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Reinterpreting the 'Interpreted': Rilke and Modernism

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In a letter to Helene von Nostitz, dated July 12, 1915, Rainer Maria Rilke expresses his immense grief about the inhumanity of the raging war and his inability to concentrate on his literary compositions in a time of utmost uncertainty and hopelessness: "Schreiben heißt jetzt [during World War I], etwas über sich vermögen, denn was schreiben, wo doch alles, woran man rührt, unsäglich, unkenntlich ist, wo nichts einem gehört, kein Gefühl, keine Hoffnung"[1]. Indeed, the war that Rilke and his contemporaries initially perceived to be a welcome purification and renewal of humankind had turned into an incomprehensible and brutal killing, an untamable and vengeful monster. No doubt, Rilke (1875-1926) lived in an unstable epoch. World War I left Europe in ruins and, to a great degree, traumatized; the old Wilhelmine era in Germany had come to an end, replaced by a shaky attempt to establish a democratic Germany during the Weimar Republic. During all this social and political upheaval Rilke tried to find his own personal safe haven, a balance in his life, and he sought it and often found it in his art.

Art in general and literature in particular had undergone significant changes in both form and content at the dawning of the twentieth century. The complexity of life in a constantly transforming reality that emerged in the wake of sociopolitical disorder and confusion required a "profound shift in aesthetic and cultural sensibilities"[2]. Thus, a new art form would have to abandon traditional aesthetic concepts of rigid character constellations and simple moral contrasts of good and evil, as these models no longer proved to be an adequate modus operandi of portraying a profoundly chaotic reality. Since reality exhibited destructive and disintegrating elements that nullified customary notions of causality, its depiction as a rational system became obsolete. Influenced by the many social, political, and cultural changes of that period, the modernist movement arose and initiated the breaking down of set boundaries and the breaking away from established traditions of thought processes and

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1 Cf. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Rilkes Duineser Elegien*, Vol. I, Eds. Ulrich Fülleborn and Manfred Engel (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1983): 127. Referred to as "letters."

2 Cf. Scott Heller, "New Life for Modernism," *Chronicle of Higher Education,* 5 November 1999: A21-22.

3 Similarly, Susanne Weingarten states in her article on "Das Jahrhundert der Massenkultur: Die Malerei der Moderne," *Der Spiegel,* 40 (1999): "Die Moderne sah ihre Aufgabe immer darin, Tabula rasa zu machen. Der radikale Bruch mit allem Alten war eine *Condition sine qua non* ihres ästhetischen und gesellschaftlichen Denkmusters. Vergangenes war Ballast, den es abzuwerfen galt" (277).

the prevailing *Zeitgeist* in order to pursue a deeper penetration of life by means of art[3]. Whereas nineteenth century realism pretended to give a true and faithful account of an objective reality, modernism, just as romanticism had a century earlier, turned to subjectivity and the portrayal of the individual's inner turmoil[4].

To understand the direction modern philosophical thinking took, one has to reach back to the writings of Kant, Schopenhauer, and Hegel. More than a hundred years earlier, Kant had already contemplated the profound skepticism that penetrated all layers of modern thoughts on being and meaning. According to Kant, we can never arrive at a *pure* knowledge of reality since we can never overcome our intellectual limitations and see into the essence of things. Besides, Kant questioned the existence of a "real" reality, the so called *noumenal world*, saying that the individual's self-consciousness imposes itself on the outside world, thus only permitting a perception of a subjective reality, the *phenomenal world*. Schopenhauer took the Kantian premise even further. In his main work, *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer, too, proclaims that the world exists primarily as an idea and as such is governed by individually differing perceptions. For Schopenhauer the innermost essence of being is likewise unattainable; however, if one realizes that the will, the core of all being and the origin of humankind's trials and tribulations, must be annihilated, one is able to arrive at inner peace and the "real" meaning of existence. Schopenhauer called this state of being the "nirvana," the surrender to the infinite that is death, and the artist's task, Schopenhauer declares, is to create this visionary ideal[5]. Taken at face value, the artist would be confronted with a twofold dilemma: if humankind is condemned to a meaningless existence in the real, and truth and meaning only be found in the unreal, i.e., the ideal, how can the unknowable be represented; or can meaning, albeit only in a subjective sense, be obtained in the here and now, in other words, would it be possible to find a Hegelian synthesis of being and meaning, or would it all otherwise result in what Hegel predicted to be the "end of art" as we know it? The significance of this artistic stumbling block at the beginning of the last century can not be overlooked, because, as one critic wrote, "nur eine ausführliche und abstrakte Auseinandersetzung mit Erkenntnistheorien und Erkenntnisskepsis zu Beginn unseres Jahrhunderts könnte plausibel machen, wieso Verstehen für Rilke und seine Zeitgenossen überhaupt zum inhaltlichen wie formalen Problem wurde"[6].

The most important impact on the nature of modern thought and the development of modern art and the new role of the artist, however, has to be attributed to one man: Friedrich Nietzsche. In the vein of Kant and Schopenhauer, Nietzsche posited that the superficial order of reality is undermined by a chaotic disorder. In his well-known essay *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche presented two fundamental life principles: the Apollonian and Dionysian, the exemplary versus the disruptive and unstructured, form versus formlessness. The Apollonian order, Nietzsche wrote, is constantly endangered by the Dionysian disorder, and to privilege the Apollonian rationality – as nineteenth

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4 The term modernism as the leading art form and aesthetic movement at the beginning of the twentieth century evades a clear and precise definition. At best, modernism can be defined as a somewhat eclectic term inasmuch as it combines various aesthetic elements by borrowing heavily from a series of other contemporaneous movements: it adopts and adapts its pessimistic portrait of the external world from naturalism; its employment of the abstract and irrational from symbolism; its often dreamlike, fantastic imagery and eradication of time and space linearity from neoromanticism; its stream-of-consciousness technique from impressionism; and its syntactic and semantic experimentation from expressionism. Even though we find an obvious plethora of ism-movements during this crucial time at the beginning of the twentieth century, underneath these diverse fashions in art lies a deep common concern about the disintegration of an already incomprehensible and meaningless reality, and the problem it poses for the artist and his work. Furthermore, contemporary currents in philosophy also notably influenced this clearly different worldview and intellectual climate.

5 Cf. Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation* (New York: Dover, 1966).

6 Cf. Manfred Engel, "Die 'Duineser Elegien' verstehen – Verstehen in den *Duineser Elegien*," *Blätter der Rilke-Gesellschaft,* 10 (1983): 7. See also Judith Ryan, *Rilke, Modernism and Poetic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999). Ryan writes: "The crisis went well beyond the personal. It was the crisis of an era. Rilke's ability to project his own psychological confusions and depressions onto the despair of an epoch played a major part in his literary success. The *Duino Elegies* are a case in point" (220).

century realism did – is a self-deceptive, illusionary outlook on life. Consequently, a break with traditional and obsolete concepts in life and art was necessary, since modern life requested a "reevaluation of values"[7]. Contrary to Schopenhauer, Nietzsche proclaimed the key concept for modern art and life not to be the abandonment of the real for an unknown utopia, as Schopenhauer favored it, but to seek a synthesis, to fuse the two realms of Apollonian and Dionysian, a fusion that would ultimately reinstate a newfound wholeness of man and universe. As Manfred Engel puts it, "die frühe Moderne löst zwar alle geschlossenen und tradierten Formen auf, hält aber an der Einheit des Werkes fest. Paradigmatisch hierfür ist die Tendenz der Lebensphilosophie, in der neuen Geschmeidigkeit des Denkens zwischen Besonderem und Allgemeinem, Individuum und Gesetz, Vielfalt und Einheit eine neue Balance herzustellen" (*Moderne Lyrik,* 85).

