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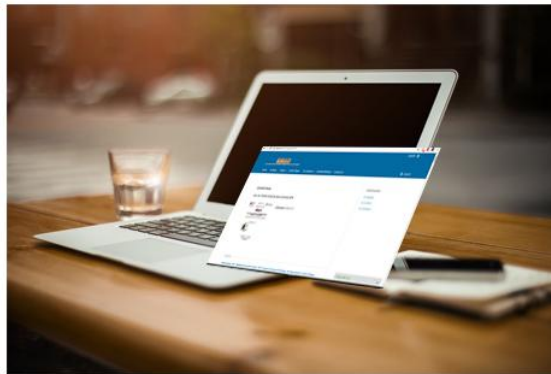
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Being and Death in Rilke's Duino Elegies

Abstract

The German poet and novelist Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926) composed the Duino Elegies, regarded as one of the greatest works of modernist poetry, in two creative bursts between 1912 and 1922. Separated by the First World War, the elegies bear an indelible impression of death. The later decade had already manifested a discernible shift in the world as well as in Rilke's poetics, who had already become considerably interested in what he called the "Angelic" mode of consciousness, which is a fuller consciousness borne out of interweaving life and death, and transcends the limitations of temporal existence. I argue that the desire for death manifest in the elegies is not only the desire for fullness from which the modern spirit has been extricated, but that the work strives to articulate this peculiar mode of absence and dispossession. This is charted in language through non-representative images borne out of a commitment to impersonal death. However, a reversion to the ecstasies of the world and to language celebrates the contradictoriness of being and acquires an urgency within the narrative. The rejection of transcendence for immanence is what I have called a transformative death whereby which the text affirms itself.

Dying and its relation to the transient and Angelic:

The literary critic Maurice Blanchot discerns in Rilke the integrity to undergo the unremitting horror of dying, where dying lies beyond the ambit of historical or merely personal calamities. Dying pertains to the consciousness which is imperilled by an indeterminate life in a transitory and finite world of fleeting appearances. How does one remain intact knowing well that "Only we/pass everything by like an exchange of air?" (Rilke 14). The act of embracing death, therefore, is to be undergone in sincerity, he advocates, without the possibility of a transcendent desire for mastering it. Dying on one's own terms by imposing

untenable limits on death delegitimizes it by betraying the profound maturity of resigning to the gravitas that it bears. To attempt to escape suffering, or “eluding the unbearable” overlooks the immanent forces at work in the elegiac moment: “Should not these ancient sufferings be finally/ fruitful for us?” (Rilke 10).

Rilke imagines death as a fruit, slowly maturing within us, a secret gesture that does not require so much decoding as patience and endurance. Suffering is to be traversed to reach the pure centre where the terror of the event becomes reversible, and can be overcome. In this regard, Blanchot’s insistence that “[t]he word overcome is one of the words poetry needs” pertains to overcoming subjectivity itself, which, on the one hand is demonstrated in the technological and global permeation of modernist sensibilities in twentieth century art (119). It also, paradoxically harkens the individual’s desolation in an increasingly mechanized and faithless world, and comes close to the note of transcendence sounded in Rilke’s (speaker’s) searing cry on the wind-swept cliffs surrounding the castle at Duino “Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the Angelic/ Orders?” (8). Blanchot conceives of death as doubly folded, one as the appellation of dying according to one’s own self, and finally, as a reversion to eternity, the immanent, which manifests for man as impersonal and anonymous death.

