed, it throws an entire tree at the listener; it cannot grow and develop in the ear of the Other, as it does in the first Sonnet.⁷⁹ It says so much positively that it effectively says *nothing*. As I mentioned in my short discussion of Vico in the section on “Das Märchen von den Händen Gottes,” there has to be a charge in order to complete the circuit, a passivity and activity.

Good writing, like a good speech, inspires activity on the part of the reader and listener. Derrida envisions this in terms of a seed:

It is later confirmed that the conclusion of the *Phaedrus* is less a condemnation of writing in the name of present speech than a preference for one sort of writing over another, for the fertile trace over the sterile trace, for a seed that engenders

⁷⁹ In the first stanza: “O hoher Baum im Ohr!” which is slowly “civilized” throughout the first section, and finally, in the last line: “da schufst du ihnen Tempel im Gehör” (Rilke 2, 731).

because it is planted inside over a seed scattered wastefully outside: at the risk of *dissemination* (Derrida 149).

One could also think about it in terms of questioning: one has to pose questions as well as try to answer them and cannot simply give a list of answers. Malte himself is aware of this as he begins his transformation, speaking of a certain charge that needs to be present between positive and negative elements of the self, remembering and forgetting:

Und es genügt auch noch nicht, daß man Erinnerungen hat. Man muß sie vergessen können, wenn es viele sind, und man muß die große Geduld haben, zu warten, daß sie wiederkommen. Denn die Erinnerungen selbst *sind* noch nicht. Erst wenn sie Blut werden in uns, Blick und Gebärde, namenlos und nicht mehr zu unterscheiden von uns selbst, erst dann kann es geschehen, daß in einer sehr seltenen Stunde das erste Wort eines Verses aufsteht in ihrer Mitte und aus ihnen ausgeht.

Alle meine Verse aber sind anders entstanden, also sind es keine. – Und als ich mein Drama schrieb, wie irrte ich da. War ich ein Nachahmer und Narr, daß ich eines Dritten bedurfte, um von dem Schicksal zweier Menschen zu erzählen, die es einander schwer machten? (Rilke 11, 724-25).

The *inscription* in the soul that Derrida describes in the passage above is certainly the owning of memories that Malte speaks of in this passage. The memories themselves have to be let be and return themselves in order for them to be the stuff out of which poetry can be created.

Good writing, in the context I am developing here, would be writing that does not erase the writer's ego in such a way that she or he is left entirely exposed. Yes, it does

open one to the Other, but there is such a thing as over-exposure, as we have seen. The writing itself acts like a shield or bulwark, opening one to the world while simultaneously insulating one from it. There is also such a thing as overstepping one's boundaries, i.e. in exposing oneself in such a way that it is more an expression of oneself than a receptivity towards the Other. The relation to the Other, as Levinas writes, cannot be reciprocal:

...what I permit myself to demand of myself is not comparable with what I have the right to demand of the Other. This moral experience, so commonplace, indicates a metaphysical asymmetry: the radical impossibility of seeing oneself from the outside and of speaking in the same sense of oneself and of the others, and consequently the impossibility of totalization—and, on the plane of social experience, the impossibility of *forgetting* the intersubjective experience that leads to that social experience and endows it with meaning (as, to believe the phenomenologists, perception, impossible to conjure away, endows scientific experience with meaning) (Levinas 53).

I cannot step outside of my skin and put myself in the position of the Other because to do so would not only be a breach of an ethical boundary, it would be pure fantasy – I can never know the position of the Other; if I imagine that I do I am merely positing the same over an image of the Other. This would include prying too deeply into the Other within the same, i.e. the psychism, *das Innere*, of which Malte writes above. Prying into the Other in the first instance is unethical; in the second instance, prying into the psychism in a hasty fashion, leads to *illness*.

Anxiety and Transformation

Malte's relation to the world has to take on a new form that is able to expose him to the Other, while at the same time preserving (in some sense) his ego.⁸⁰ Change is ultimately the goal, to view the world in a radically different manner, but surviving the process is also, of course, necessary – some level of coherence still has to exist. There are only glimpses of the transformation that takes place; a much greater part of the book describes the illness that I mentioned at the end of the last section. What is this illness? Generally, it is anxiety, terror, fear: everything Malte does is to avoid this illness or face it in such a way that he overcomes it. He is, in any case, always in relation to it. Malte describes it as something that he has had since childhood, but also as something that returns in peculiar forms. Here, he calls it simply “das Große”:

Und da, als es drüben so warm und schwammig lallte: da zum erstenmal seit vielen, vielen Jahren war es wieder da. Das, was mir das erste, tiefe Entsetzen eingejagt hatte, wenn ich als Kind im Fieber lag: das Große. Ja, so hatte ich immer gesagt, wenn sie alle um mein Bett standen und mir den Puls fühlten und mich fragten, was mich erschreckt habe: Das Große. Und wenn sie den Doktor holten und er war da und redete mir zu, so bat ich ihn, er möchte nur machen, daß das Große wegginge, alles andere wäre nichts. Aber er war wie die andern. Er konnte es nicht fortnehmen, obwohl ich damals doch klein war und mir leicht zu helfen gewesen wäre. Und jetzt war es wieder da (Rilke 11, 764).

Michael Hulse translates this as “the big thing” (Rilke, *Notebooks* 40), but “thing” is far too overdetermined in Rilke's work. The article “das” does indeed indicate some neuter

⁸⁰ Hopefully the echo of the Sublime is evident here, particularly the need for “safe reserve.” Malte needs to face the unknown but requires a ship and a bulwark.

object, but to say it is a thing is to reduce the ambiguity, which in this case is very important to preserve.⁸¹ It is not that the Thing is unambiguous – quite the opposite – but it is not clear that Rilke wants to conflate his thoughts on the Thing with this, the source of Malte’s anxiety.

The ambiguity is key here because Malte wants to describe a fear of no-thing in particular, or of the world as such, as Heidegger would define *Anxiety*:

Die Geworfenheit in den Tod enthüllt sich ihm ursprünglicher und eindringlicher in der Befindlichkeit der Angst. Die Angst vor dem Tode ist Angst „vor“ dem eigensten, unbezüglichen und unüberholbaren Seinkönnen. Das Wovor dieser Angst ist das In-der-Welt-sein schlechthin. Mit einer Furcht vor dem Ableben darf die Angst vor dem Tode nicht zusammengeworfen werden (Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 251).

There is a lot going on in this passage and it appears in the middle of Heidegger’s analysis, but we can still sift out a few salient features. We understand our relationship both to death and to the world best through a state of anxiety. The “of-what” (*das Wovon*) of anxiety is being-in-the-world itself, which is to say, anxiety is of the very fact of being situated in the world. It is not a fear of something in particular, a particular object in the world, but of the entirety of the world, which is an accurate description of the state in which Malte finds himself. That he can describe it in no other way than as “das Große” is an indication that he has reached a limit in his ability to use language, i.e. that he is approaching language’s limit.

⁸¹ This is not a problem with Hulse’s translation, but the general problem of translating German into English. It is possible to leave meaningful ambiguities in the German upon which a translator must decide when translating into English.

There is an instance of something like a sense of being-in-the-world with the story of Nikolaj Kuzmitsch, towards the end of the *Aufzeichnungen*. He first has a run in with *time*, in which he feels what seems like a draft, and then realizes that it is the passage of time itself (Rilke 11, 868). He laments the fact that now that he is aware of the passage of time, he will always feel it:

Nun würde man dasitzen, und es würde immer so weiterziehen, das ganze Leben lang. Er sah alle die Neuralgien voraus, die man sich dabei holen würde, er war außer sich vor Wut (Rilke 11, 869).

We see here that with his now expanded awareness come many symptoms to match it, just like Malte. His next encounter is riddled the same duality. Malte continues:

Er sprang auf, aber die Überraschungen waren noch nicht zu Ende. Auch unter seinen Füßen war etwas wie eine Bewegung, nicht nur eine, mehrere, merkwürdig durcheinanderschwankende Bewegungen. Er erstarrte vor entsetzen: konnte das die Erde sein? Gewiß, das war die Erde. Sie bewegte sich ja doch. In der Schule war davon gesprochen worden, man war etwas eilig darüber weggegangen, und später wurde es gern vertuscht; es galt nicht für passend, davon zu sprechen. Aber nun, da er einmal empfindlich geworden war, bekam er auch das zu fühlen. Ob die anderen es fühlten? Vielleicht, aber sie zeigten es nicht. Wahrscheinlich machte es ihnen nichts aus, diesen Seeleuten (Rilke 11, 869).

I have attempted to argue throughout this study that language, particularly poetic language, is a bulwark of sorts, and one should remember its literal meaning, viz. the extension of a ship above the deck.⁸² This is the element of the “safe reserve” in the

⁸² Rilke contemplates, in a letter to Lou Andreas Salome, whether Malte will perish in order to preserve Rilke, or if Rilke himself will be swept away by the current and dashed to pieces (Rilke, *Letters*, 184).

sublime. The seafarer is then exposed in a limited way to the elements, but also protected by the ship. What Nikolaj says here is that most people are already used to the strange feeling of being-in-the-world, a world that is constantly in motion. It does not bother them. But, as Kierkegaard would surely say, they are already in a state of anxiety, they are just not aware of it.

One cannot help but think of Freud's statements about an "oceanic feeling" in *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*, which is (under pressure from a friend that forces him to address the issue) how he chooses to describe the source of religiosity:

Dies sei ein besonderes Gefühl, das ich selbst nie zu verlassen pflege, das er von vielen anderen bestätigt gefunden und bei Millionen Menschen voraussetzen dürfe. Ein Gefühl, das er die Empfindung der „Ewigkeit“ nennen möchte, ein Gefühl wie von etwas Unbegrenztem, Schrankenlosem, gleichsam „Ozeanischem“. Dies Gefühl sei eine rein subjektive Tatsache, kein Glaubenssatz; keine Zusicherung persönlicher Fortdauer knüpfe sich daran, aber es sei die Quelle der religiösen Energie, die von den verschiedenen Kirchen und Religionssystemen gefasst, in bestimmte Kanäle geleitet und gewiß und auch aufgezehrt werde. Nur auf Grund dieses ozeanischen Gefühls dürfe man sich religiös heißen, auch wenn man jeden Glauben und jede Illusion ablehne (Freud, *Das Unbehagen*, 6).

Freud goes on to explain that he himself cannot find this feeling within himself and that it is not comfortable to elaborate scientifically on feelings, but that one can describe their physiological manifestations. What is also pertinent to Nikolaj is what Freud writes in the next lines, which is a loose citation from the poet Christian Dietrich Grabbe: "Aus dieser

Welt können wir nicht fallen” (Freud, *Das Unbehagen*, 7). This line could be a reassurance to one who finds her or himself in a state of anxiety – not just in touch with eternity but overwhelmed by it – like Nikolaj, and like Malte.

In the statement from Freud, that he has no access to the oceanic feeling, we have an instance in which faith, despite what Freud says here about it not being a matter of faith, is a precondition for the manifestation of a phenomenon. St. Anselm wrote,

I seek not, O Lord, to search out Thy depth, but I desire in some measure to understand Thy truth, which my heart believeth and loveth. Nor do I seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe that I may understand. For this too I believe, that unless I first believe, I will not understand (Anselm 3).

While Anselm is arguing for the existence of God here, I would like to argue that other phenomena require that one first believe in order for them to manifest. Certain states of mind, like the oceanic feeling that Freud describes above, are one example. Freud has no access to these states of mind⁸³ because he faces them with scientific skepticism, which immediately collapses them – it stops these states of mind before they can start. But more important is what one might call *faith in the Other* – and this is no more complex than acknowledging that there is no proof that will get us out of solipsism and simply believing in the Other. One cannot come into relation to the Other through doubt. This relation is dissolved by doubt. I alluded already to *The Body in Pain*, in which Elaine Scarry locates the origin of the capacity to torture in this very doubt.⁸⁴

⁸³ Freud may also be merely acting modest. It is clear that he has sympathy for his friend, as well as a certain insight into this feeling, otherwise he would not be acknowledging it or taking it so seriously. Nor would he be able to write about it at all.

⁸⁴ See the section entitled “etwas schwarzes” in Chapter III.