The desire for this totality and balanced unity of the self and reality, existence and essence, subject and object is one of the many characteristics of the modern narrative – and the main theme in Rainer Maria Rilke's *Duino Elegies*[8]. A few months before Rilke finally finished his *Duino Elegies*, he wrote,

> Denn so sehr der Künstler in einem auch das *Werk* meint, seine Verwirklichung, sein Dasein und Dableiben über uns hinaus –, ganz gerecht wird man erst, wenn man einsieht, daß auch diese dringendste Realisierung einer höheren Sichtbarkeit, von einem endlich äußersten Ausblick aus, nur als Mittel erscheint, ein wiederum Unsichtbares, ganz und gar Inneres und vielleicht Unscheinbares –, einen heileren Zustand in der Mitte des eigenen Wesens zu gewinnen (*Letters,* 215).

It had taken Rilke an entire decade from 1912 until 1922 to compose what he eventually considered to be his "most important work"[9]. Rilke's quest for this "wholesome state of existence," the "heileren Zustand," was by far not an effortless task; on the contrary, his distress and despair of ever completing the *Elegies* is well documented. If one reads his numerous letters to friends and patrons, it becomes evident that Rilke was both constantly torn between the desire to participate fully in life and the desire to be in complete seclusion and, moreover, was subject to mental anguish and anxiety neuroses that would often result in prolonged periods of writer's block. Prior to his embarking on the *Duino Elegies*, Rilke had just concluded his *Malte Laurids Brigge* and was in dire need to find a place of comfort where he would be able to recover from his mental and emotional exhaustion. When his patroness, Fürstin Marie von Thurn und Taxis, invited him to be her guest on

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7 Cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Werke in Drei Bänden*, Ed. Karl Schlechta (München: Hanser, 1965). Also see Manfred Engel's view of Nietzsche's influence on modernism in *Rainer Maria Rilkes 'Duineser Elegien' und die Moderne Deutsche Lyrik* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1986): "Bekanntlich ist Friedrich Nietzsche zugleich wichtigster Exponent wie auch einflußreichster Propagator dieser Krise aller traditionellen Werte und dieser Suche nach neuen Wertsetzungen. Seine radikale Erkenntnisskepsis markiert den Beginn genuin moderner Weltsicht und genuin modernen Wirklichkeitsverhaltens" (61).

8 Analyzing Rilke's poetic method and place within the modernist movement, Ryan states: "Rilke's form of modernism is a very particular kind that is both elegiac and restorative. He did not participate in the various experimental movements that constituted the avant-garde of the teens and twenties. The Futurists were remote from him because of their enthusiasm for modern machinery, which Rilke believed had alienated modern man from simple and more satisfying craftsmanship. He was familiar with Expressionist poetry, notably that of Georg Trakl, whose daring, visionary work he much admired; he also read poetry by Georg Heym, Else Lasker-Schüler, Alfred Wolfenstein, and Johannes R. Becher. He knew personally the Expressionist dramatist and political activist, Ernst Toller, through his connections with the political group around Walter Rathenau. He was delighted to discover the paintings of Franz Marc at the 1916 retrospective in Munich: he praised Marc's work as particularly unified, uncompromising, and pure. He admired Kokoschka, with whom he became friendly during his Munich years, when they worked side by side at the war archive. Still, he was reluctant to delve too deeply into the more painful aspects of Kokoschka's works, for fear of exacerbating his own depressive tendencies" (221).

9 In a letter to countess Sizzo from February 19, 1922, Rilke writes: "[Es] ist [...] mir endlich in diesen jüngsten Wochen gelungen, die Fäden meiner wichtigsten Arbeit, die alle von der Schärfe der letzten Jahre quer durchschnitten waren, wieder aufzunehmen und im einst angefangenen Geweb fortzuführen" (*Letters,* 252). And one month later he expresses to her that "diese Gedichte [...] das Wichtigste und Gültigste [enthalten], was ich um die Zeit meiner Lebensmitte festzustellen vermocht hatte" (*Letters,* 262).

her Italian estate Castle Duino near Triest, Rilke ecstatically obliged[10]. Although initially Rilke was certain that it would be here in Duino where he would regain his artistic spirit, it soon became evident that his work was not progressing and he found himself at a standstill: "Ich sehne mich nach Arbeit, manchmal meine ich einen Augenblick, auch sie sehnt sich nach mir –, aber wir kommen nicht zusammen" (*Letters,* 47)[11]. By February 1912, Rilke had finished the first and second elegy, and fragmentarily started on elegies three, six, nine, and ten[12]. Even though Rilke titled his work the *Duino Elegies* and hence dedicated them to his benefactress Marie von Turn und Taxis, he would change his domicile many times in the coming years before all ten elegies were done[13]. Rilke's own remarks about his apparent *Wanderlust* and his constant residing abroad are very telling as they lead to the very roots of the *Elegies'* stance – Rilke's preoccupation with language, his critique of language, and the artist's agony over its limited usefulness. In a letter from March 17, 1922, he writes:

> Dehmel [...] stellte mich geradezu zur Rede über mein ständiges Wohnen im Auslande. Ich konnte ihm unmöglich *alle* Gründe dafür anführen [..\.] so beschränkte ich mich, unter anderem zu sagen – mich dessen keineswegs rühmend, sondern es, wenn man so will, als eine Schwäche zugebend –, daß ich arbeitend, kein Deutsch (das meistens so widerwärtig schlecht und faul gesprochene!) um mich hören könne, sondern es vorzöge, dann von einer anderen, mir als Umgangsmittel vertrauten und sympathischen Sprache umgeben zu sein: durch solche Isolierung [...] nähme dann [...] das Deutsch *in mir* eine eigentümliche Sammlung und Klarheit an; abgerückt von allem täglichen Gebrauch empfände ich es als das mir angemessene herrliche [...] Material (*Letters,* 265).

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[10] Cf. Rilke's letter to Fürstin Marie von Thurn und Taxis from September 17, 1911: "Die Menschen (liegts an mir, liegts an ihnen) daß sie mich abnutzen, in Leipzig, hier, jedesmal war jemand da, der gewisse Dinge nichtmehr halten konnte und sie mir aufs Wesen niederstellte. Wie ichs dann von mir hinunterrücke, damit ists noch nicht gethan, dann wollen sie's auch noch erleben, wie und wo ichs ihnen hinbringe, und ich soll so richtig einen Denkstein darüber machen und eine Inschrift dazu. Ich bin's müde. Welcher Segen, daß Sie mich in Duino verbergen wollen: als ein Flüchtling, wie unter fremdem Namen, will ich mich dort aufhalten, nur *Sie* sollen wissen, daß ichs bin" (*Letters,* 37). Likewise to Elsa Bruckmann on December 14, 1911: "Ich wünschte mir seit lange, hier [in Duino] allein zu sein, streng allein, mich einzupuppen, zusammenzunehmen, kurz und gut, von meinem Herzen zu leben und von nichts anderem" (*Letters,* 42).

[11] Rilke also complained about the climate in Triest and found it to be detrimental to his well-being. See a letter to Lou Andreas-Salomé, January 10, 1912: "Liebe Lou, wenns geht, so bleib ich wahrscheinlich bis in den Frühling hier, obwohl mir weder das Haus noch das Klima recht zusagt; dieser fortwährende Wechsel zwischen Bora und Scirocco tut meinen Nerven nicht gut, und ich erschöpfe mich darin, das eine und das andere mitzumachen" (*Letters,* 46).