This is where awareness leads the speaker to recognize the ineffable, searing truth of dying that relentlessly impinges upon life. Death, therefore, for Rilke, is nothing short of imagining the unimaginable, an undoing of the very limits of finitude. More than physical cessation, death would entail a falsity of consciousness that is shackled to the ego, and that allocates meaning to experience. The paper intends to underline the significance of language in imagining a death liberated of the systems of representation, and in so doing links Rilke’s conception of death to Blanchot’s conception of language in *The Space of Literature*. Language ultimately provides a space for the transformative encounter that is death—that reorients us to what Rilke refers to as the “Open” which is not bound to the mimetic reproduction of images in reality, but a space in which thought congeals and turns toward itself. This image of condensation, of distillation is embodied in the immanence of the Angels. What begins on the note of Angelic in the first elegy achieves its final culmination in an expansion of the present into the infinite in the final elegy. The Angels, as Rilke himself pointed out in a 1925 letter to his Polish translator Witold Hulewicz, are not to be understood as the deities of Biblical antiquity, but self-contained creatures “in whom the transformation of the visible into the invisible, which we perform, appears already complete” (quoted in *Ars*,

Arte et Labore). The enigmatic “entities” stand at the very limits of representation, of understanding our approach to life.

Keeping the harrowing effects of World War I on a generation disoriented by the overthrow of prevailing order in mind, one can recognize the impossibility of transcendence sounded in the speaker’s lament “Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the Angelic/ Orders?”. However, it becomes a concerted poetic feat of placating death by fixing the gaze on the finitude of the lived world. The dead corpse (of mutilated soldiers) lie scattered in the ambivalent realm between the objective world of inanimate objects and the world that surpasses mortality. In the first, death is matter in stasis, immovable, a seeming representation of a former body and a name it once inhabited, while in the latter it seems unknowable and irreducible, as something altogether distinct from its former avatar. The recognition of death coexists with the failure of representing death. This is also evident in Blanchot’s account of war atrocities:

Mass-produced death, ready-made in bulk for all and in which each disappears hastily; death as an anonymous product, an object without value, like the things of the modern world which Rilke always rejected... (122)

In seeing death as a causal end, we conceive of mortality as a terrible finitude. In contrast to the inexpressible horror stemming from being torn off from our transient and material attachments, Rilke’s poetics entail death as enabling a revelation of the world above and beyond the eyes of deadened perception. Death in the *Duino Elegies* relates to precisely what is effaced by this habitual life, and the poet initially attempts to invisibilize or congeal the visible universe and its paraphernalia. Human beings are deprived of access to the elusive realm in which the Angels reside, and concomitantly to the unified consciousness these embody. This is the point Blanchot picks up, when he insists on approaching death as an authentic process that is to be apprehended through suffering, and not tamed artificially. Death, in Rilke’s eyes becomes a transformative encounter to cull imaginative vigour from the anguish of contemplating loss and transience, for the maturation of the spirit which is overlapped onto the development of the poetic work.

The detection of what the speaker deems the “destructiveness” and “disdain” of the Angels in the *First Elegy* gives way for a declaration of his alienation from both the world of “men” and the “resourceful creatures” who recognise his/their discomfort in the “interpreted world” (8).

At the point where the articulation of loss seems to falter, the reader swerves from the inexorable isolation of the singular first person (“I hold myself back and swallow the cry/ of a darkened sobbing”) to a collective third person voice (“we are not really at home/ in the interpreted world”) that underlines this irrevocable slippage of being, rather than evoking a consolatory elegiac assurance (8). The speaker then innocuously shifts to the second-person addressee who is a rhetorical stand-in for the distracted man swept up in the currents of his “expectation”. The addressee is then reoriented to being supremely receptive of the intangible emanations of a wave that “lifted towards you out of the past, or, as you walked/ past an open window, a violin/ (that) gave of itself” (Rilke 10). One is extrapolated and carried off into the furthest purview of the known and inhabited world through momentarily inhabiting certain affects and intensities in this estranging and defamiliarizing process. Upon revisiting the searing existential anguish of the speaker’s cry, albeit inaudible in the “Angelic” orders, one finds affirmation of the cathartic effect of art, the profundity of inspiration. Judith Ryan puts it eloquently:

The first elegy poses the question of inspiration, claiming that, although no heavenly figure will come at our beck and call in this post-classical age, the poet would do well to listen to the voices that still resonate in nature and vouchsafe an impression of what it would be like to have transcended bodily existence... (120)