To return to our discussion of anxiety, which is not unlinked to the question of the Other, what Heidegger and Kierkegaard would like to say, broadly speaking, is that within anxiety, we have a model for the whole of our experience. The totality of our actions can be understood through the motion or tension of anxiety, because it is a kind of flight from Being. It is the self relating to the self. Trying to describe it directly produces flight, but we can still describe this tension, or *Spannung*, a tension that is also at work everywhere in Rilke's prose and poetry. In Kierkegaard's work,⁸⁵ which is less secularized than Heidegger's, he might say that we cannot describe the moment of *grace*, but we can describe our *fall* away from it.⁸⁶

Not coincidentally, Heidegger describes a falling, "Das Verfallen des Daseins" (Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 185), a flight from the self and from Being. Rilke himself describes *Malte* as a kind of negative in a letter to Lotte Hepner from November 8th, 1915:

Ich habe schon einmal, vor Jahren, über den Malte jemandem, den dieses Buch erschreckt hatte, zu schreiben versucht, daß ich es selbst manchmal wie eine hohle Form, wie ein Negativ empfände, dessen alle Mulden und Vertiefungen Schmerz sind, Trostlosigkeiten und wehste Einsicht, der Ausguß davon aber, wenn es möglich wäre einen herzustellen (wie bei einer Bronze die positive Figur, die man

⁸⁵ Rilke learned Danish in order to read Jacobsen and Kierkegaard, as he writes in a letter to Lou Andreas Salome (Rilke, *Letters*, 49). The water metaphors continue throughout the letter. He also says in a letter to Arthur Hospelt (Rilke, *Letters*, 208) that the reader cannot simply go along with the book, but has to read it against the current. This would be similar to one reading *Johannes Climacus* and following the steps – it is the description of an erred path, not a formula to follow. They are antiheroes.

⁸⁶ In a letter to Clara Rilke, Rilke writes of an artist rejecting some part of existence and this throwing him out of a state of grace and into sin. Perhaps Malte's core mistake is that he tries to edit his experience, like, for instance, when he tries to look away from the woman with her hands in her face.

daraus gewönne) wäre vielleicht Glück, Zustimmung; – genaueste und sicherste Seligkeit (Rilke, *Briefe 1914-1921*, 86-87).

If we cannot directly relate to the self, we can look at the nature of this non-relation. In this letter, Rilke seems to be saying that there is no true direct description of the state of mind that he wants to relate through *Malte*, but that the way to express it is negatively. It is a *via negativa* in the true sense, because these *Aufzeichnungen* are ultimately a religious journey for Malte – not, it seems, in a Christian sense, but in the sense of a recovery of spirit and meaning in the form of a transformed relationship to the world.

By Kierkegaard's model, we have to describe the fall away from grace (which is also the self-relation). *Dasein's* falling away from itself into everyday modes and relating to others as “das Man” would be another way of understanding this:

In dieser zum Mitsein gehörigen Abständigkeit liegt aber: das Dasein steht als alltägliches Miteinandersein in der *Botmäßigkeit* der Anderen. Nicht es selbst *ist*, die Anderen haben ihm das Sein abgenommen. Das Belieben der Anderen verfügt über die alltäglichen Seinsmöglichkeiten des Daseins. Diese Anderen sind dabei nicht *bestimmte* Andere. Im Gegenteil, jeder Andere kann sie vertreten (Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 126).

The fall away from the world and things is also a fall away from the self, and with this fall away from the self one is no longer able to relate to others. People are no longer distinct others, they are “the they.” They speak about everyday things, “die Rede,” and act “inauthentically,” all in a kind of flight from Being, a motion which is akin to anxiety, or is indeed anxiety itself. There is an implicit, “genuine” relation here that Heidegger is using negatively, a relation to Being and to others that is beyond the limits of language,

and for this reason he turns to our everyday relation to the world and to others. Rilke wants to perform a similar operation, in order to yield the negative or the cast of all the misery and illness in *Malte*, in order to reach “genaueste und sicherste Seligkeit,” as he writes in his letter above. Rilke describes Malte’s illness in an attempt to relate negatively to its opposite. He makes Malte face his terror in a deliberate attempt to not reject any particular aspect of existence, but to look at it as a whole.

Kierkegaard’s language helps us understand Malte’s illness because it is very much a bodily condition,⁸⁷ which is how the former describes anxiety, and the latter experiences as “Das Große,” which returns to haunt him in his adulthood:

Es war später einfach ausgeblieben, auch in Fiebernächten war es nicht wiedergekommen, aber jetzt war es da, obwohl ich kein Fieber hatte. Jetzt wuchs es aus mir heraus wie eine Geschwulst, wie ein zweiter Kopf, und war ein Teil von mir, obwohl es doch gar nicht zu mir gehören konnte, weil es so groß war. Es war da, wie ein großes totes Tier, das einmal, als es noch lebte, meine Hand gewesen war oder mein Arm. Und mein Blut ging durch mich und durch es, wie durch einen und denselben Körper. Und mein Herz mußte sich sehr anstrengen, um das Blut in das Große zu treiben: es war fast nicht genug Blut da. Und das Blut trat ungern ein in das Große und kam krank und schlecht zurück (Rilke 11, 764-65).

There are several parallels here with the scene in which God’s hand returns from earth, having lived a single human lifetime, which was supposed to be easy, but proved to be very much the opposite:

⁸⁷ This bodily understanding makes a lot of sense on a number of levels, especially if we think of sin and habit as being related. Anxiety, untransformed, is like a body that is not in control of itself because it acts without awareness, from habit alone, or from habit that has not yet be consciously transformed.

...sie kam blaß und bebend und legte sich an ihren Platz, wie ein krankes Tier.
Aber auch die Linke, die doch schon manches wußte, da sie die rechte Hand
Gottes damals unten der Erde erkannt hatte, als diese in einem roten Mantel den
Berg erstieg, konnte von ihr nicht erfahren, was sich weiter auf diesem Berge
begeben hat. Es muß etwas sehr Schreckliches gewesen sein (Rilke 7, 301-302).

The question here is how to heal this ailing hand, and how to transform “das Große” into something that benefits instead of something that sucks the lifeblood from Malte. The question, again, is how to get out of the seventh day and do real, creative labor. It requires, perhaps, a *pharmakon*, i.e. a cure that is composed of the correct amount of poison, or homeopathically with trace amounts of a *contagion*.

There is an episode of the *Aufzeichnungen* in which Malte’s hand is also somewhat dismembered, but as we shall see, it is difficult to say, in more ways than one, what exactly happens. It is a memory of his childhood and, quite in line with the present line of inquiry, he is drawing, which, in other places in the book, seems to be the key. Young girls who draw seem closest to God. Paradoxically, however, their drawing also acts like something that keeps them away from God, just like the images that both separate and link the monks of the *Stunden-Buch* to God.⁸⁸ This is the same paradox that takes place in the young girl’s drawings:

Und über der angestrengten Beschäftigung mimit dem, was sie sich vorgenommen
haben, diese jungen Mädchen, kommen sie nicht mehr dazu aufzusehen. Sie
merken nicht, wie sie bei allem Zeichnen doch nichts tun, als das unabänderliche

⁸⁸ 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).

Leben in sich unterdrücken, das in diesen gewebten Bildern strahlend vor ihnen aufgeschlagen ist in seiner unendlichen Unsäglichkeit (Rilke 11, 832).

Malte writes that families are incapable of reaching God any more and it is better to remove oneself from the drama of the family anyway, in a time in which there is so little to go around that family members turn against one another (Rilke 11, 832). He writes shortly after, as he and his mother look at an exquisite piece of lace, that the woman who made it must surely have gone to heaven (Rilke 11, 836), which surely indicates that their creative labor is charged with the spirit that is the aim of Rilke's work.

The image of Malte as a little boy drawing is then perhaps an instance of a Garden of Eden, the state of still being in touch with true creative labor, in the darkness of childhood. He has to change crayons often and one *falls*, as if taking on a life of its own, forcing the young Malte to go in search of it:

Ich brauchte ihn wirklich dringend, und es war recht ärgerlich, ihm nun nachzuklettern. Ungeschickt, wie ich war, kostete es mich allerhand Veranstaltungen, hinunterzukommen; meine Beine schienen mir viel zu lang, ich konnte sie nicht unter mir hervorziehen; die zu lange eingehaltene knieende Stellung hatte meine Glieder dumpf gemacht; ich wußte nicht, was zu mir und was zum Sessel gehörte. (Rilke 11, 794)

We see already a certain disconnection from his body, with his limbs being numbed and feeling too long. Numbed legs is gesture toward dismemberment again. There is also a confusion between self and world, in that the young Malte can no longer tell what is part of him and what is the armchair. It is also not insignificant that he had been in a kneeling position, perhaps unwittingly discovering a position of prayer.

Malte continues to describe his experience, which is worth citing at length:

Endlich kam ich doch, etwas konfus, unten an und befand mich auf einem Fell, das sich unter dem Tische bis gegen die Wand hinzog. Aber da ergab sich eine neue Schwierigkeit. Eingestellt auf die Helligkeit da oben und noch ganz begeistert für die Farben auf dem weißen Papier, vermochten meine Augen nicht das geringste unter dem Tische zu erkennen, wo mir das Schwarze so zugeschlossen schien, daß ich bange war, daran zu stoßen. Ich verließ mich also auf mein Gefühl und kämmte, knieend und auf die linke gestützt, mit der andern Hand in dem kühlen, langhaarigen Teppich herum, der sich recht vertraulich anfühlte; nur daß kein Bleistift zu spüren war. (Rilke 11, 794)

It is noteworthy here that the young Malte is forced to parse his senses. He is first numbed by his kneeling position, in the last cited passage, and now, with his sense of sight limited, he is forced back on his sense of touch. But, through the exposure to darkness, his sight is now expanded:

Ich bildete mir ein, eine Menge Zeit zu verlieren, und wollte eben schon Mademoiselle anrufen und sie bitten, mir die Lampe zu halten, als ich merkte, daß für meine unwillkürlich angestregten Augen das Dunkel nach und nach durchsichtiger wurde. Ich konnte schon hinten die Wand unterscheiden, die mit einer hellen Leiste abschloß; ich orientierte mich über die Beine des Tisches; ich erkannte vor allem meine eigene, ausgespreizte Hand, die sich ganz allein, ein bißchen wie ein Wassertier, da unten bewegte und den Grund untersuchte. Ich sah ihr, weiß ich noch, fast neugierig zu; es kam mir vor, als könnte sie Dinge, die ich

sie nicht gelehrt hatte, wie sie da unten so eigenmächtig herumtastete mit Bewegungen, die ich nie an ihr beobachtet hatte (Rilke 11, 795).

Just like God, who sought to see the form of the human being and could not, the young Malte looks for his hand here. His hand now seems separate from him, and we hear an echo from the condition in which God's hand returned to its place in the *Geschichten*, "wie ein krankes Tier" (Rilke 7, 301) in that his hand is "wie ein Wassertier."

The hand is doing things that Malte himself did not teach it, just as God's hands will set the human being free in the world before we are ready. It is clear, if one reads *Malte* in context with the *Geschichten*, that a disaster is coming.

Ich verfolgte sie, wie sie vordrang, es interessierte mich, ich war auf allerhand vorbereitet. Aber wie hätte ich darauf gefaßt sein sollen, daß ihr mit einem Male aus der Wand eine andere Hand entgegenkam, eine größere, ungewöhnlich magere Hand, wie ich noch nie eine gesehen hatte. Sie suchte in ähnlicher Weise von der anderen Seite her, und die beiden gespreizten Hände bewegten sich blind aufeinander zu. Meine Neugierde war noch nicht aufgebraucht, aber plötzlich war sie zu Ende, und es war nur Grauen da. Ich fühlte, daß die eine von den Händen mir gehörte und daß sie sich da in etwas einließ, was nicht wieder gutzumachen war (Rilke 11, 795).

It is difficult to say what this other hand is. It could be that his hand encounters some echo of the hand of God. Whatever the case may be, we have another instance of the fall and a similar moment to when God sees "something black" falling to the earth.⁸⁹ It is a moment in which we realize that something has gone horribly wrong. Anxiety says, "If only I had done something different in that moment," and this is that moment for Malte.