[12] See the diagram about the genesis of the *Duino Elegies* in *Rilkes Duineser Elegien*, Eds. Ulrich Fülleborn and Manfred Engel, op. cit., 376-377. Whereas Rilke spent the following ten years laboring over his work, the first elegy apparently was conceived and completed in only one day, January 21, 1912. Fürstin Marie von Thurn und Taxis later recounted Rilke's own description of this 'miraculous event': "Rilke erzählte mir später, wie diese Elegie entstanden war. Er ahnte nichts von dem, was sich in ihm vorbereitete. Wohl machte er in einem Brief eine Anspielung: Die Nachtigall nähere sich [...] Hatte er da vielleicht das Kommende gefühlt? Aber sie schien von neuem zu schweigen. Eine große Traurigkeit überfiel ihn, er begann zu glauben, daß auch dieser Winter ohne Ergebnis bleiben würde. Da erhielt er eines Tages in der Frühe einen lästigen geschäftlichen Brief. Er wollte ihn rasch erledigen und mußte sich mit Ziffern und anderen trockenen Dingen abgeben. Draußen blies eine heftige Bora, aber die Sonne schien, das Meer leuchtete blau, wie mit Silber übersponnen. Rilke stieg zu den Bastionen hinunter, die, vom Meer aus nach Osten und Westen gelegen, durch einen schmalen Weg am Fuße des Schlosses verbunden waren. Die Felsen fallen dort steil, wohl an 200 Fuß tief, ins Meer herab. Rilke ging ganz in Gedanken versunken auf und ab, da die Antwort auf den Brief ihn sehr beschäftigte. Da, auf einmal, mitten in seinem Grübeln, blieb er stehen, plötzlich, denn es war ihm, als ob im Brausen des Sturmes eine Stimme ihm zugerufen hätte: 'Wer, wenn ich schriee, hörte mich denn aus der Engel Ordnungen?' [...] Lauschend blieb er stehen. 'Was ist das?' flüsterte er halblaut [...] 'was ist es, was kommt?' Er nahm sein Notizbuch, das er stets mit sich führte, und schrieb diese Worte nieder und gleich dazu noch einige Verse, die sich ohne sein Dazutun formten. Wer kam? [...] Er wußte es jetzt: der Gott [...] Sehr ruhig stieg er wieder in sein Zimmer hinauf, legte sein Notizbuch beiseite und erledigte den Geschäftsbrief. Am Abend aber war die ganze Elegie niedergeschrieben" (*Letters,* 49-50).

[13] Cf. Rilke's letter to Nora Purtscher-Wydenbruck from December 20, 1923: "Vergessen Sie nicht, daß die Elegien 1912 auf Duino begonnen wurden; das müßte sie Ihnen noch näher bringen. Die beiden ersten entstanden dort ganz, aber auch Fragmente der späteren waren vorausgekommen; andere Bruchstücke datieren: Toledo, Ronda, Paris; dann aber kam die tiefe verhängnisvolle Unterbrechung, und nun hat erst Muzot alles Vorhandene und jenes dazu noch zu Leistende in ein Ganzes und Heiles und Bleibendes gerettet: womit ein geistiges Jahrzehnt geschlossen erscheint" (*Letters,* 296).

Rilke's critical reflections on his native German and on the mode of language in general very much parallel those of his contemporaries. Indeed, as Manfred Engel points out, as modern life and culture was confronted with a break from outdated traditions and a "reevaluation of values," art had to explore a new approach of expressing these profound sociocultural changes: "Änderung von Weltsicht und Weltverhalten [...] bedeutet für den Künstler zunächst einmal: Änderung seiner Ausdrucksmittel – und die Radikalität dieses formalen Neuansatzes ist zu Beginn [des] Jahrhunderts in allen Kunstbereichen gleichermaßen unübersehbar" ("Verstehen", 14). Similarly, at the same time Ferdinand de Saussure with his concept of structuralism had proposed the arbitrary nature of linguistic signs, stating that essentially there is no intrinsic link between a "signifier" and the "signified," and that any relation between the two is completely conventional. Thus, per definitionem, language cannot accurately mirror the world around us. Hence, the problem for a writer lies in identifying the structures and workings of language, to rearrange customary linguistic uses, and in this manner put forth meaning through context. In the same vein as the Saussurean argument, Rilke declares:

> Schreiben zu können ist, weiß Gott, nicht minder 'schweres Handwerk', um so mehr, als das Material der anderen Künste von vornherein von dem täglichen Gebrauch abgerückt ist, während des Dichters Aufgabe sich steigert um die seltsame Verpflichtung, *sein* Wort von den Worten des bloßen Umgangs und der Verständigung gründlich, wesentlich zu unterscheiden. *Kein* Wort im Gedicht [...] ist *identisch* mit dem gleichlautenden Gebrauchs- und Konversations-Worte; die reinere Gesetzmäßigkeit, das große Verhältnis, die Konstellation, die es im Vers oder in künstlerischer Prosa einnimmt, verändert es bis in den Kern seiner Natur, macht es nutzlos, unbrauchbar für den bloßen Umgang, unberührbar und bleibend (*Letters,* 264-265).

Rilke had already previously addressed the issue of experiencing and "seeing" the world in a modern light and finding a new form of articulation in *Malte*. Malte, Rilke's first-person narrator, "lern[t] 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"[14]. Malte undergoes an existential crisis as a person and as an artist. He questions the authenticity of his reality, believing that his life lacks substance, that his consciousness has only allowed him to scratch the surface of "true" existence. Malte is in a state of transformation and it directs him to the discovery of his inner life, his subconsciousness as it were, "ein Inneres, von dem ich nichts wußte" (*Malte,* 10). For Malte, the writer, his altered perception of the world around him will have far reaching consequences when he realizes that

> 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 (*Malte,* 47).

Rilke does not allow his protagonist to come to terms with his new transformed self, and just like the novel itself, Malte, too, remains a fragmented individual. But whereas in *Malte* the protagonist's struggle with the idea of transformation and transcendence is not resolved, the *Duino Elegies* paint a different picture. As Rilke explained in a letter about the differing messages he put forth in his *Elegies* and *Malte*, "in den 'Elegien' wird [...] das Leben wieder möglich, ja es erfährt hier diejenige endgültige *Bejahung*, zu der es der junge Malte, obwohl auf dem richtigen schweren Weg 'des longues études', noch nicht führen konnte" (*Letters,* 319).

Rilke's *Duino Elegies* have experienced an extraordinary exegesis and evoked a multitude of varied and often completely opposed interpretations[15]. According to Roland Ris "[ist] je nach dem Erfahrungshorizont des Interpreten beziehungsweise je nach den ihm vorschwebenden intertextuellen Bezügen d[er] 'Schlüssel' zu den Elegien bisher in ganz verschiedenen Bereichen gesucht worden:

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[14] Rainer Maria Rilke, *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge* (Frankfurt: Insel, 1982): 10.

[15] For a brief introduction into the history of literary criticism pertaining to the *Duino Elegies* see Torsten Pettersson's article "Internalization and Death: A Reinterpretation of Rilke's *Duineser Elegien*," *Modern Language Review,* 94 (1999): 731-743; especially 731-732.