Beyond Representation: Ways out of the Self

The Second Elegy interrogates this very affirmation of art by revealing modern life as shunned from a divine afflatus which was once available to us in ancient times. Accordingly, it attempts to configure the Angel in terms of a language that evokes a “distant intimacy” by fusing a physical term with its transcendent counterpart, as in the phrase “shields of bliss” (Rilke 13). The narrator strays into wondering if the Angels embody only “what has streamed out of them” or if they also capture “sometimes, as if by an oversight, something/ of our being as well?” (Rilke 14). The “mountain-chains”, “pollen of flowering godhead” evoked in the same breath as “corridors, stairs, thrones” produce an effect of the immensity and equilibrium of the Angelic that give way to “spaces of being” projected in fleeting moments of “bliss” and “delight” of the lovers (Rilke 13). Their erotic fulfilment, though fleeting, counteracts the abiding sense of self-dissolution that haunts our lives. In fact, the narrator, failing to simulate a semblance of the “Angelic” in language, reverts to the world of fleeting forms to utter that “Appearance, endlessly, stands up, /in their face, and goes by” (Rilke 14). The moment of pure

solitude embodied in the image of the lovers in embrace hinges on the eternal, and in fact, attests to the irreducibility of the Angelic. The ecstasy of fuller illumination is condensed in the “suddenness” of solitary mirrors refracting the image of the soul.

However, human rational consciousness seems intrinsically bent on filling in the fissures in its knowledge and accrues a superfluity that becomes increasingly isolated from the world at large. The guilty conscience of the speaker then peers toward the animal. Liberated from memory as well as language, the animal is depicted in the Eighth Elegy as looking over the “pure space” of a world as unfathomable as itself. It is not impeded by gazing “backwards” or contemplating “what is settled” (Rilke 39). Blanchot describes the pure space as one of non-relationality, one that is freed from the tyranny of representation:

The animal is where it looks, and its look does not reflect it, nor does it reflect the thing, but opens the animal onto the thing. The other side, then, which Rilke also calls "the pure relation," is the purity of the relation: the fact of being, in this relation, outside oneself, in the thing itself, and not in a representation of the thing(134).

Though implicated in the world, the human being finds an immersion in things elusive, and though gifted with the possibility of transcendence in consciousness and in art (what is called “promise’s play” in the Seventh Elegy), reaching it seems improbable (Rilke 35). It is by imagining the countenance and instinctive oneness of the animal with its habitation that the speaker must unearth the edifice that is death.

Stranded between the Angel and the animal, between two orders of certainty and congealment, the human comes closest to a degree of self-preservation in the figure of the tragic hero. Motivated solely by the impulse to act without heeding the consequences, they are often those who “vanish prematurely/ in whom Death the gardener wove different veins” (Rilke 32). Like the fig tree spawning fruits without efflorescence, the hero hastens into action, and his glory is preserved, undiminished in death. Rilke’s transfiguration of death by embracing the vicissitudes of existence is a turn toward tragic heroism: “Since near to death one no longer sees death,/and stares ahead, perhaps with the large gaze of the creature” (Rilke 39). The reversion to animality in this respect is an attempt to evade the insularity of self-consciousness and furthermore a strategic conceptualization of an impersonal and anonymous death, death neither to be possessed nor disowned, but reinvigorated:

Death would seem, then, to be the dearth which we must generously fill... and which is terrifying only because of the distress that separates it from us. To sustain, to fashion our nothingness -- such is the task. We must be the figurers and the poets of our death (Blanchot 125).