⁸⁹ See, again, "etwas schwarzes" in Chapter III.

He enters in on something that can never be put right again and he is aware of this in his *Grauen*, which we might translate as dread, or perhaps *anxiety*. He cannot put his experience into words, and even if he could, he is afraid of what these words would do if he were capable of expressing them (Rilke 11, 796).

Let us return to the discussion of anxiety. In Kierkegaard's schema, it would be a question of how to transform anxiety and habits (a product of sin; the fall) – in the present context, training the hand – in such a way that they are charged with spirit. It is important that for Kierkegaard,⁹⁰ anxiety is not something of which we must rid ourselves, “*mit Pulver und mit Pillen* [...] and then with enemas” (Kierkegaard, *Anxiety*, 121), but something that must be transformed, so that it “plays another role” (53). We find, as we ultimately will with Malte, that anxiety is the relation to spirit: “Whoever has learned to be anxious in the right way has learned the ultimate” (155). Anxiety, it seems, is a kind of raw energy that needs to be directed, almost like electricity that is to be conducted – if the resistance of the conductor is too high, then it melts or burns up. This is Malte: a person who has the good fortune of a kind of otherworldly energy being directed through him, but without the ability to transform it usefully. I am perhaps mixing metaphors, but the continuity should be clear nonetheless: he is not a phonograph that can receive vibrations and translate them into writing that can be translated back into vibrations – he is the product of the age old dispute between God and his hands; spirit cannot find its way through him and out the tip of his pen. It lodges within him and travels around in him, burning him up in the process.

⁹⁰ Kierkegaard writes *The Concept of Anxiety* under the pseudonym of Vigilius Haufniensis. While there are important differences between this character and Kierkegaard himself, I will simply refer to Kierkegaard in order to avoid confusion.

Malte does indeed speak of a kind of inner resistance⁹¹ of which he is unable to rid himself. He is afraid of change, and perhaps for good reason. The idea that we can simply “let go” and get rid of the ego is a naïve one – it falls into the trap that is so pervasive in the sciences today, and is the complaint that Kierkegaard had about the academy of his time:

He feels that they – or at least the intellectuals among them – have come to think that man is to be viewed as a *knower*, and that his most important capacity is that of attaining knowledge. For the attainment of knowledge, an attitude of objectivity is required; and the cultivation of an attitude of objectivity involves the suppression of personality and the transcendence of individuality. And in the attempt to rise above and leave behind one's individuality and personality, which can be partly if not completely successful, Kierkegaard sees a kind of self-annihilation to which he objects in the strongest possible terms (Schacht 299).

In Malte's case, it is not self-annihilation, but rather a transformation that is needed. We see him struggling with wanting to learn how to see the world in a new way, but also being afraid of what else this change will bring along with it:

Und ich wehre mich noch. Ich wehre mich, obwohl ich weiß, daß mir das Herz schon herabhängt und daß ich doch nicht mehr leben kann, auch wenn meine Quäler jetzt von mir abließen. Ich sage mir: es ist nichts geschehen, und doch habe ich jenen Mann nur begreifen können, weil auch in mir etwas vor sich geht,

⁹¹ This is similar to the resistance of the psychism, of which Levinas speaks and which I cited in the introduction to this chapter. The part of myself that I cannot know, the psychism, is the Other-within-the-same. It resists totalization in the sense that it cannot be reduced to knowledge, but it is also a source of fecundity. This surplus, however, also needs to be expressed. Similarly, electricity will melt a wire if the resistance of that wire is too high, but conduct that electricity if it is not. Creative labor would be something like conducting the electricity of spirit. Converse to this resistance to totality is the resistance to dissolution, which I will explain below in relation to Buddenbrooks.

das anfängt, mich von allem zu entfernen und abzutrennen [...] Wenn meine Furcht nicht so groß wäre, so würde ich mich damit trösten, daß es nicht unmöglich ist, alles anders zu sehen und doch zu leben. Aber ich fürchte mich namenlos vor dieser Veränderung. Ich bin ja noch gar nicht in dieser Welt eingewöhnt gewesen, die mir gut scheint. Was soll ich in einer anderen? (Rilke 11, 755-56)

The ego is a living organism that will protect itself if attacked. This is what is happening within Malte – he is creating a new self or ego that sees the world differently, but the old construction keeps reasserting itself. Seeing the world anew means risk of dissolution, and we see in the turn in the last two sentences of this paragraph the reassertion of the old ego, a kind of grasping at a world that is clearly a horrifying place to Malte, but that he nonetheless calls a good one.

This resistance to transformation is particularly clear in Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks*.⁹² A short look one of its scenes will help us to better understand Malte's dilemma. Thomas Buddenbrooks begins such a transformation, and we see quite clearly this process of "clearing," so to speak, when the illusion of a static world begins to lift because of an experience that shakes him out of his everyday way of seeing the world. Thomas has been thrown into a fit of depression, anxiety, and perhaps for the first time, self-reflection, because of the lack of self-preservation instinct on the part of his son, Hanno. This, combined with mortality issues stemming from a presentiment of early death, forces Thomas to take stock: "Ich muß denken, sagte er beinahe laut. . . Ich muß alles ordnen, ehe es zu spät ist. . ." (Mann, *Buddenbrooks*, 654)

⁹² *Malte* also invited comparison with *Der Tod in Venedig*, if we think of him being a northern individual moving to Paris in the south and experiencing a downfall there, as Rilke writes in a letter to Clara Rilke (Rilke, *Letters*, 95-96).

Almost against his own will, he sits one day for four hours, gripped by an unnamed book,⁹³ which Mann only tells us is the second half of a famous metaphysical system (Mann, *Buddenbrooks*, 654). The book, poorly printed and bound with thin, yellowing paper, has a curious effect on the unsuspecting Thomas:

Eine ungekannte, große und dankbare Zufriedenheit erfüllte ihn. Er empfand die unvergleichliche Genugtuung, zu sehen, wie ein gewaltig überlegenes Gehirn sich des Lebens, dieses so starken, grausamen und höhnischen Lebens, bemächtigt, um es zu bezwingen und zu verurteilen. . . die Genugtuung des Leidenden, der vor der Kälte und Härte des Lebens sein Leiden beständig schamvoll und bösen Gewissens versteckt hielt und plötzlich aus der Hand eines Großen und Weisen die grundsätzliche und feierliche Berechtigung erhält, an der Welt zu leiden - dieser besten aller denkbaren Welten, von der mit spielendem Hohne bewiesen ward, daß sie die schlechteste aller Denkbaren sei. (Mann, *Buddenbrooks*, 654)

The book is apparently a true artwork, created by someone who has managed to escape the seventh day. The work takes Thomas into its grasp for hours in which Thomas has waves of complete puzzlement followed by crystal-clear understanding; a “Wechsel von Licht und Finsternis”⁹⁴ (Mann, *Buddenbrooks*, 654), which holds his breath in rhythm and keeps his posture rock-solid. His nicotine-numbed body comes back to him and he is embodied, his will held in abeyance.

As the *Folgmädchen* comes out to announce that dinner is ready, Thomas looks

⁹³ Mann does not say the name of the book that Thomas is reading, but mentions that the chapter is called “Über den Tod und sein Verhältnis zur Unzerstörbarkeit unseres Wesens an sich,” which is chapter 41 of Schopenhauer’s *Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*.

⁹⁴ We again have the contrast that was so heavily present in the *Geschichten*. Difference is introduced into Thomas’ thinking at this point: without dark there can be no light; without a question, there can be no answer.

around and notices that something has changed; his psyche has been infiltrated by something Other; a freedom that is ultimately unavailable to him with the way in which the world is ordered, with its dominance, fear, anxiety, and guilt:

Er fühlte sein ganzes Wesen auf ungeheuerliche Art geweitet und von einer schweren, dunklen Trunkenheit erfüllt; seinen Sinn umnebelt und vollständig berauscht von irgend etwas unsäglich Neuem, Lockendem und Verheißungsvollem, das an erste, hoffende Liebesehnsucht gemahnte. (Mann, *Buddenbrooks*, 655)

But Thomas' old ego crushes the space that has been cleared. What at first is a liberating break with the established world soon turns into an awareness that that world is "alien and false" and the standards by which that world is ruled – his own standards – are "narrow-minded and barbarous" (Horkheimer 275).⁹⁵ This is a contradiction that he cannot bear.

Thomas' "glowing head" is unable to form a coherent thought, a fact that at first is experienced as a radical freedom, but then becomes alarming to him – "ein seltsamer Druck[. . .] als könnte irgend etwas darin zerspringen. . ." (Mann, *Buddenbrooks*, 655) - as his everyday consciousness begins to reassert itself:

Was war dies? fragte er sich, während er ins Haus ging, die Haupttreppe erstieg und sich im Eßzimmer zu den Seinen setzte. . . Was ist mir geschehen? Was habe ich vernommen? Was ist zu mir gesprochen worden, zu mir, Thomas Buddenbrook, Ratsherr dieser Stadt, Chef der Getreidefirma Johann Buddenbrook. . .? War dies für mich bestimmt? Kann ich es ertragen? Ich weiß

⁹⁵ I am alluding back, again, to the section on "Der fremde Mann," where I also quoted these lines from Horkheimer's "Art and Mass Culture."

nicht, was es war. . . ich weiß nur, daß es zu viel, zu viel ist für mein Bürgerhirn. . .
. . . (Mann, *Buddenbrooks*, 655).

We see his ego, his *Bürgerhirn*,⁹⁶ reasserting itself here like a soldier who has been caught daydreaming by his drill sergeant and is ordered to state his name, rank, company, and mission. Where Malte was afraid, “namenlos” of the change, we see Thomas filling this empty space with names and labels. He degenerates to some kind of primitive ego-identification mode in a scramble to pick up the shattered pieces of a self.

Mann’s masterful description of the shattering and reassertion of the self are helpful in understanding Malte’s cycles, especially in the way in which Malte falters before the change. The shift in Thomas Buddenbrook’s consciousness is perhaps so radical because he has never imagined such a change. The awareness on Malte’s part of a need for change works almost to his disadvantage and his *Bürgerhirn* – or more precisely, perhaps, his *Adelhirn* – asserts itself often before the change can take place:

Noch eine Weile kann ich das alles aufschreiben und sagen. Aber es wird ein Tag kommen, da meine Hand weit von mir sein wird, und wenn ich sie schreiben heißen werde, wird sie Worte schreiben, die ich nicht meine. Die Zeit der anderen Auslegung wird anbrechen, und es wird kein Wort auf dem anderen bleiben, und jeder Sinn wird wie Wolken sich auflösen und wie Wasser niedergehen. Bei aller Furcht bin ich schließlich doch wie einer, der vor etwas Großem steht, und ich erinnere mich, daß es früher oft ähnlich in mir war, eh ich zu schreiben begann.

Aber diesmal werde ich geschrieben werden (Rilke 11, 756).

⁹⁶ Malte’s situation is perhaps somewhat different than Thomas Buddenbrook, in that Malte is aristocracy, struggling to find a place in an emerging bourgeois world and Thomas is bourgeois, facing the dissolution of the family and strikes among the workers at his business. They are both in transition between two worlds and both struggle with giving up their hegemony.

The ambiguity here is telling: it is difficult to say whether Malte wants for this “Zeit der anderen Auslegung” to occur or not; if this is the change that he seeks or the state that he wishes to overcome. There is of course the homonym of “Sinn” that stands out in the present context, which could either mean “sense,” in the sense of the five senses, or could mean “meaning.” If it means “sense,” then we have another instance of the senses becoming cloudy and blurry and then, in the image here, condensing again into water, which would be fluid, i.e. changeable, if we think back to Heraclitus. But what seems even more pertinent to the discussion is the hand, which hearkens back to “Das Märchen von den Händen Gottes” and indicates that Malte has the feeling of being separate from his own hand, which is to say, *Geist* and hand are separated, as if in an argument.