Wer vom 'Malte' ausgeht, wird der Problematik von Liebe und Tod mehr Bedeutung zumesssen, als wer von den Ding-Gedichten herkommt und in der Evokation von einzelnen Gegenständen und einzelnen Tätigkeiten einen dann nur in den 'Weltinnenraum' hinein verlagerten Ding-Realismus sieht. Wer schließlich nach der Rückbindung des Menschen auf einen persönlich oder kosmisch gefaßten Gott hin fragt, wird in der Dichotomie zwischen Transzendenz und Immanenz seinen Ausgangspunkt nehmen"[16]. Undoubtedly, Rilke's unconventional use of linguistic forms, the use of rhetorical figures of speech, the extended utilization of schemes and tropes, plus the added ambiguity and symbolism which are filled with multiple (non-)meanings and connotations have generated the common conviction that the *Duino Elegies* are one of the most challenging and thereby misinterpreted poems in German literature[17]. The poet himself gives the most famous and most often quoted interpretation. When asked by his Polish translator Witold Hulewicz to provide some advice and instruction on how to read the *Duino Elegies*, Rilke, notwithstanding his hesitance, gave the following explanation:

> *Lebens-und Todesbejahung erweist sich als Eines in den 'Elegien'*. Das eine zuzugeben ohne das andere, sei, so wird hier erfahren und gefeiert, eine schließlich alles Unendliche ausschließende Einschränkung. Der Tod ist die uns abgekehrte, von uns unbeschienene *Seite des Lebens*: wir müssen versuchen, das größeste Bewußtsein unseres Daseins zu leisten, das in *beiden unabgegrenzten Bereichen* zu Hause ist, *aus beiden unerschöpflich genährt*... Die wahre Lebensgestalt reicht durch *beide* Gebiete, das Blut des größesten Kreislaufs treibt durch beide: es *gibt weder ein Diesseits noch ein Jenseits, sondern die große Einheit*, in der die uns übertreffenden Wesen, die 'Engel', zu Hause sind. [...] In jener größesten '*offenen*' Welt *sind* alle, man kann nicht sagen 'gleichzeitig', denn eben der Fortfall der Zeit bedingt, daß sie alle *sind* [...] Aber *nicht im christlichen Sinne* von dem ich mich immer leidenschaftlicher entferne, sondern, in einem rein irdischen, tief irdischen, selig irdischen Bewußtsein gilt es, das *hier* Geschaute und Berührte in den weiteren, den weitesten Umkreis einzuführen. Nicht in ein Jenseits, dessen Schatten die Erde verfinstert, sondern in ein Ganzes, in *das Ganze* [...] So gilt es, alles Hiesige nicht nur nicht schlecht zu machen und herabzusetzen, sondern gerade, um seiner Vorläufigkeit willen, die es mit uns teilt, sollen diese Erscheinungen und Dinge von uns in einem innigsten Verstande begriffen und verwandelt werden (*Letters,* 319-320).

As indicated by the poet himself, the *Duino Elegies* are assigned a dual task: to explore, at the onset, the intellectual and spiritual emptiness of man's existence, and at length to offer a new insight into a hidden and still unexplored side of reality in order to find new meaning and value in the world around us. Accordingly, Rilke's *Elegies* are divided into two parts: the first six elegies consist of the poet's lament over man's incompleteness, his insufficiency, and his questionable and doubtful half-existence, whereas the last four elegies, after having arrived at a "neue Sicht von Mensch wie Wirklichkeit" (Engel, "Verstehen" 10), display a transformation of his sorrow into joy and acceptance of the "here and now." To understand Rilke's thought processes it is necessary to point out some characteristics of his work. Rilke, as indicated earlier, takes his cue from Nietzsche's – via Hegel's law of the dialectic – dualistic model of thesis (the Apollonian) and antithesis (the Dionysian), and like Nietzsche is convinced that only a unifying synthesis that encompasses and reconciles both thesis and antithesis will grant access to a whole and wholesome state of an "absolute" existence. Rilke viewed the inhabitants of the modern world as determined by emotional insecurity, lack of spirituality, and a

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[16] Cf. Roland Ris, "Die Überwindung des kategorialen Denkens beim späten Rilke," *Blätter der Rilke-Gesellschaft,* 20 (1993): 36.

[17] Also see Eleanor E. Ter Horst's analysis of Rilke's expanded use of the subjunctive in his metaphors and similes in her article "The Pendulum of Poetry: Metaphor and Mediation in Rilke's *Duineser Elegien*," *The German Quarterly,* 79 (2006): 308-328. According to Ter Horst, Rilke, by employing the subjunctive, hypothetical form, "creates a mode of existence outside the categories of truth and falsehood, presence and absence, being and non-being" (309). The concepts of linearity, continuity and constancy are thereby suspended, making it possible to transcend the realm of the Kantian "phenomenal world."

complete misconception of reality. According to Rilke, man's lack of wholeness is caused by his self-consciousness that limits and narrows his perception to merely a subjective view of reality, the Apollonian in Nietzsche's terms. Modern life for Rilke is characterized by set rules and laws, order and organization, all man-made structures, that by default prevent humankind from looking beyond the superficial structure into the Dionysian and preclude the apprehension of the essence of being[18]. Humankind is therefore excluded from participating in a unified existence within a universe "with which it can identify only spasmodically and which it can decipher only sporadically" (Sheppard, 584). Rilke shows his desperation over humankind's limited experience of reality by depicting the boundaries that man has set between the antipodes of the phenomenal and the noumenal, the empirical and non-empirical, the Apollonian and Dionysian. As a contrast to this gloomy view, in the elegies Rilke tries to establish a world where the contrast of inner and outer reality is eliminated, and a new significance is given to man's existence[19].

The *Duino Elegies* start with a bitter remark and the "lyrical I" lamenting: "Wer, wenn ich schriee, hörte mich denn aus der Engel/ Ordnungen"[20]? Since the representatives of the angelic order, i.e., the super-conscious sphere, are not listening to man's sorrow, the poet directs his lamentations towards humankind – the mothers, fathers, children, and the lovers[21]. As a matter of fact, if one examines each elegy individually, one notices a pattern of the speaker addressing every realm of existence from the self to society to nature. The first elegy can be perceived as the "lyrical I" being engaged in an inner dialogue with himself. Precisely since the angels are not paying attention to his anguish, he resolves to "keep down [...] and swallow the call-note" (21) and to converse with his inner self, his own "Herz" (22) instead. The speaker ponders the root of man's curse of being alienated from his "interpreted world," reasoning that it might be his constant distractions caused by his ever-present expectations. As a consequence he never expands his knowledge or transcends himself and the categories that he applies in reflecting on his transient experiences[22]. That is why angels "wüßten oft nicht, ob sie unter Lebenden gehn oder Toten" (24). The speaker then wonders if maybe "findige[ ] Tiere," "Liebende[ ]," and "Früheentrückte[ ]" (20-24) understand that, as Shakespeare once put it, "there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of," and are able to catch a glimpse of the "real nature" of being.

Contrary to Manfred Engel's view that "in der Abfolge der 'Elegien' gibt es weder ein kontinuierliches Argument, noch strenge Konstruktion, noch überhaupt so etwas wie Progreß" (*Moderne Lyrik* 178), I would argue that the speaker's hypothesis made at the beginning of the elegies' cycle sets up the basis of discussion that is to follow in the succeeding five elegies. The second elegy is

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18 Cf. Richard W. Sheppard, "From the 'Neuen Gedichte' to the 'Duineser Elegien': Rilke's Chandos Crisis," *MLR,* 68 (1973): 578: "Briefly, Rilke's experience told him on the one hand that the all-encompassing, aristocratic world of pre-war Europe, in whose institutions and mythologies he had once implicitly believed, had been finally destroyed by the War, and on the other hand, that this old order had been replaced by the mass world of industrial capitalism which, in his view, had a vested interest in severing men from the creative trans- and irrational powers of their personalities in order to develop the rationally directed and functional will – a faculty for which Rilke had very little respect."