Also present in this passage is the striking feature that Malte is quite aware that he is *writing himself*, or perhaps a new self, *into being*. In the passage that I quoted in the “Ur-geräusch” chapter from John Llewellyn, he commented on language’s surprising ability to surpass itself and speak the flavor of the fruits in the poem into being. Here, we have writing serving a similar function, but what is brought into the world through this writing is not a flavor, but a transformed human being. In the *Stunden-Buch*, Rilke’s poet-monk persona brings about a similar transformation within himself through prayer and his bulwark against the *Feind*, “der Fürst im Land des Lichts” (Rilke 1, 287), is verse. Malte continues, battling against what Kierkegaard calls the Demonic.⁹⁷

Ich bin der Eindruck, der sich verwandeln wird. Oh, es fehlt nur ein kleines, und
ich könnte das alles begreifen und gutheißen. Nur ein Schritt, und mein tiefes
Elend würde Seligkeit sein. Aber ich kann diesen Schritt nicht tun, ich bin

⁹⁷ This is a state in which the individual is “in evil” and for that reason is repelled by the good. See “Anxiety about the Good (The Demonic)” in *The Concept of Anxiety* (Kierkegaard, *Anxiety*, 118).

gefallen und kann mich nicht mehr aufheben, weil ich zerbrochen bin. Ich habe ja immer noch geglaubt, es könnte eine Hülfe kommen. Da liegt es vor mir in meiner eigenen Schrift, was ich gebetet habe, Abend für Abend (Rilke 11, 756). We see here that Malte acknowledges that he is the one to be transformed, and also the connection between this transformation, writing, and prayer. This “Schritt” sounds much like a Kierkegaardian leap, but it is clear in this passage that this is not a step that Malte is ready to take.

It would perhaps be helpful to look at this “leap” a little closer, so my meaning is clear. Richard Schacht, in “Kierkegaard on ‘Truth is Subjectivity’ and ‘The Leap of Faith’” compacts this notion rather well:

...it is [Kierkegaard’s] contention that a human being cannot achieve a relation of unity with God through becoming objective and rational, but rather only through a "leap of faith" which is completely non-rational. For an existing human being, he maintains, it is not Hegelian Logic which “will lead him into all truth”; and it is not through the attainment of Hegelian Absolute Knowledge that an existing human being can achieve “unity with the infinite.” Rather, one can be “in the truth” only when one is in the state of faith. So Kierkegaard regards “the venture which chooses an objective uncertainty with the passion of the infinite” not only as “faith,” but also as “truth” (Schacht 306).⁹⁸

I have already discussed Husserl’s notion of intersubjectivity, viz. that already for an existing ego there is the alter-ego. We cannot say much more, we cannot offer proof, and Husserl brackets the question of whether or not other egos exist, preferring instead to

⁹⁸ Schacht quotes here from *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (182).

look at the *phenomenon*, i.e. what appears to me.⁹⁹ Whether or not what appears exists is a different, perhaps fruitless and ethically spurious, line of inquiry. This is, in other words, a matter of *faith*.¹⁰⁰ We do not need to think of a transcendent God here in order to require this notion – we already need a notion of faith in order to interact with the Other. She or he is not “there,” or “ready-to-hand,” to me but must be *believed*.

Conclusion

The difficulty in Malte’s case is that he withdraws from other people, looking for solitude, which is a completely understandable course of action in a case like his. He has opened up a new sensitivity to the world and now feels the entire world around him is attacking him. This is similar, indeed, to Heidegger’s withdrawal from the world, which Hannah Arendt’s biographer, Alois Prinz, sums up nicely:

...seine wahre Leidenschaft ist seine Philosophie und die Einsamkeit, in der allein er seine Gedanken entwickeln kann [...] Für Heidegger ist die Hütte in Todtnauberg seine „Arbeitswelt“. Wie ein Bauer will er dort oben leben und seine gedankliche Arbeit soll hart, einfach und schwer sein wie die raue Bergwelt. „Wenn in tiefer Winternacht ein wilder Schneesturm mit seinen Stößen um die Hütte rast und alles verhängt“, schreibt Heidegger, „dann ist die hohe Zeit der Philosophie.“ (Prinz 51)

We have here a critical difference not only between Heidegger and Levinas, which is

⁹⁹ Phenomenology is useful for understanding many of Rilke’s figures, particularly his angels. The reader has to trust that Rilke is trying to describe a phenomenon that he is actually experiencing and bracket preconceived images of what “angel” means.

¹⁰⁰ Malte undergoes an entire line self-examination (see Rilke 11, 728) in which it seems as if he is seeking, Cartesian style, a *tabula rasa*. We could also take it as poking fun at this process, as does Kierkegaard in *Johannes Climacus*, showing that not all things are to be known through doubt.

pertinent in the present context, but also between Heidegger and Arendt, as Prinz goes on to explain. While Heidegger, and Malte, seek solitude and a relationship to Being, or in Malte's case, to God, thinkers like Arendt and Levinas insist on our ethical obligation to others around us.

It is precisely this problem that Rilke would like to present to us in the *Aufzeichnungen*. Malte's goal is to bring the world to life again, Things and People alike. His withdrawal into solitude, frightened by his exposure to the Other, prompts the world of Things to come alive, but also to turn against him, as we saw in Kafka. If there is proof that for every ego there is an alter ego, then it would be something like the waking nightmare that Malte experiences:

Wo aber einer ist, der sich zusammennimmt, ein Einsamer etwa, der so recht rund auf sich beruhen wollte Tag und Nacht, da fordert er geradezu den Widerspruch, den Hohn, den Haß der entarteten Geräte heraus, die, in ihrem argen Gewissen, nicht mehr vertragen können, daß etwas sich zusammenhält und nach seinem Sinne strebt. Da verbinden sie sich, um ihn zu stören, zu schrecken, zu beirren, und wissen, daß sie es können. Da fangen sie, einander zuzwinkernd, die Verführung an, die dann ins Unermessene weiter wächst und alle Wesen und Gott selber hinreißt gegen den Einen, der vielleicht übersteht: den Heiligen. (Rilke 11, 878)

The world itself becomes an Other to Malte, and he is as exposed to it as he is to the woman with her face in her hands. It does not seem to be the case that Malte is the saint of which he speaks at the end, but it does seem that he tries to live as a somewhat more secularized version of it. This, perhaps, is the poet. The saint, in any case, through her or

his terrible labor, i.e. the expansion of the senses to such a degree that the world itself comes alive, develops within her or himself an extremely refined substance:

Und der Heilige krümmt sich und zieht sich zusammen; aber in seinen Augen war noch ein Blick, der dies für möglich hielt: er hat hingesehen. Und schon schlagen sich seine Sinne nieder aus der hellen Lösung seiner Seele (Rilke 11, 879).

We begin here to finally get some small indication that something comes out of the labor that Malte is undergoing. Through the haze of gloominess that Malte has faced, we get an indication here (but only a hint) of the “positive,” the bronze figure that emerges from the negative mold, of which Rilke wrote in the letter to Lotte Hepner.

The last part of the *Aufzeichnungen* consists mainly of tales of saints and their tribulations. We have several illustrations of characters who lived their lives as God’s hand, sent down to earth, must have; enduring suffering that borders on the limits of language. We do not have naïve images, like the common image of Jesus, but of people wracked by the difficulty of being-in-the-world. I used one example already, of Nikolaj Kuzmitsch, which is presented, in the fashion of the *Geschichten*, with humor, so as to make the deadly seriousness of the story tolerable. There are countless images of the poor in the book, and I mentioned one, of the woman with her face left in her hands. It seems these are the solitaries, sometimes the saints, that Malte means:

Wenn man von den Einsamen spricht, setzt man immer zuviel voraus. Man meint, die Leute wüßten, um was es sich handelt. Nein, sie wissen es nicht. Sie haben nie einen Einsamen gesehen, sie haben ihn nur gehaßt, ohne ihn zu kennen. Sie sind seine Nachbarn gewesen, die ihn aufbrauchten, und die Stimmen im Nebenzimmer, die ihn versuchten. Sie haben die Dinge aufgereizt gegen ihn, daß

sie lärmten und ihn übertönten. Die Kinder verbanden sich wider ihn, da er zart und ein Kind war, und mit jedem Wachsen wuchs er gegen die Erwachsenen an. Sie spürten ihn auf in seinem Versteck wie ein jagdbares Tier, und seine lange Jugend war ohne Schonzeit. Und wenn er sich nicht erschöpfen ließ und davonkam, so schriegen sie über das, was von ihm ausging, und nannten es häßlich und verdächtigten es. Und hörte er nicht darauf, so wurden sie deutlicher und aßen ihm sein Essen weg und atmeten ihm seine Luft aus und spieen in seine Armut, daß sie ihm widerwärtig würde. Sie brachten Verruf über ihn wie über einen Ansteckenden und warfen ihm Steine nach, damit er sich rascher entfernte. Und sie hatten recht in ihrem alten Instinkt: denn er war wirklich ihr Feind (Rilke 11, 879-880).

There is an expanded meaning of “seeing” that is present here, in that people had never *seen* a solitary person (*Sie haben nie einen Einsamen gesehen*). Learning to see includes coming into relation to the Other. The people cannot see him because they are unable to recognize difference. Victims of a modern world view, they think that only what is rational is real and they censor this anomaly out of their experience.

This paragraph gives us the tragedy of the sort of being that Rilke is trying to describe to us here: these people cannot be recognized by others. They are in fact disliked and shunned by others, even attacked, because they are truly different and unique, but also alien and foreign, i.e. Other, which inspires fear and hatred. Same only recognizes same; this is the necessity of “das Innere” of which Malte speaks at the beginning of the book, which is the psychism, the Other within the same, the refined substance that starts to come about within Malte, allowing him to recognize “jenes gespenstische

Anderswerden, das man nicht merkt, weil man beständig alle Beweise dafür, wie das Fremdeste, aus den Händen läßt” (Rilke 11, 938). Proof of it is let go, pertinently, out of the hands. One lets go of proof of the Other because it cannot be reduced to something that can be held in the hand; that is ready-to-hand.

Malte has several encounters with “folk of unearthly fashion”¹⁰¹ (Benét 795) throughout the book that may be saints, but may in some instances be more like angels. There is the encounter with the specter (Rilke 11, 737) that haunts the young Malte’s family during a meal, and the strange hopping man (Rilke 11, 769) that seems somewhat like a guide. Malte describes how they appear:

Denn sie kommen und gehen nicht wie die übrigen Leute, denen zu folgen eine Kleinigkeit wäre. Sie sind da und wieder fort, hingestellt und weggenommen wie Bleisoldaten. Es sind ein wenig abgelegene Stellen, wo man sie findet, aber durchaus nicht versteckte. Die Büsche treten zurück, der Weg wendet sich ein wenig um den Rasenplatz herum: da stehen sie und haben eine Menge durchsichtigen Raumes um sich, also ob sie unter einem Glassturz stünden (Rilke 11, 780-81).

What Malte describes here is something like a halo or an aura, which, as we will see in the next chapter on Rodin, is a feature that is not limited to human beings, but also surrounds artworks.

These otherworldly folks affect the environment around them with a kind of magnetism, which, as we see in this passage, causes the bushes to “step back.” The path

¹⁰¹ From Ezra Pound’s “The Flame”: There is the subtler music, the clear light / Where time burns back about th’ eternal embers. /We are not shut from all the thousand heavens: /Lo, there are many gods whom we have seen, /Folk of unearthly fashion, places splendid, /Bulwarks of beryl and of chrysoprase (Benét 795)

seems to move, as it did in the passages cited from Kafka, but this time to frame the creature, whatever it may be. People gather around this figure, as well as birds:

Und je mehr Menschen sich um ihn sammeln, in entsprechendem Abstand natürlich, desto weniger hat er mit ihnen gemein. Wie ein Leuchter steht er da, der ausbrennt, und leuchtet mit dem Rest von Docht und ist ganz warm davon und hat sich nie gerührt. Und wie er lockt, wie er anlockt, das können die vielen, kleinen, dummen Vögel gar nicht beurteilen. (Rilke 11, 781)

Birds and humans seem to be of very little difference when compared to this creature. They all gather around him, but do not know why. This figure is also not an angel, as we might expect from Rilke, but something even more:

Wenn die Zuschauer nicht wären und man ließe ihn lange genug dastehn, ich bin sicher, daß auf einmal ein Engel käme und überwände sich und äße den alten, süßlichen Bissen aus der verkümmerten Hand (Rilke 11, 781).

This creature can tempt even an angel with the breadcrumbs in his hand. But, as Malte goes on to explain, the presence of the people nearby prevents the appearance of the angel (perhaps because the people would be destroyed by the angel's stronger *Dasein*, as Rilke tells us in the first elegy (Rilke 2, 685).

It is such a figure, a blind newspaper salesman¹⁰² that ultimately gives Malte the “proof” that he has been looking for. He becomes obsessed with this character, although he had been invisible to him until this point, which is a product of “same only recognizing same,” which I explained above. It is here that we have a clear instance of the Other breaking into sameness. The man seems to be able to disguise himself in his

¹⁰² The salesman is blind, i.e. he cannot see, but has nonetheless learned to see in the way that Malte describes throughout the *Aufzeichnungen*.

environment, as a thing among things, which we might call a goal of Rilke's:

Er macht sich so flach, daß täglich viele vorübergehen, die ihn nie gesehen haben.
Zwar hat er noch einen Rest von Stimme in sich und mahnt; aber das ist nicht
anders als ein Geräusch in einer Lampe oder im Ofen oder wenn es in
eigentümlichen Abständen in einer Grotte tropft. Und die Welt ist so eingerichtet,
daß es Menschen giebt, die ihr ganzes Leben lang in der Pause vorbeikommen,
wenn er, lautloser als alles was sich bewegt, weiter rückt wie ein Zeiger, wie eines
Zeigers Schatten, wie die Zeit. (Rilke 11, 899-900)

Malte makes up the details of the man's life, which causes him great strain, because he knows nothing about him. It helps him, notably, to think of the ivory Christ figures that are in every antique shop (Rilke 11, 900). There is nothing about the man that is unimportant – every article of clothing and the way it is in relation to the others and the way it hangs from his body all indicate some kind of order.

Malte finally has to give up with this image-making of the man and thinks of the environment around him, and realizes it must have been a Sunday. It is this realization that sparks the moment for Malte:

Ich war stehengeblieben, und während ich das alles fast gleichzeitig sah, fühlte ich, daß er einen anderen Hut hatte und eine ohne Zweifel sonntägliche Halsbinde; sie war schräg in gelben und violetten Vierecket gemustert, und was den Hut angeht, so war es ein billiger neuer Strohhut mit einem grünen Band. Es liegt natürlich nichts an diesen Farben, und es ist kleinlich, daß ich sie behalten habe. Ich will nur sagen, daß sie an ihm waren wie das Weicheste auf eines Vogels Unterseite. Er selbst hatte keine Lust daran, und wer von allen (ich sah

mich um) durfte meinen, dieser Staat wäre um seinetwillen? (Rilke 11, 902-03). Malte says that it is not the colors themselves that are important, but the way in which everything, at that moment came together for him in the figure of the old man. It is a kind of aesthetic feeling that ultimately proves God's existence to Malte:

Mein Gott, fiel es mir mit Ungestüm ein, so *bist* du also. Es giebt Beweise für deine Existenz. Ich habe sie alle vergessen und habe keinen je verlangt, denn welche ungeheuere Verpflichtung läge in deiner Gewißheit. Und doch, nun wird mir gezeigt. Dieses ist dein Geschmack, hier hast du Wohlgefallen. Daß wir doch lernten, vor allem aushalten und nicht urteilen. Welche sind die schweren Dinge? Welche die gnädigen? Du allein weißt es.

Wenn es wieder Winter wird und ich muß einen neuen Mantel haben, – gieb mir, daß ich ihn *so* trage, solange er neu ist (Rilke 11, 903).

These lines are somewhat mysterious, but it is significant that God is found in an overcoat, because an overcoat is something that shields one from the elements, like a roof or a bulwark, indicating again the idea of the safe reserve in the sublime. Learning to see, Rilke wants to say, may or may not have to do with the faculty of sight. The blind man “sees” the contrasts and arranges them, whether or not his eyes physically function. Malte finds proof here, and it is not through rational argument, but through an irrational moment and in the contrast one color against another, chosen by a blind man.

There is no real conclusion to the *Aufzeichnungen*, and, as I mentioned, the entries conclude with the stories of individuals who live fully through the suffering of human life. *Malte* is ultimately the story of a man who tries to find his way in a new world order in a genuine way and runs up against the most severe backlash that one can experience,

which I have described here as the resistance of the *Adelhirn*, the old ego of the aristocracy protecting itself. But I have also argued that this self-preservation is a matter of course and that there is a need to maintain coherence; that it is impossible to simply give up the ego like a renunciate, and that Malte's story is one of trying to navigate the process of building a new ego in a transformed way. This change is a transformation of anxiety and a new relation to the Other, but it is not clear that Malte achieves this, except in the small glimpses he attains, like with the overcoat of the blind man.

CHAPTER VI

AUGUSTE RODIN AND THE CULMINATION OF CREATIVE LABOR

Introduction

For the final chapter of this work I have chosen Rilke's *Auguste Rodin* monograph, which Rilke published in 1902 and 1907. There are two parts in the monograph, which are quite different by nature. The two parts of the monograph will correspond to the two parts of this chapter. They will also correspond to the first and last of three phases of their relationship that H.F. Peters delineates (Peters, "Rilke in his Letters," 6). In 1902, when the first part of the manuscript was written, Rilke still worshipped Rodin as something of a religious figure. In the second stage they become closer personally, and in the third they finally became friends (ibid). The image that Rilke presents in both parts, despite changes in their relationship, is something like hero worship; as if Rodin had achieved perfection in every aspect. The artworks are likewise described as if they are ideal, intentional at every point – flawless in every way conceivable.

From their letter exchanges, one gets the impression that there is somewhat of a master/slave relation that is present between the two men. H.F Peters emphasizes this aspect in "Rilke in his Letters to Rodin," and explains that the death of poet Hans Peter Jacobsen was one of the chief causes for Rilke to seek out a new master (Peters, "Rilke in his Letters," 5). Rilke had wanted to throw himself at Jacobsen's feet, but found out that he was dead (ibid). But it is not only submission to a master that drives Rilke's relationship to Rodin. Rilke himself is a master who will not simply submit to another

master.¹⁰³ At times Rilke's requests in his letters are so carefully worded that they almost take on the character of demands. From the other side Rodin, it seems, wanted Rilke to be on equal footing with him, and Peters describes the time in which they were closest as the time in which Rilke was hardest at work on *Malte* and the *Neue Gedichte* (Peters, "Rilke in his Letters," 10). Rilke reacts strongly to the common assertion that he was Rodin's secretary and insists that he was much more his pupil (Peters, "Correction," 10).

No matter what the exact nature of their relationship was, one thing is clear: Rodin is the culmination of the artist for Rilke, even if his image of Rodin is exaggerated. And we oftentimes learn as much from an exaggeration or ideal as we do from more "objective" sources. We might get a closer idea, for example, of what drove the Romans through reading the *Aeneid*,¹⁰⁴ than through the most detailed reconstructions of their past. In this monograph we find everything that Rilke was looking for in the phonograph, in that Rodin is something of a machine that translates movements like a natural force. He has reconnected the hand to the spirit, healing the ancient rift that we saw in the creation story of the *Geschichten* and continued in *Malte*. The horror that Malte feels upon seeing his own hand out of his control, and the strange hand moving independently, is superseded in the figure of Rodin. The anxiety that Malte felt, the shakiness and illness

¹⁰³ In "Ein Verein, aus einem dringenden Bedürfnis heraus," one of the *Geschichten vom lieben Gott*, there are three artists who are at first friends, but slowly are incapable of occupying the same space, even if that means being under one sky (Rilke 7, 376-377). One has to wonder if this fact, two masters occupying the same space, was the source of some of the tension in their relationship.

¹⁰⁴ I mention the *Aeneid* because it is a depiction of the ideal for the Romans and because it emphasized Apollonian virtues. If we want to call Rilke's inspired writing style, which came in sporadic bursts, "Dionysian," then he is looking to counterbalance himself in his exposure to Rodin, and to become more Apollonian. By this I mean controlling the passions, including Eros.

with which he struggled, is overcome in the steadiness of Rodin, the hero who is immovably centered.¹⁰⁵

Letting the Thing Guide the Hand

This image that Rilke has of Rodin, paired with the quote from Emerson, gives us the impression of a man with *gravitas*.¹⁰⁶ He is heavy, stable, and steady in an environment of change, chaos and hardship. He is centered, which implies a certain unity that supersedes Malte's fragmented and shattered and dismembered state. He has a presence like that of gravity itself, and he is often compared with a natural force throughout the monograph. If we think back to the phonograph and my assertion that Rilke wanted to *be like* that machine, we get a clear example of that achievement from Rodin because his work is incessant, compared with Rilke's sporadic activity.¹⁰⁷ If Rilke wanted to be like the phonograph, reconnecting his ear to his hands and being able to translate the vibrations, Rodin is the one that Malte wanted to be: He has learned how to see and how to express that vision through creative labor.

Frances Mary Scholz analyzes this phenomenon by comparing *Malte* with *Rodin*. I have already described the scene in which Malte loses control over his hand looking for a crayon; Scholz takes a later scene, with Malte looking in a mirror:

In the famous costume scene Malte must look through a mask into a mirror to *see* how his hands are moving—but has no real interior knowledge; not to mention

¹⁰⁵ Rilke begins the monograph with a quote, in English, from Ralph Waldo Emerson: "The hero is he who is immovably centered" (Rilke 9, 141).

¹⁰⁶ *Gravitas*, as well as *pietas*, were two of the most prized Roman virtues.

¹⁰⁷ Or at least Rilke's perception that he was working sporadically—the enormous body of work that we produced, especially in his correspondences, would suggest that he was busier and steadier than he lets on.

control, of their actions. As is well known, this “alienation” can in a more positive context be a relaxation of conscious control and a yielding to a more spontaneous, instinctive and creative movement, as in the obvious case of the artist’s hands (Scholz 66).

Scholz is far too modest in her assessment that these discoveries are “obvious.” The mystery that the entirety of this study investigates is precisely this obviousness. Moreover it is the task of phenomenology and of philosophy in general to make that which is “obvious” articulate, as Scholz does here. Her suggestion that we can, in a way, “play” with our alienation offers us a way to acknowledge our condition, which is one in which the spirit is separated from the hand, and transform it.

The implication of starting with Marx, as I have done, and stating that the human being has no fixed essence and that the senses are variable, is that alienation is a situation in which we are confined to one single essence by being reified, i.e. turned into things, mere tools of production. Our senses are imprisoned, like the panther’s. But what Rilke wants to give us is a way to *respond* to these conditions. We are historically situated and we cannot change that; we have to work from the given conditions, but we also have to transform them, as we are commanded in “Archaischer Torso Apollos.” This change is possible through doing creative labor (i.e. non-alienated, or at least a transformation of alienation), which mediates the change in the senses and keeps them unfolding. Creative labor mediates, which is to say, gives language or image to the change that is taking place. But this mediation is also a type of closing: giving language to something, painting, or sculpting something into stone solidifies it. This closing, the absence of which we saw with Malte, is necessary in order that one not be over-exposed in anxiety,

or in other words, left too open. Poetry, as I have argued, gives us a permeable membrane: the world is both opened up through it, and closed enough to temper anxiety. Rodin's way of creating was poetic, as I will explain in this chapter. He was able to create this living contradiction that solves our problem.

Again, we have to respond somehow to being alienated and reified. For this is our condition: it is how our historical ego is constituted. As I have also argued already, the ego is necessary and cannot be attacked directly, just as anxiety, to think back to Kierkegaard again, cannot be cured with pills and powders. If we are already alienated, dismembered from our limbs, and turned into things, the task is not to destroy that situation but transform it, as Kierkegaard wants to transform anxiety, not eliminate it. If the phonograph is fascinating, even in a perhaps sinister way, the key is to find the same passivity that it has, as Scholz suggests. We become a thing among things, tapping into their dark, still intelligence. This is what Rilke saw in Rodin. Scholz quotes Rilke in a letter to his wife, Clara:

After having watched Rodin's instinctively agile, almost independent and free hands modeling clay, Rilke imagined his own writer's hands behaving in a similar way: "Es ist, wie wenn man zeichnet, den Blick an das Ding gebunden, verwoben mit der Natur, und die Hand geht allein irgendwo unten ihren Weg . . . mir ist, als hätte ich immer so geschaffen, das Gesicht im Anschauen ferner Dinge, die Hände allein (Scholz 66).