19 Cf. Hans Egon Holthusen, "Rilkes letzte Jahre," *Rilkes Duineser Elegien*, op.cit., Vol. II: 133.

20 Cited from: Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies* (New York: Norton, 1939): 20.

21 That Rilke did not apply any religious notions to the super-conscious realm becomes apparent in his previously mentioned famous letter to Witold von Hulewicz, dated November 13, 1925: "Wenn man den Fehler begeht, *katholische* Begriffe des Todes, des Jenseits und der Ewigkeit an die Elegien oder Sonette zu halten, so entfernt man sich völlig von ihrem Ausgang und bereitet sich ein immer gründlicheres Mißverstehen vor. Der 'Engel' der Elegien hat nichts mit dem Engel des christlichen Himmels zu tun [...] Der Engel der *Elegien* ist dasjenige Geschöpf, in dem die Verwandlung des Sichtbaren in Unsichtbares, die wir leisten, schon vollzogen erscheint [...] Der Engel der Elegien ist dasjenige Wesen, das dafür einsteht, im Unsichtbaren einen höheren Rang der Realität zu erkennen. – Daher 'schrecklich' für uns, weil wir, seine Liebenden und Verwandler, doch noch am Sichtbaren hängen" (*Letters,* 322).

22 Manfred Engel assumes that one can decipher a "dreifachen Entfremdungsproze[ß]" in the *Duino Elegies*: humankind's "Entfremdung vom Tod [...] Entfremdung der Menschen untereinander [...] Entfremdung des Menschen von den Ergebnissen seiner Tätigkeit" (*Moderne Lyrik,* 173).

directly addressed to "[euch] Liebende" (30). The speaker has thus already managed the first step towards expanding his perception of reality, as he has, by the very act of invoking the lovers, transcended his own self. Lovers are inherently different from the rest of humankind since their heightened passion allows them to sense "reine[s] Dauern" (32), whereas "wir, wo wir fühlen, verflüchtigen" (28), and wither away. However, although lovers, just like the speaker, seem to have momentarily escaped their self-conscious isolation, i.e., "they have managed to extend their consciousness as far as another single person"[23], their love is essentially nothing but self-interest. Just like the rest of us, lovers are not flawless either, as they are the ones who constantly restrict themselves and those they love through their love. Love, in Rilke's view, is, like all human actions, always combined with expectations and hopes; therefore the very act of loving is aimed at the future, and consequently overlooks and overshadows the present and the momentary, or as the lyrical voice puts it, "wir nur/ ziehen allem vorbei wie ein luftiger Austausch" (30). Man's self-consciousness does not permit him to indulge in the moment, as he constantly feels the urge to interpret his world according to a beginning and an end, either looking backwards or forwards, never experiencing the present to the fullest extent. Love's shortcoming is caused by its complete narcissism, which as a result narrows humans' perception of reality. Hence, lovers sacrifice perception, "sie verdecken sich nur mit einander ihr Los" (20), or as the more mundane version explains "Liebe macht blind." "Ist es nicht Zeit," the speaker then asks, "daß wir liebend/ uns vom Geliebten befrein und es bebend bestehn:/ wie der Pfeil die Sehne besteht, um gesammelt im Absprung/ *mehr* zu sein als er selbst" (22), for "treten Liebende/ nicht immerfort an Ränder, eins im andern,/ die sie versprachen Weite, Jagd und Heimat" (40)[24].

Still having found no satisfying proof for his earlier hypothesis, the speaker continues his search for an answer to the question why humans are incapable and even afraid of transcending their own subjectivity and individuality even when in love. In elegies three and four he analyzes – one might even say in an almost naturalistic mode – the topic of social upbringing and environment. Here the speaker addresses the mothers and fathers and their formative influence on children. We, as children, are born with an intuitive insight into the unknown, the strange and "wallende[ ] Chaos" (36). This a priori knowledge manifests itself in our early childhood dreams and nightmares. Reminiscent of Freud's dream interpretations, Rilke writes[25],

> Aber *innen*: wer wehrte,/ hinderte innen in ihm die Fluten der Herkunft?/ Ach, da *war* keine Vorsicht im Schlafenden; schlafend,/ aber träumend, aber in Fiebern: wie er sich einließ./ Er, der Neue, Scheuende, wie er verstrickt war,/ mit des innern Geschehns weiterschlagenden Ranken/ schon zu Mustern verschlungen, zu würgendem Wachstum, zu tierhaft/ jagenden Formen. Wie er sich hingab – . Liebte./ Liebte sein Inneres, seines Inneren Wildnis,/ diesen Urwald in ihm, auf dessen stummem Gestürztsein/ lichtgrün sein Herz stand. Liebte (36).

During the process of socialization, however, children lose their innocence and, hence, as adults no longer have direct access to the world within. The speaker blames the mothers for cutting the chord that tied the child to the "other": "Mutter, *du* machtest ihn klein, du warsts, die ihn anfing;/ dir war er

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23 Cf. Kathleen L. Komar, *Transcending Angels. Rainer Maria Rilke's Duino Elegies* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska Press, 1987): 10.

24 Rilke expressed a similar view on love and the contrast between requited and unrequited lovers in his *Malte*. There the first-person narrator says, "Geliebtsein heißt aufbrennen. Lieben ist: Leuchten mit unerschöpflichem Öle. Geliebtwerden ist vergehen, Lieben ist dauern" (194).

25 It is worth mentioning that Rilke was familiar with Sigmund Freud and his work primarily through his friendship with Lou Andreas-Salomé. In their edition of Rilke's letters, the editors comment: "Lou Andreas-Salomé (1861-1937) war zweifellos eine der interessantesten Frauengestalten der Epoche: 1882 hatte sie Nietzsche kennengelernt, mit dem sie einige Zeit befreundet blieb, 1912/13 studierte sie bei Freud die eben entwickelte Wissenschaft der Psychoanalyse und war später selbst als Analytikerin tätig. Rilke war ihr im Mai 1897 erstmals begegnet; 1899 und 1900 reisten sie gemeinsam nach Rußland, beide Male kam es zu einem Besuch bei Leo Tolstoi. Mit den Jahren wurde aus einer leidenschaftlichen Liebesbeziehung eine lebenslange Freundschaft" (op. cit.: 28, ff. 1).

neu, du beugtest über die neuen/ Augen die freundliche Welt und wehrtest der fremden" (36). Rilke here employs an almost Lacanian model of 'symbolization'. Lacan contends that the primal experience of separation and alienation starts with the child's entry into the "symbolic order," the structures of language. The split between the unconscious and the conscious is caused by language and language is marked by societal imperatives – laws, rules, and codes of conduct taught by the mothers and fathers. Furthermore, Lacan tells us that language isolates the subject from the "real," the "signified," and confines it forever to the sphere of consciousness, the realm of signification and signifiers. The unconscious, on the other hand, remains in search of the "other," the signified, it has lost: "Wo, o wo ist der Ort – ich trag ihn im Herzen" (50), the speaker mourns.

The notion of an original androgynous whole is a classical theory dating back to Plato. The Platonic idea maintains that we have knowledge of a universal "absolute" within us. However, we forget this knowledge when we gain consciousness, though our subconsciousness – the soul in Plato's belief – contains and at times recollects this prior knowledge of the "floods of origin." The universe, Plato argues, is divided between appearance and reality, and our information about it is similarly divided between opinion and knowledge. We can only have opinions about the world of appearance, yet our soul holds within itself the true knowledge about the real world. Thus, man is forever defined through self-alienation – "wir sind nicht einig" (40) – as he is subconsciously aware of this ideal version of his other self. The child, on the other hand, does not differentiate between itself and the "other," and that is why the "lyrical I" yearns for the lost childhood and its innocent state of being, the less self-conscious interaction of the self and reality:

> O Stunden in der Kindheit,/ da hinter den Figuren mehr als nur/ Vergangnes war und vor uns nicht die Zukunft./ Wir wuchsen freilich und wir drängten manchmal,/ bald groß zu werden, denen halb zulieb,/ die andres nicht mehr hatten, als das Großsein./ Und waren doch in unserem Alleingehn/ mit Dauerndem vergnügt und standen da/ im Zwischenraume zwischen Welt und Spielzeug,/ an einer Stelle, die seit Anbeginn/ gegründet war für einen reinen Vorgang (44).

The portrait of the child serves to epitomize the speaker's longing for a world in which consciousness and object, namely the toy, still interacted purely without disrupting the self from reality. Through the play of the child "kommt zusammen, was wir immerfort/ entzwein, indem wir da sind" (44). Because man, the 'mothers and fathers', is a social being he cannot but try to influence his world and anticipate the outcome. Thus, the state of "childlike" harmony is only temporary, since even the small child "wenden wir um und zwingens, daß es rückwärts/ Gestaltung sehe, nicht das Offne, das/ im Tiergesicht so tief ist. Frei von Tod" (66).

Due to the fact that humankind is banished from the realm of essence, and thus forced to exist plainly in a meaningless world, only a true hero, the speaker succinctly reflects in his next elegy, might be the happiest among his fellow beings. The hero's existence is simply that: he exists for his own pleasure without expectations, pretense, limitations, and norms. "Wunderlich nah ist der Held doch den jugendlich Toten. Dauern/ ficht ihn nicht an. Sein Aufgang ist Dasein" (54), the speaker enviously contends. This insight on the speaker's part is significant for the understanding of why the seventh elegy is so very different in its tone from the previous ones. "Werbung nicht mehr, nicht Werbung, entwachsene Stimme,/ sei deines Schreies Natur" (58), starts the seventh elegy with "a voice that has reached maturity" (Pettersson, 734). After having carefully thought about every station in life – from infancy to childhood, from adolescence to adulthood, from birth to death – the "lyrical I" has acquired a new appreciation of life. To live a full life is a *heroic* effort in itself and humankind does not need the angels' comfort. On the contrary, the angels should be in awe of humankind's achievements: "O staune, Engel, denn *wir* sinds,/ wir, o du Großer, erzähls, daß wir solches vermochten, mein Atem/ reicht für die Rühmung nicht aus" (62). With his "Adern voll Dasein" (60), the speaker disdainfully dismisses the angels' order and directs his attention now wholeheartedly to the task at hand – to put forward answers to the question of how to live in this irrational and meaningless, world and to find ways of dealing with one's existence so as to make life meaningful. In order to teach others his newly developed wisdom, the speaker aims his and our focus to the realm of nature, to the animals to be precise.

Like Heinrich von Kleist before him, Rilke sees the "brute," the animal, superior to human beings. The animal's lack of consciousness and reflection unites it with its environment. Its existence is purely instinctive, innocent, unproblematic, and without the inner disruption that man's self-consciousness affects. The animal's own being, the speaker informs us, "ist ihm/ unendlich, ungefaßt und ohne Blick/ auf seinen Zustand, rein, so wie sein Ausblick./ Und wo wir Zukunft sehn, dort sieht es Alles/ und sich in Allem und geheilt für immer" (68). The animal lacks "die innere Gespaltenheit des Selbstbewußtseins [...] während das menschliche Leben ein immerwährendes Etwas-Tun, bewußtes und gegenständliches Dasein [...] bedeutet"[26]. Man's ill fortune is that he cannot observe his world without distinct definitions and demarcations: "Immer ist es Welt/ und niemals Nirgends ohne Nicht" (66). The hero and the young child comprehend the idea of "knowing without craving," and are on that account closer to the domain of nature, and for this reason to a more wholesome or "truer" form of existence than "wir: Zuschauer, immer, überall" (70)[27]. To open our perception to the unknown, the "Offene," or in other words "den reinen Raum" (66), we have to learn to let go of our preconceptions to be able to mend the "split in our existence that human consciousness causes"[28].

The textual structure of the elegies' is defined by the division into "menschliche[ ] und kreatürliche[ ] Erlebensweise," as Manfred Engel writes (*Moderne Lyrik,* 176). Thus, on a narrative level, the reader encounters numerous levels of dichotomies, complementary oppositions, and "interrelated multiple contrasts" (Pettersson, 737). Rilke uses the thought of humankind's inherent need to reflect and compare to construct the lyrical form of his elegies in a likewise manner – it is contrastive and antithetic. The most obvious level is composed around the contrast of the animal realm and humankind's perception of reality. Within the human reality we find the polarities of childhood and adulthood, the lovers and the lonely hearts, life and death. On another level, Rilke takes everyday occurrences and "Oberflächenerscheinungen" (van Stockum, 111) and contrasts them with their counterparts. To list just a few, we come upon:

- Elegy I: beauty *vs*. terror; full *vs*. empty; silence *vs*. sound; human world *vs*. cosmic space
- Elegy II: humankind *vs*. divinity
- Elegy III: familiar *vs*. unfamiliar; order *vs*. chaos; light *vs*. darkness; water *vs*. fire; love *vs*. hate
- Elegy IV: past *vs*. future; decay *vs*. growth; lovers *vs*. enemies
- Elegy V: joy *vs*. despair; misery *vs*. bliss
- Elegy VI: sleep *vs*. awake; young *vs*. old; sweet *vs*. bitter
- Elegy VII: negation *vs*. affirmation; inner *vs.* outer; visible *vs.* invisible
- Elegy VIII: finite *vs.* infinite; consciousness *vs.* unconsciousness
- Elegy IX: departure *vs.* arrival; heavenly *vs.* earthly; known *vs.* unknown
- Elegy X: transience *vs.* permanence; lamenting *vs.* rejoicing; pain *vs.* comfort

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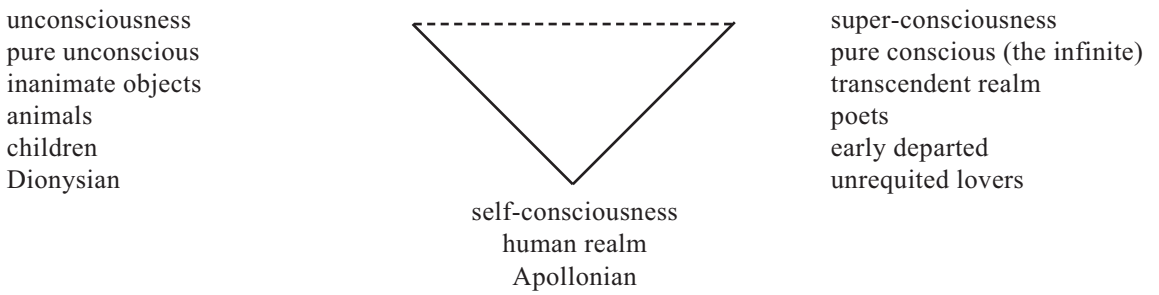
[26] Cf. Th.C. van Stockum, "Der gedankliche Hintergrund von Rilkes Duineser Elegien," *Neophilologus,* 32 (1948): 112. See also Jacob Steiner's essay "Zeit und Raum in den Duineser Elegien," *Blätter der Rilke-Gesellschaft,* 20 (1993): 11-21. Steiner writes: "Das Wesen der Engel und das Dasein der einfachen Kreatur besagen ex negativo schon viel über den Menschen. Er verstellt sich mit einem Bewußtsein das 'Offene' und das 'Freie' der unmittelbaren Befindlichkeit in der 'Schöpfung'. Er ist nicht in der Schöpfung wie die Kreatur, sondern ihr 'zugewendet', das heißt, er steht ihr 'gegenüber'" (12).