Rodin has mastered what Rilke saw in that phonograph at such a young age, and only understood later. Just as the horn "hears" sounds and directly transfers these vibrations into the wax without a thought to mediate, Rilke has Rodin's gaze bound to the Thing

and the hand working independently. To be interwoven with nature, like Rodin himself, bound to the thing, and making its movement into the movement of one's own hand is to scoff at alienation; to reconnect the spirit to the hand and play with the fact that the hand itself has become a thing. It is to create in a world in which creation itself is under attack, healing an ancient wound and, I would like to suggest, taking back our eyes and ears from oppressive forces.

The Hands

It is no surprise, then, that the hands play a significant role in the Rodin monograph. Rilke begins by considering the smallness of human hands and how little time we have to do anything with them, which is what makes a pair of hands like Rodin's so great (Rilke 9, 141). He was able to do creative labor despite all the restrictions that were present. Rodin was able to take his dream and put it into his hands (Rilke 9, 147), realizing this dream instead of letting it lie dormant in his psyche. Or more accurately perhaps, instead of letting the weight and suffering of human life defeat their creative force, like the hand of God that returned to his side in the *Geschichten*, "like a sick animal."

Es giebt im Werke Rodins Hände, selbstständige, kleine Hände, die, ohne zu irgendeinem Körper zu gehören, lebendig sind. Hände, die sich aufrichten, gereizt und böse, Hände, deren fünf gesträubte Finger zu bellen scheinen wie die fünf Häse eines Höllenhundes. Hände, die gehen, schlafende Hände, und Hände, welche erwachen; verbrecherische, erblich belastete Hände und solche, die müde sind, die nichts mehr wollen, die sich niedergelegt haben in irgend einen Winkel,

wie kranke Tiere, welche wissen, daß ihnen niemand helfen kann. Aber Hände sind schon ein komplizierter Organismus, ein Delta, in dem viel fernherkommendes Leben zusammenfließt, um sich in den großen Strom der Tat zu ergießen (Rilke 9, 164).

We hear an echo, of course, back to the “Fremde Mann” story in the *Geschichten* here. The “Aber” signifies a turn, a *volta*, in the last sentence and indicates the complexity of being able to direct the energy and life that can flow through one’s hands, which is what makes Rodin such an exception and a hero. Rilke goes on to explain that hands have their own history and culture and that we give them the right to have their own development (ibid). Directing the immense energy that can flow through the hands, it seems, has something to do with allowing them their own agency. In this passage, it seems also to mean that the hands are passive to a “fernherkommendes Leben,” a Life that comes from afar, an idea that I consider in some detail below.¹⁰⁸

The hands can also play here a role similar to storytelling in the *Geschichten*. We saw there that the borders between human beings, between the ego and the Other, were brought down through stories. The stories also took on a life of their own, just as the hands are allowed to do here, and became independent. By understanding that a story never stays the same when it passes from one person to the next, he was able to give his stories life that would not have been possible had they been told by a single individual. The story is only “complete” in this way, viz. when it has been embellished and passed

¹⁰⁸ Apollo is “Zeus’ son who strikes from afar” (Homer 75). The Apollonian tendency of the text seems quite clear and I have already alluded to *Aeneid*, in which Virgil emphasizes the Roman ideal, which held Eros to be a distraction from one’s duties (we might think of Aeneas, in love, building the city of Carthage with Dido and being warned by Mercury [Hermes] that he is not doing what fate dictates, which is to found Rome. See *Aeneid*, Book IV, 346ff.)

on to another person and turned into a new thing. The hands of Rodin's sculptures have a similar quality:

Wie der menschliche Körper für Rodin nur so lange ein Ganzes ist, als eine gemeinsame (innere oder äußere) Aktion alle seine Glieder und Kräfte im Aufgebot hält, so ordnen sich ihm andererseits auch Teile verschiedener Leiber, die aus innerer Notwendigkeit aneinander haften, zu einem Organismus ein. Eine Hand, die sich auf eines anderen Schulter oder Schenkel legt, gehört nicht mehr ganz zu dem Körper, von dem sie kam: aus ihr und dem Gegenstand, den sie berührt oder packt, entsteht ein neues Ding, ein Ding mehr, das keinen Namen hat und niemandem gehört; und um dieses Ding, das seine bestimmten Grenzen hat, handelt es sich nun (Rilke 9, 164-5).

There is an ambiguity here in that it is first a shoulder or thigh on which the hand is laid, i.e. another person, but then Rilke speaks more generally about an object. In any case, what the hand touches, whether it is a human being or a thing, becomes something new, different, and unified with the hand itself. Rilke is also playing with alienation here again, with the hand and the things it touches all being reduced to things.

*Rodin and the Paradox of "Life"*¹⁰⁹

There are many paradoxes at work with Rodin: the divine stillness in his presence, coming from a person who works incessantly; works that show extreme intent, control

¹⁰⁹ Derrida discusses "life" in both "To Speculate – on Freud" in *The Postcard and Of Spirit*. In the latter, he speaks of "life" vs. "spirit" in Heidegger. In "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," (this essay appears in *Illuminations*) Walter Benjamin writes about the conditions necessary for receptivity to lyric poetry, and philosophy since the end of the 19th century, which quite often tries to grasp "true experience" instead of the standardized, sterilized experience that we experience through mass culture. This philosophy is generally characterized as "vitalism," and looks to tap into some sort of spark or "energy." The similarities with Rilke's concept of "life" are noteworthy.

and no mistakes, but are a product of giving way to a passivity in which the hands work of their own accord – a passivity that is the greatest activity; a man who expresses a great multiplicity of characters, each with its own personality (which suggests an artist with a fragmented personality) but a presence that can only have the weight that it does by being a coordinated unity. To take an example, the hands that I mentioned in the citation above are sculpted hands, they are not human hands. The paradox here is: how is it that this life and movement can be brought into a non-living thing? This question has far-reaching significance in thinking about Rilke, because it is his goal to bring this life to the world as such and to live in a world of Things endowed with this meaning. Another way of formulating this question is: What is this Life of which Rilke speaks that flows into the hands, this “fernherkommendes Leben”? This should also answer the question of what kind of “vibration” it is that Rilke is looking to pick up with his phonograph-horn ear and translate through his stylus-pen.

The paradox of this “Life” with which Rodin was able to animate Things begins in his work and practice. Rodin, according to Rilke, felt that the world of his time, particularly in architecture, had lost the magnetism which bound art pieces together and that art pieces now stood alone and separate from one another (Rilke 9, 143). But they needed to be made different from ordinary things, which is to say *sacred* or *sacrosanct*,¹¹⁰ and this, for Rilke at least, means timeless, i.e. in accordance with a kind of universal law (Rilke 9, 143-44). From a knowledge of his own body,¹¹¹ an inward knowledge, he was

¹¹⁰ Sacred, as I indicated in the section called “The Art of Darkness” in Chapter IV, is removing something from its everyday context through certain rituals. In this case, I want to suggest that working on something, mediating it poetically, does the same.

¹¹¹ Rilke writes of a knowledge of the human body, but calls it an inward knowledge, which I take to mean an objective knowledge, but one that Rodin has taken care to connect to a subjective knowledge. Rodin, I presume, never studied models in such a way that he was not also simultaneously studying himself.

able to measure *an outward surface* with his hands, and this surface became the object of his study. The play of light, encounters of light with itself on innumerable surfaces animates the works:

An dieser Stelle schienen sie einander aufzunehmen, an jener sich zögernd zu begrüßen, an einer dritten fremd an einander vorbeizugehen; und es gab Stellen ohne Ende und keine, auf der nicht etwas geschah. Es gab keine Leere (Rilke 9, 149).

The last sentence indicates a plenum of sorts. But it does not seem to be a totality, because of the emphasis that Rilke always places on contrast, as I discussed at length in the chapters on the *Geschichten*. The act of animating a thing, it seems, has much to do with arranging its surfaces so that light is able to interact between them. We see again the paradox of activity and passivity, but here it is more clear what is the former and what is the latter. The activity is in the labor, the physical act of chipping away at the stone. The passivity is that this act of labor is merely clearing the way or creating an accommodating space for light to come to life.

This illustrates an important aspect of Rodin's art and artistic self, his refined understanding of his limitations. There is something that is up to him and something that is not,¹¹² because Rodin is sculpting the piece in a particular way, but then leaving the rest up to the light itself. This idea relates back to the *Geschichten*: the narrator can only give the facts of the story and it propagates itself of its own accord, without much say on

¹¹² There is something Stoic about all of this, particularly the aspect that there is something that is up to us and something that is not. The Stoics, though Greek in origin, were taken up by the Romans: Seneca, Marcus Aurelius (Epictetus 1).

his part as to what shape it will take. This is also the play¹¹³ of signs that Derrida illustrates throughout *Dissemination* and in other works. One can use a word in a specific way, but it inevitably takes on different meanings depending upon the listener and other contextual forces, which is how we might translate this light phenomenon in the plastic arts to narrative and poetry.¹¹⁴ If one has to carve a sculpture that allows for the interaction and play of light, then one has to tell stories that will grow and evolve as they disseminate through the community, and write poetry that lends itself to the play signs in one's mind (or that produces the flavor of the fruit named in the mouth itself.)

For Rilke, beauty is an external factor that cannot be completely created by the human hand. It must be allowed to spring up, of its own accord. The artist can set the conditions, but it has to occur on its own. The surface is the key factor in this discovery for Rodin:

In diesem Augenblick hatte Rodin das Grundelement seiner Kunst entdeckt, gleichsam die Zelle seiner Welt. Das war die Fläche, diese verschieden große, verschieden betonte, genau bestimmte Fläche, aus der alles gemacht werden mußte. Von da ab war sie der Stoff seiner Kunst, das worum er sich mühte, wofür er wachte und litt. Seine Kunst baute sich nicht auf einen große Idee auf, sondern auf eine kleine gewissenhafte Verwirklichung, auf das Erreichbare, auf ein

¹¹³ Play, as I will show in the second section, plays a significant role in finding the source of creative energy.

¹¹⁴ This is partially the inevitable violence that is done in dialogue. Jeffrey Librett writes in the preface to *The Rhetoric of Cultural Dialogue*, "Most briefly and thetically, there is no understanding that does not pass by way of violence, the violence of the reduction of the other to the self, the reduction of the different to the self-same, which is always an effect of force. Hence, as writers such as Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, and Paul de Man have argued in various ways, there is no understanding that is not misunderstanding" (Librett xvii). This, I suppose, is the spirit behind my thoughts on narrative and poetic speech: that it allows exposure to the Other, which involves a certain violence, but shields simultaneously, like the bulwark of a ship that shields us from the elements but also allows us to see outward and navigate. Or, if one prefers, like the sublime that is exposure to nature but at a safe reserve.

Können. Es war kein Hochmut in ihm. Er schloß sich an diese unscheinbare und schwere Schönheit an, an die, die er noch überschauen, rufen und richten konnte. Die andere, die große, mußte kommen, wenn alles fertig war, so wie die Tiere zur Tränke kommen, wenn die Nacht sich vollendet hat und nichts Fremdes mehr an dem Walde haftet (Rilke 9, 150).

The simile at the end may provide the most stable statement about Rodin's method. The implication is that one cannot force an animal to go to the water and drink, but can allow for the conditions necessary for them to do so by walking away and allowing them to do what they want. They go of their own accord. The simile also aligns Rodin's creative force with the force of nature again, as there are no human-made objects in the image, but it is the night itself that has completed the scene. This is also the idea behind Rilke's *Dinggedichte*.