[27] Rilke explained his eighth elegy in a letter from February 25, 1926, saying that, "diese Achte Elegie ruft ja indessen den Liebenden nur vorübergehend auf, um eine menschliche Verfassung zu zeigen, die, einen Augenblick, jene Sicht ins Offene gewähren mag, von der ich vermute, daß sie des Tieres (in unserem Sinne) 'Sorglossein' ausmacht. Sie müssen den Begriff des 'Offenen', den ich in dieser Elegie vorzuschlagen versucht habe, *so* auffassen, daß der Bewußtseinsgrad des Tieres es in die Welt einsetzt, ohne daß es sie sich (wie wir es tun) jeden Moment gegenüber stellt; das Tier ist *in* der Welt; wir stehen *vor ihr* durch die eigentümliche Wendung und Steigerung, die unser Bewußtsein genommen hat [...] Mit dem 'Offenen' ist also nicht Himmel, Luft und Raum gemeint, auch *die* sind, für den Betrachter und Beurteiler, 'Gegenstand' und somit 'opaque' und zu" (*Letters,* 326).

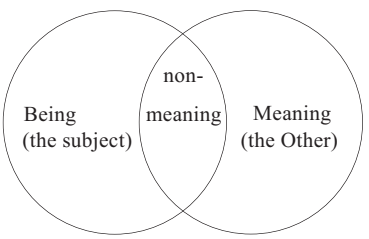
[28] Cf. David Oswald, "Rilke's importance to Jungian Psychology," *Rilke-Rezeptionen/Rilke Reconsidered*, Eds. Sigrid Bauschinger and Susan L. Cocalis (Tübingen: Francke, 1995): 138. In a similar manner Jacob Steiner writes, "der Mensch [ist] durch sein Bewußtsein gezwungen [...], immerfort die Welt zu deuten. Er stellt sein eigenes Ich in den Mittelpunkt und deutet von da aus die Zeit als Vergangenheit, Gegenwart und Zukunft" (13).

As shown, nouns, verbs, and adjectives are constantly differentiated from their antonyms, and through this process deconstruct their own meaning. Additionally, on yet another level, Rilke employs words that pertain to our five senses: "hören" (22, 24); "Geruch" (28); "schmecken" (30, 42); "greifen" (30); "berühren" (32); "schauen" (42). Again, Rilke puts them in opposition to their antipodes, such as "unsäglich" (30, 74); "unkenntlich" (34); "lautlos" (38, 52); "unsichtbar" (76). Once more, the meaning of these words is continually undermined by their opposites. Clearly, Rilke tells us that, although we can perceive the phenomenal world with our senses, we do not have a sense for that which is unknown and invisible. Also, senses are subjective and can sometimes deceive us. This Kantian logic then leaves us with the outcome that nothing really exists as it is presented, and we are ultimately left with nothing but a chain of essentially empty signifiers without a signified.

In order to clarify some of Rilke's philosophical assumptions in his *Elegies*, we have to examine his underlying and fundamental belief about transitory human existence and that of pure essence. Rilke puts the human realm of self-consciousness between the spheres of unconsciousness, where he situates inanimate objects, animals and children, and super-consciousness, i.e., the transcendent realm of absolute essence. The following diagram will illustrate Rilke's thesis[29]:



As shown, the human realm is both open to the unconscious space that animals inhabit, and to the transcendental sphere to which unrequited lovers have access – "Menschen," as Manfred Engel puts it, "[haben] an beiden Bereichen teil[ ], ohne je einem ganzen anzugehören" ("Verstehen", 13). Although the similarity of Rilke's thoughts to those of Heinrich von Kleist in his famous piece "On the Puppet Theater" is obvious, Rilke, in opposition to Kleist, sees a forward progression towards the realm of the super-consciousness as the solely possible way of getting closer to the very core of existence, essence, and reality[30]. Borrowing from Lacan's model of alienation, one could say that the subject has to attempt to include essence into existence without getting separated from its existence or "Being," as Lacan calls it, i.e., without losing itself in nothingness. Explaining the "root of alienation," Lacan came up with this illustration[31]:

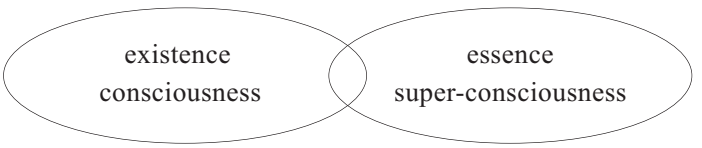


29 Also see Kathleen L. Komar, op. cit.: 10.

30 Kurt Bergel writes in his essay "Rilke's Fourth Duino Elegy and Kleist's essay *Über das Marionettentheater*," *Modern Language Notes,* 60 (1945), that Rilke had become very familiar with Kleist's works after he had asked his publisher Anton Kippenberg in 1913 "to send him a complete edition of Kleist's works" (73).

31 Cf. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* (New York: Norton, 1981): 211.

Lacan explains his diagram in this way: "If we choose being, the subject disappears, it eludes us, it falls into non-meaning. If we choose meaning, the meaning survives only deprived of that part of non-meaning that is, strictly speaking, that which constitutes in the realization of the subject, the unconscious. In other words, it is of the nature of this meaning, as it emerges in the field of the Other, to be in a large part of its field, eclipsed by the disappearance of being" (211). If we slightly alter and transfer this illustration to Rilke's *Elegies*, the drawing would look as follows:



Quoting from Lacan, we could state that "if we choose existence as subject, we deprive ourselves of essence and meaning, but if we choose essence, we cannot have existence." "Therefore, the choice, then, is a matter of knowing whether one wishes to preserve one of the parts" (Lacan, 211). The speaker in Rilke's *Elegies* chooses existence, and willingly accepts his humanness and destiny,

> Weil Hiersein viel ist, und weil uns scheinbar/ alles das Hiesige braucht, dieses Schwindende, das/ seltsam uns angeht. Uns, die Schwindendsten. Einmal/ jedes, nur einmal. Einmal und nichtmehr. Und wir auch/ einmal. Nie wieder. Aber dieses/ einmal gewesen zu sein, wenn auch nur einmal:/ *irdisch* gewesen zu sein, scheint nicht widerrufbar (72).

Still, he also realizes that authenticity as a human being includes the realization of the transitory human condition. We have a life that ultimately leads to death, and though we dread that conclusion, it is nevertheless part of the cycle. Comprehending that birth and death – the unequivocal state of absolute essence – form a totality, that is, we have to become familiar with the "vertrauliche Tod" (76), will make us aware of our finitude. In the end, this awareness constitutes our sense of meaning and essence, responsibility, and our freedom for transformation. That is why the speaker no longer woos the angels and he advises us to do the same:

> Preise dem Engel die Welt, nicht die unsägliche, ihm/ kannst du nicht großtun mit herrlich Erfühltem; im Weltall,/ wo er fühlender fühlt, bist du ein Neuling. Drum zeig/ ihm das Einfache, das, von Geschlecht zu Geschlechtern gestaltet,/ als ein Unsriges lebt neben der Hand und im Blick./ Sag ihm die Dinge (74-76).