With the discovery of the importance of surfaces, Rodin was able to break free of traditional conceptions of art and started to come into his own. Here we finally find an answer to what kind of movement, energy, *Spannung*, or vibration that Rilke was trying to capture in his poetry: it is Life, which is produced through a combination of many factors. First, there is the masterful, detailed creation of surfaces. Then, equally important but not up to the artist, is letting the piece be in order that the light could interact between the surfaces. But there is one further complexity to this idea, viz. that the master artist, the idealized artist, has put the Life that she has produced at her command:

Es gab weder Pose, noch Gruppe, noch Komposition. Es gab nur unzählbar viele lebendige Flächen, es gab nur Leben, und das Ausdrucksmittel, das er sich gefunden hatte, ging gerade auf dieses Leben zu. Nun hieß es seiner und seiner

Fülle mächtig zu werden. Rodin erfaßte es an den kleinsten Stellen, er beobachtete es, er ging ihm nach. Er erwartete es an den Übergängen, wo es zögerte, er holte es ein, wo es lief, und er fand es an allen Orten gleich groß, gleich mächtig und hinreißend. Da war kein Teil des Körpers unbedeutend oder gering: er lebte. Das Leben, das in den Gesichtern wie auf Zifferblättern stand leicht ablesbar und voll Bezug auf die Zeit, – in den Körpern war es zerstreuter, größer, geheimnisvoller und ewiger (Rilke 9, 150-51).

This final complication, that the artist must take charge of an entire process that is largely not up to her, completes the paradox, leaving no way out. The passivity of the hand that has been left to be moved by true creative force has given up control, but has gained great control in doing so; there is nothing that is unintended in Rodin's work, but it is all a product of giving up, in a sense, his intention. He is an artist who lives in a world that has become completely crushed by alienated labor, but overcomes it through "playing" with that alienation. If the hand is separated from Spirit and dismembered, reclaiming it means to take up that dismemberment.¹¹⁵

Alienation, Anxiety and a Transformed Relation to the Self

We have by no means exhausted the first part of the monograph, but have focused on a few aspects of it that are salient to the study as a whole. We have also made great leaps in understanding many questions that have been at the forefront of this study. I write "understanding questions" and not "answering them," because, as I outlined in the final section of Part I, Rilke uses the paradox as a motor for motion in creative labor and

¹¹⁵ This is perhaps a new, modern version of the Schillerian "Spieltrieb." Rilke in fact has a lot in common with Schiller, especially in their views on education and politics.

the paradox is not to be solved. The artist realizes her own alienated condition, with the hands dismembered, and paradoxically “plays” with these factors, using them to her own advantage. She surpasses alienation by realizing it and taking it up, which, as we saw, involves a passivity: the hand needs to be allowed to move of its own accord and the piece itself has to be crafted in such a way that it allows for the play of light between its surfaces.

This produces the conditions that are necessary for a *fernherkommendes Leben*, a Life that comes from afar, which occurs of its own accord, given an accommodating space. Beauty itself operates in a similar fashion, and seems even to be the same phenomenon:

Und es ist immer noch nicht überflüssig geworden zu wiederholen, daß man Schönheit nicht „machen“ kann. Niemand hat je Schönheit gemacht. Man kann nur freundliche oder erhabene Umstände schaffen für Das, was manchmal bei uns verweilen mag: einen Altar und Früchte und eine Flamme – das Andere steht nicht in unserer Macht. Und das Ding selbst, das, ununterdrückbar, aus den Händen eines Menschen hervorgeht, ist wie der Eros des Sokrates, ist ein Daimon, ist zwischen Gott und Mensch, selber nicht schön, aber lauter Liebe zur Schönheit und lauter Sehnsucht nach ihr (Rilke 9, 211).

Socrates enters our discussion again, for the first time since chapter 1, where I used his *ἀπορεία* (*aporia*), in which he led interlocutors to an impasse, to describe the position into which the young Rilke was thrown while looking at the needle retracing its path down the grooves in the wax that had been carved by the phonograph. One might recall that Socrates’ *daimon* was not a “little voice” that told him what to do, but was instead a

feeling that he got when he was about to do something that he should not do. Here, then, we might understand Rilke to be telling us that there is a sense to be developed, an aesthetic sense, which tells the artist where *not* to carve into an artwork; where to leave a surface that will allow for the play of light and indeed for beauty itself to arise. It is also a sense of knowing when a piece is finished. This is not to say that the artist does not calculate and control the creation of the surface. There is no chance and nothing unintentional in the work, as Rilke reminds us repeatedly throughout the monograph.

This passivity, it turns out, is the greatest activity; giving up control in one respect gives rise to the most precise control in another, which is what the master artist (an ideal figure which may or may not have much to do with Rodin himself) understands. The master artist has transformed her alienated condition, not eliminated it, just as, in the case of anxiety, the key for Kierkegaard is not to eliminate it, but to transform it:

When salvation is posited, anxiety, together with possibility, is left behind. This does not mean that anxiety is annihilated, but that when rightly used it plays another role (Kierkegaard, *Anxiety*, 53).

Anxiety and alienation, I would like to argue, are both to be put into one's service. For Kierkegaard, anxiety is ultimately the relation to spirit and, without negating this, I would like to posit that alienation serves a similar role. A bit later, Kierkegaard writes, "Whoever has learned to be anxious in the right way has learned the ultimate" (Kierkegaard, *Anxiety*, 155). What I would like to say here (again, without negating Kierkegaard's statements, but complementing them), is that whoever has learned to be

alienated in the right way has learned “the ultimate.”¹¹⁶ Moreover, alienation and anxiety are not separate (though both are products of separation) but are intimately linked.

A couple of questions arise here. I have used “spirit” throughout this study and have tried to let it stand on its own, in Rilke’s own terms. What could also strike the reader as strange is my meaning of alienation, and learning to be alienated “in the right way.” First, the question of spirit. Kierkegaard,¹¹⁷ despite the theological language that he uses here (“salvation”), actually means something rather concrete when he writes “spirit”:

A human being is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation that relates itself to itself or is the relation’s relating itself to itself in the relation; the self is not the relation but is the relation’s relating itself to itself. A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short, a synthesis (Kierkegaard, *Sickness*, 13).

While the logic here may seem convoluted, the goal of passages like these is to put the reader into a more developed relation to the self. Kierkegaard’s books, like Rilke’s, are *practice books*, which means that the reader, by following along, is already *doing* what the book says. What Kierkegaard is saying, in other words, is that the relation to the self is a paradoxical relation, and that this relation is spirit. So by spirit, I mean the relation to

¹¹⁶ I should qualify this designation, because I do not mean that there is something that the human as human can discover that is the solution to every problem. Rather, I mean that if we live in conditions in which the major difficulty facing us is our inability to do creative labor and maximize our potential, then “the ultimate” is to face these conditions and push back on them in a real way.

¹¹⁷ *The Concept of Anxiety* is in fact written under the pseudonym of “Vigilius Haufniensis” (“Watchman of Copenhagen”) and *The Sickness Unto Death* under “Anti-Climacus,” probably in response to the writings of “Johannes Climacus,” his pseudonym for *Philosophical Fragments*, and other works. It would require an entire essay to explore these constellations, so, for now, I am collapsing the distinctions for the purpose of simplicity.

the self, especially when it is a question of the more difficult parts of that relation, i.e. the unknown part of the self (the unconscious).¹¹⁸

The question of what is alienation “rightly used,” is intimately linked with the relation to the self. The circular statements about self-relation from Kierkegaard are as if to say that it is only when we have short-circuited logic and come into a kind of quiet attention that we know what the relation to self is. This is similar to what Rilke asks of his reader at the beginning of Part II of *Auguste Rodin*. By addressing the reader, we also see the aspect of Rilke’s writing that makes it a “practice.” Rilke explains what kind of attention is needed in order to do this:

Es giebt ein paar große Namen, die, in diesem Augenblicke ausgesprochen, eine Freundschaft zwischen uns stiften würden, eine Wärme, eine Einigkeit, die es mit sich brächte, daß ich – nur scheinbar abgesondert – mitten unter Ihnen spräche: aus Ihnen heraus wie eine Ihrer Stimmen. Der Name, der weit, wie ein Sternbild aus fünf großen Sternen über diesem Abend steht, kann nicht ausgesprochen werden. Nicht jetzt. Er würde Unruhe über Sie bringen, Strömungen würden in Ihnen entstehen, Zuneigung und Abwehr, während ich Ihre Stille brauche und die ungetrübte Oberfläche Ihrer gutwilligen Erwartung (Rilke 9, 207).

Rilke is speaking, of course, of Rodin. But he is concerned that the controversy¹¹⁹ that surrounds this figure will lead to “position-takings.” Once one has taken up a position on something, whether good or bad, there is something that stands between her or him and

¹¹⁸ As I mentioned in the *Malte* chapters, relating to the unknown part of the self is a key moment in relating to the Other, because it is the Other-within-the-same (the psychism) in Levinas’ language or the alter ego in Husserl’s language. Simply put, in order to relate to the unknown outside of myself, I must relate to the unknown within myself. The boundary between the two becomes *verschmolzen*.

¹¹⁹ The *Bürger von Calais* were denied a place; Rodin was forced, against his will, to make various changes to his work; perhaps most extreme was the treatment of his plaster cast of the *Denker*, which was destroyed by blows of an axe (Rilke 9, 229).

the work of art itself. One no longer stands a chance of learning to see the work, let alone doing actual labor oneself, which is ultimately Rilke's goal – to do creative labor himself and to inspire others to do so as well.

Just like being able to make a positive statement about the self without dialectically challenging it with a negation brings about a solidified, frozen relation to the self, having a preconceived opinion about the artwork or the artist destroys the relation to both. The practice in reading Rilke, as he suggests in the passage above, is phenomenological in the sense that there is a suspension of prior positions on the artist and the artworks and that there is a certain presence that one needs to find in order to be open to the work. There are many paradoxes at work here: activity and passivity, anxiety and stillness, the unity of the body but also recognition of its split and shattered condition, and in this instance, Being and the Other. In order to become receptive to the Other, which is linked in Rilke's language to Beauty, to this Life-that-comes-from-afar, there must be presence or Being.

Reconnecting Spirit to the Hand

We established in the last section that spirit, despite Kierkegaard's challenging definition, is a refined relation to the self. Rodin, as Rilke argues throughout the monograph, is like a force of nature. He has an incredible amount of control, but this control comes from letting the forces of nature work through him, which means a certain passivity to these forces. The relation to the self, in this context, becomes one in which extreme activity and passivity do not coalesce, but do become unified in a sense. There is not, in any case, an interruption between the self and the hand, and moreover, to the end

of the tool that one uses: chisel, pencil, paintbrush, piano keys, typewriter or computer keyboard. I argued in chapter 2 that Rilke wanted to use his body, particularly the skeleton as a kind of antenna, and we now know that the signal that he was trying to pick up was a *fernherkommendes Leben*, which we might call spirit, which is a refined relation to the self, and consequently an extreme sensitivity to natural energy.

The task now is to look a bit closer at what this “Life-from-afar” is and how one expresses it through the hand and the tool that the hand holds, allowing one to produce an “ancient gesture,” as Rilke calls it throughout the monograph. This involves digging into the relation to the self as well as into our relation to Things, which, as we find out, cannot be neatly separated. Rilke writes:

Mir ist zu Mute wie einem, der Sie an Ihre Kindheit erinnern soll. Nein, nicht nur an Ihre: an alles, was je Kindheit war. Denn es gilt, Erinnerungen in Ihnen aufzuwecken, die nicht die Ihren sind, die älter sind als Sie; Beziehungen sind wiederherzustellen und Zusammenhänge zu erneuern, die weit vor Ihnen liegen (Rilke 9, 208).

One should remember at this point that God in the *Geschichten* (and everywhere in the *Stunden-Buch*) is associated with darkness; also that the Thing is dark and intelligent at its core; that Rodin works with his eye bound to the Thing; that childhood is a short darkness at the beginning of life, which is what God tells his hand before he sends it to earth; that darkness is the unconscious and is associated in *Worpswede* with the accumulated rage of all the primitive creatures in the history of life on earth, which is the force that the artist tries to harness.

To tap into spirit, into a more developed relation to the self, we have to understand what it means to be bound to the Thing, as Rodin is in his labor. But *what is a Thing?* Rilke writes that it is a word that we pass over in silence because it has no meaning for us, but immediately writes that it also means too much (Rilke 9, 208). This definition is reminiscent of Being, in that one cannot pose the question of the meaning of Being without knowing already knowing and not knowing what it is: in order to pose the question, one must ask “What *is* Being?” So one uses the word to pose the question, which implies an understanding, but the question itself implies non-understanding. The question is, until reflected upon, too clear and obvious. One must become, as Socrates was, perplexed (Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 1). Perplexed, which is to say, sea-sick like Malte, whereas most of the others are “sea-people,” impervious to the vertigo of Being-in-the-World: “Ob die anderen es fühlten? Vielleicht, aber sie zeigten es nicht. Wahrscheinlich machte es ihnen nichts aus, diesen Seeleuten“ (Rilke 11, 869).¹²⁰

The way in which Rilke directly addresses the reader throughout the second part of *Rodin* is noteworthy, because it turns reading into a practice, again challenging the lines between active and passive. In order to bring his reader closer to the meaning of the word “Thing,” he offers a thought-experiment:

Wenn es Ihnen möglich ist, kehren Sie mit einem Teile Ihres entwöhnten und erwachsenen Gefühls zu irgend einem Ihrer Kinder-Dinge zurück, mit dem Sie viel umgingen. Gedenken Sie, ob es irgend etwas gab, was Ihnen näher, vertrauter

¹²⁰ If it is not clear already, I am still playing off of the language of natural forces that Rilke uses to describe Rodin, as well as the Roman virtues that seem to be occupying Rilke throughout. There is an Apollonian tendency in the text, which is the tendency that Virgil wanted to encourage in his *Aeneid*. Rodin was a man with *gravitas*: grounded, heavy. The middle French word *gravité* meant “seriousness, thoughtfulness, and the Latin word meant “weight, heaviness, pressure,” (Online Etymology Dictionary). There is also a link back to the Sanskrit *guru*, which means “master” or “teacher,” (Barnhart 447) and, as one might recall, Rilke acknowledged being a pupil of Rodin.

und nötiger war, als so ein Ding. Ob nicht alles – außer ihm – imstande war, Ihnen weh oder unrecht zu tun, Sie mit einem Schmerz zu erschrecken oder mit einer Ungewißheit zu verwirren? Wenn Güte unter Ihren ersten Erfahrungen war und Zutraun und Nichtalleinsein – verdanken Sie es nicht ihm? War es nicht ein Ding, mit dem Sie zuerst Ihr kleines Herz geteilt haben wie ein Stück Brot, das reichen mußte für zwei? (Rilke 9, 208-209).

Rilke asks the reader to think back to something that she had as a child, e.g a toy or blanket. One might think here of what D.W. Winnicott calls a “transitional object,”¹²¹ which is something that mediates reality for a baby who is learning how to be separate from her mother.

The transitional object brings comfort to the child and slowly replaces the breast, which is a connection to the mother of which the baby used to be a part. Notably, the first version of this is the *hand*, when, for example the baby sucks on her fist or thumb, which turns into “not-me” objects, like soft toys and blankets (Winnicott 2). This transitional object is in turn slowly replaced by a fantasy or illusion that we have about the world, a sort of tolerable version of a world that we need in order to navigate it. In short, Winnicott argues that we need this transitional object and the resulting illusion as we learn how to cope with the world. The difference between a good and a bad parent is that the bad parent simply tears the transitional object away, leaving the child over-exposed to a hostile world (perhaps Malte’s parents were like this). The converse phenomenon is when the child is simply allowed to be attached for too long, as in the case of madness, in which one pushes her own illusion onto others and forces them to accept it (Winnicott 4).

¹²¹ This is chapter 1 of *Playing and Reality* from D.W. Winnicott.

What Rilke suggests in the passage cited above is something remarkably similar to what Winnicott is arguing here. While it may seem that a child who has attached herself to a single object is blocking the world or holding on too tightly to the comforts of home and not facing the world, she is in fact giving herself a way to go out into that world without overexposure.

Dieser kleine vergessene Gegenstand, der alles zu bedeuten bereit war, machte Sie mit Tausendem vertraut, indem er tausend Rollen spielte, Tier war und Baum und König und Kind, – und als er zurücktrat, war das alles da. Dieses Etwas, so wertlos es war, hat Ihre Beziehungen zur Welt vorbereitet, es hat Sie ins Geschehen und unter die Menschen geführt und mehr noch: Sie haben an ihm, an seinem Dasein, an seinem Irgendwie-Aussehen, an seinem endlichen Zerbrechen oder seinem rätselhaften Entgleiten alles Menschliche erlebt bis tief in den Tod hinein (Rilke 9, 209).

As Winnicott argues, there is an inherent strain in objective perception (Winnicott 18). In other words, we are exposed to the world through our senses. This relates back also to my argument that poetic language mediates in such a way that one is exposed to the world and to the Other, but simultaneously protects with that language.

There is always a certain violence that is done through language and communication; a poem or properly-told story limits that violence by acknowledging the existence of this violence and tempering it. To bring back the ship metaphor, the upper deck has to be open in order to navigate the ship,¹²² but the exposure involved here

¹²² The ark itself was covered, but it seems there was some kind of opening: “Make a roof for the ark, and finish it to a cubit above; and put the door of the ark in its side; make it with lower, second, and third decks” (Genesis 9:16). The footnote in the *Harper Collins Study Bible* indicates that the Hebrew word for “roof” might also mean window.

cannot sink the ship or wash away its crew. A bulwark is needed, which in this context translates into the Thing grasped by the child's hand, the transitional object that will allow her to safely learn all the other objects in the world.

We have made the connection now between the unconscious and the hand: the hand, as Winnicott shows, is linked back to the breast, because one begins to suck on it as a replacement for the breast. The urge to do so is a longing to be *one* again with the mother and is an expression of the anxiety of the separation from the mother. The fragmented self, with the spirit separated from the hand, could also have its origin here. The hand, which is a replacement for the breast and the mother from which one is separated, becomes associated with that same separation. One feels, because of the absence of the mother, that the hand itself is separated. If we assume that there was some primordial oneness with the mother, prior to the fragmentation of self, then this oneness could easily be construed as *spirit*. Creative labor consequently takes charge of this anxiety and alienation of the self from itself and from the hand.

There is one further thing that is required in order to understand the process of creative labor, from the unconscious all the way to the tip of the mediating tool. We have yet to resolve the connection of the hand to the *tool*. The condition of having our hands separated from spirit is not a problem that is peculiar to the artist or to Rilke as an individual, but, as my brief psychoanalytic description hopefully showed, a difficulty that faces everyone. The tool is, in many ways, what makes the human separate from most animals, and is an ancient problem. But it is also specifically modern, which is important because a machine (the phonograph) is hovering in the background of the whole discussion. Joseph Fracchia writes about the relationship between the hand and the tool:

Marx looks beyond the machine's inorganic body and its mechanical limbs in order to grasp its 'interior structure' or, as he puts it, its 'soul'. For Marx, however, that 'soul' is very material: it is the body, human corporeal organisation, which, as the author of the artefact and the source of the accumulated and congealed labour incorporated into it, quite literally animates it. This is quite obviously and literally true of the original hand-tool, which was, as Marx notes in a striking phrase, 'nothing more' than the 'dexterities residing in the evolved human hand (Fracchia 61).

The tool then does "nothing more" than amplify the dexterity of the hand, which, as I have established above, is in direct, unmediated communication with the unconscious itself. "With the unconscious," which is to say, with a self that has been able to look into its darker parts, which remain forever invisible, but can be expressed in a sense through subtler means. The hand tool amplifies this subtlety just as the phonograph, with its brush-bristle stylus, amplifies invisible sound waves making them at first visible, and in turn audible through playback. That which is expressed in this amplification process is the Life-that-comes-from-afar, i.e. Spirit. The movement as a whole, which reaches from the depths of the unconscious to the tip of the pen, might fall under the canopy of the "gesture," which Rilke refers to throughout the monograph.

Conclusion: Creating Poetically

To the ancient Greek, the link between producing or creating and poetry would have been clear, but to us the relationship has become obscure. Whether or not this was an issue for Rodin, it is clear from Rilke's monograph that he created poetically. His

works were dense with language, *gedichtet*, and Rilke writes, about the figures of the *Gates of Hell*,

Es ist unmöglich, sie alle aufzuzählen, wie es unmöglich ist, sie zu beschreiben.

Rodin selbst hat einmal gesagt, er müßte ein Jahr reden, um eines seiner Werke mit Worten zu wiederholen (Rilke 9, 173).

This gives us an idea of the difficulty of the task that faced Rilke in writing the monograph and points to the paradox that is, in the last instance, the task of poetry: to say the unsayable. If it would have taken a year for Rodin to describe one of his works, Rilke did so in a few paragraphs because of his ability to condense language.

Rodin achieved a similarly unattainable goal, showing us what is impossible to show through his surfaces and the play of light that bounced between them. Like the Michelangelo of “Von einem, der die Steine Belauscht,” he found Spirit in the stones and the plaster that he carved, and did so through having perfected the process of creative labor. What Rilke felt he lacked as an artist, which he shows through *Malte*, is realized in the figure of Rodin, because Rodin had made an ongoing *process* of work. Rodin, over the years, had solidified his health to such a point that he could labor without pain, continuously:

Wie er aus jenen Jahren unerschöpfliche Frische mitbrachte, so kehrt er jetzt noch jedesmal gestärkt und voll Arbeitslust von einem weiten morgendlichen Wege zurück. Glückliche, 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 9, 238).

Just like the brush bristle stylus moves completely through natural forces, so too does Rodin's hand. What Rilke heard through the phonograph as a child, the magnification of the minute textures carved into the surface of the wax by the stylus, and later saw in the sutures of the skull, Rodin was able to enact through his labor. This was a continuous labor, as we see in this passage and as Rilke saw in Rodin's workshop: "Ich ging in Gedanken durch die ungeheueren Werkstätten und ich sah, daß alles im Werden war und nichts eilte" (Rilke 9, 239).

Another similarity that appears in the passage above is the image of the garden, which in the "Ur-geräusch" essay appeared as a way of thinking about the senses. The senses were set into process through the impasse that I described, when sight and sound collided, viz. the sound produced by the phonograph and the sight of the carving in the wax, which was eerily comparable to the sutures of the skull. This impasse set Rilke's senses in motion and gave him the desire to keep them in process, but the difficulty that he encountered was that the "five gardens of the senses" required continuous cultivation, which is achieved through creative labor. We identified the problem, which was etiologically expressed in the fairy tale of God's hands: the origin of the split between our hands and spirit. In *Malte*, we saw the result of this split, with a figure who is shattered, full of an anxiety that he cannot master, and unable to produce. In Rodin, we finally have

a Master who has probed the depths of his self and fused that self directly to the tip of his chisel, allowing him to find – and to place – Spirit into his work.

What Rilke seems to have underestimated on his own part, however, is something that has been latent throughout this study: creative labor, visible or invisible; spoken, written or chiseled into stone is a process of sense and self-transformation. It is a process that pushes back against whatever oppressive forces are at work in the world. In the process of changing himself, either by expelling Malte or idealizing Rodin, Rilke took his dream, as he said of Rodin, and realized it. Moreover, his works are sculptures themselves, which can only be proven by holding them in one's hands. Stefan Zweig can help us again here:

...his sense of the elements of beauty accompanied him to the most insignificant detail. It was not only that he wrote his manuscripts on the best of paper with his calligraphic round hand so that every line was related to another as if measured with a ruler; the choicest paper was selected for even an occasional letter, and even, clean and round his calligraphic writing filled the space. In the most hurried notes he did not permit himself to strike out a word, and whenever a sentence or an expression did not seem correct, he wrote the letter a second time with his marvelous patience. Rilke never allowed anything to leave his hands that was not perfect (Zweig 116).

Zweig, before this passage, had praised the detail with which Rilke dressed, given his limited means, and the way in which he generally organized things around him. Looking at Rilke's poems first hand, one sees the same delicacy and attention to detail. Rilke was only able to marvel at the *fernherkommendes Leben* in Rodin's work – at the ancient

gesture that Rodin had preserved in his sculptures – because it was already present in the interaction of the fibers in the linen and the ink from his pen.

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