As a result, "[erwächst] aus der positiven Einstellung zu den vergänglichen Dingen und aus deren produktivem Rühmen [...] dem Ich die positive Einstellung zur eigenen Vergänglichkeit. Dann ist der Tod nicht mehr der feindliche Gegensatz zum Leben wie in der gedeuteten Welt, sondern er ist 'vertraulich' geworden" (Steiner, 20). It is therefore no mystery why the last elegy is filled with the speaker's exhilaration, even though its imagery evokes pain and suffering. The allegory of the "city of pain" (79) and the "landscape of lamentation" (83) that the speaker relates is essential to the interpretation of the whole cycle of the *Elegies*, as it portrays to us that "rather than attempting to curtail our suffering, we should [...] accept it as a part of existence that is both perdurable and somehow beautiful" (Pettersson, 741). Then, and only then can we find "einen heileren Zustand in der Mitte des eigenen Wesens"[32].

An adequate platform for providing a glimpse of a meaningful state of being is, in Rilke's opinion, poetry as the poet is closest to the realm of transcendence. Similar to Thomas Mann, the mediating stance of the artist plays a crucial role in Rilke's works. Rilke saw the function of art as

[32] About the many failed attempts at interpreting the tenth elegy, Pettersson writes: "Within the traditional interpretation, critics have had difficulties fitting the Tenth Elegy into their account of the cycle because it seems to take off in a new direction; it has even been suggested that the cycle would be better off without it" (740).

mediation between humankind and a transcendent realm, which he, however, did not perceive as a divine sphere, but rather as the "other" side of reality, i.e., the essence of being. In his "Marginalien zu Friedrich Nietzsche," Rilke writes, "das Dionysische Leben ist ein unbegrenztes In-Allem-Leben, zu dem der Alltag sich wie eine lächerliche kleine Verkleidung verhält. Aber da vermittelt die Kunst die Erfahrung, daß diese Verkleidung die einzige Möglichkeit bietet von Zeit zu Zeit in die großen Zusammenhänge einzutreten, die, über Momente und Metamorphosen hin, sich ausspannen"[33]. Consequently, art's task is twofold: it has to make humankind realize its limitations and will simultaneously bring about a heightened (self-)consciousness to enable man to reexperience reality. "Künstlerische Tätigkeit wird damit zum Paradigma [...] eines herrschaftsfreien, spontanen und spielerischen Bezugs zwischen Ich und Welt, Ich und Du" (Engel, "Verstehen" 18).

While Rilke explores the different stages of consciousness in the first part of his *Elegies* and feels trapped in the human condition, that is, the existence of his consciousness, he comes to realize during this exploration that humankind cannot move backwards to an unconscious state of being, like that of the animal, but rather needs to move forward towards the realm of super-consciousness. The solution that Rilke posits is the act of internalizing the outside world, to bring about the union of self and world, inside and outside, subject and object: "Nirgends, Geliebte, wird Welt sein, als innen. Unser/ Leben geht hin mit Verwandlung. Und immer geringer/ schwindet das Außen" (60). Since humankind is faced with nothingness and the inevitability of passing away, it needs to reflect about the transience of its existence and the imminence of death as both parts of the circle of life, the "yin and yang." The freedom of will, even though, as Schopenhauer would suggest, it might cause us pain, has to become the driving and determining force. As Rilke writes in a letter on January 6, 1923,

> Ich will nicht sagen, daß man den Tod *lieben* soll; aber man soll das Leben so großmütig, so ohne Rechnen und Auswählen lieben, daß man unwillkürlich ihn (des Lebens abgekehrte Hälfte) immerfort mit einbezieht, ihn mitliebt [...] Unser effort (dies ist mir immer deutlicher geworden mit den Jahren, und meine Arbeit hat vielleicht nur noch den *einen* Sinn und Auftrag, von dieser Einsicht, die mich so oft unerwartet überwältigt, immer unparteiischer und unabhängiger ... seherischer vielleicht, wenn das nicht zu stolz klingt ... Zeugnis abzulegen), ... unser effort, mein ich, kann *nur* dahin gehen, die *Einheit* von Leben und Tod vorauszusetzen, damit sie sich uns nach und nach erweise (*Letters,* 283).

Rilke proposes that humankind build a meaningful relationship with an absolute, but to do so, needs to strive for complete self-realization beforehand. And as such, on man alone depends the possibility of creating a meaningful and authentic existence. In the end, the speaker comes to terms with the "phenomenal world," and confirms the human existence with all its flaws by joyously shouting "Hiersein ist herrlich" (60)[34].

After a long and oftentimes painful searching for the meaning of existence, the "lyrical I" realizes that interaction with the physical world rather than flight will help humankind to escape from its solipsism. He finally claims "that true joy only makes itself known to us when we are open to it within our consciousness, when we, like the child at play, can take in the outside world and transform it within our consciousness to create the unity that we lose by our alienated self-consciousness" (Komar 130). This rejuvenated awareness of the power within the self allows the poet to shift his poetic aim away from transcendence, the topic that, for example, romanticism depicted, toward the

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33 Cf. Rainer Maria Rilke, "Marginalien zu Friedrich Nietzsche-'Die Geburt der Tragödie'," *Sämtliche Werke*, Vol. 12 (Frankfurt: Insel, 1975): 1165.

34 In a letter from October 9, 1918, at the conclusion of World War I, Rilke writes: "Ich habe mich alle die Jahre nicht gefragt (es wäre unvorsichtig gewesen es zu tun), wie sehr ich noch bei aller Trübsal, Wirrnis und Entstellung der Welt an die großen, an die vollkommenen, weithin unerschöpflichen Möglichkeiten des Lebens glaube [...] Und da bekenne ich denn [...], daß ich das Leben für ein Ding von der unantastbarsten Köstlichkeit halte, und daß die Verknotung so vieler Verhängnisse und Entsetzlichkeiten, die Preisgebung so zahlloser Schicksale, alles, was uns diese letzten Jahre zu einem immer noch zunehmenden Schrecken unüberwindlich angewachsen ist: mich nicht irre machen kann an der Fülle und Güte und Zugeneigtheit des Daseins" (*Letters,* 147).

newly defined task of modern art, which is transformation. With that concept in mind, the poet then is able to teach his fellow human beings to be more receptive to reality, to experience existence in every moment, through every object, be it inanimate or animate[35].

A closer look at Rilke's work shows the modern writer's concern with the superficiality of existence and reality. Rilke endeavors to break the surface in order to get beneath it, to unveil the fallacy of the phenomenal world. He tries to search for the unknowable behind the obvious structure of order, the hidden inside underneath the outside, and thus brings the deceptive physical world into question. Humankind's crisis, its limited perception and existence, is caused by its fractured relationship with the world around it. It can only be mended if the self and reality, the subject and object try to establish a correlation in which the dialectics of subject and object are annihilated. Then, and only then, can they partake in an envisioned wholeness, a condition strongly advocated by Rilke in his elegies.

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[35] Similarly, Rilke writes in the "Marginalien zu Friedrich Nietzsche" about the poet, his art, and his responsibility towards mankind: "Etwas *den Menschen* (und nicht den Menschen eines Standes, einer Zeit, einer Moral*) den Menschen überhaupt* Gemeinsames muß hinter der Handlung, wie eine verbindende Erinnerung, die *sie alle einer gemeinsamen Kindheit* [emphasis added] sich besinnen heißt, aufstehen und *dort*, *nicht* innerhalb der verhältnismäßig zufälligen Szene, muß sich das Bedeutende, Erlösende ereignen" (1168).

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