The evolution of consciousness therefore has to resist signification, or modes of self-representation, which impede our being in the world. Our estrangement in the world is attributed to an intensification of self-consciousness with which we approximate the world. The process of naming and thus making ephemeral objects intelligible that in turn defines our places within the social order clearly cannot be applied for animal consciousness, or love. Lovers, particularly those for whom love is unrequited, project another possibility of escaping the insularity of self-consciousness. Rather than bringing about satiation in and a fusion of identity with the beloved, love is evinced as an asignifying organism unfurling onto eternity, in which the lover and the beloved become otherized:

Lovers, each satisfied in the other, I ask
you about us. You grasp yourselves. Have you a sign?...
...I know
you touch so blissfully because the caress withholds,
because the place you cover so tenderly
does not disappear: because beneath it you feel
pure duration. So that you promise eternity
almost, from the embrace (Rilke 15).

In the Fifth Elegy, the lovers are depicted as leaning on each other's timorous bodies, almost suspended in vacuum. The supreme feat of weightless flight they are captured in is revoked as it seems to have happened in a place where "their towers of desire, their ladders" had been standing for long "where there was no ground" (Rilke 31). Lovers can delve into the consciousness of another, but the unrequited lover holds the distinct possibility of approaching existence by an individuation of consciousness. The transcendence that the romantic narrative initially promises by way of the possibility of a complete immersion in the other is a temporary illusion.

The distance from the beloved that is essential for transcendence seems to be a lesson Rilke has inherited from his own amorous experiences. His correspondence with the older Lou

Andreas-Salome reveals his initial disillusionment with love after her decision to avert monogamous fidelity to him, which plunged him into desolation. He came out of the profound despair plunging headlong into the sanctity of his new found seclusion, realizing the need to interiorize seclusion into being. Such is then the profundity of love then that eludes reciprocity and possession, and renders the visible delights of the world into an invisible interiority, into renunciation and release. In the words of Blanchot again,

In the world things are transformed into objects in order to be grasped, utilized, made more certain in the distinct rigor of their limits and the affirmation of a homogeneous and divisible space. But in imaginary space things are transformed into that which cannot be grasped. Out of use, beyond wear, they are not in our possession but are the movement of dispossession which releases us both from them and from ourselves(140).

Love is divested of its commitment to a body, an entity acknowledged as possession. In its holistic form, it is the immemorial resurrection of an eternity, figured as a landscape, conceived as a fissure in the continual progression of time.

See, we don't love like flowers, in a
single year: when we love, an ancient
sap rises in our arms. O, girls,
this: that we loved inside us, not one to come, but
the immeasurable seething: not a single child,
but the fathers: resting on our depths
like the rubble of mountains: the dry river-beds
of those who were mothers - : the whole
silent landscape under a clouded or
clear destiny - : girls, this came before you. (Rilke 83)

The "Open" and the finite

Though systems of representations undermine the recognition of a holistic consciousness, the speaker had already acknowledged the difficulty of "set(ting) aside even one's own/ proper name like a broken plaything" (Rilke 11). The speaker becomes particularly aware of firstly the insufficiency of interpretation, and subsequently of a profound excess – of the world

overwhelming the boundaries of representative thinking. How and when can the demarcation between the subject and object dissolve to allow for a complete immersion in the world unmediated by critical interference, is one of the central preoccupations of the elegies. Though the precise key to unlocking this secret (“locked rooms”/ “understanding which holds back in amazement”) remains undisclosed (and it is not a deliberate misleading, as we will see), one is made acutely aware of the unremitting intensification of the “elusive”, of the subsequent suffering and the need to endure it: “sadness is often/ the source of a blessed progress” (Rilke Letter Four, 12). “You must live your problems”, Rilke writes in a 1903 letter to the “young poet” Herr Kappus:

If you attach yourself to Nature, ... which can unexpectedly turn into the great and the immeasurable, if you have this love for what is slight, and try quite simply as a servant to win the confidence of what appears to you as poor, then everything will become easier for you, more uniform and somehow more reconciling, not perhaps in the understanding, which holds back in amazement, but in your innermost consciousness, watchfulness and knowledge... Have patience with all unsolved problems in your heart and try to love the questions themselves like locked rooms, or books that are written in a foreign tongue (Letter Four).

This then is the key to unlocking Rilke’s elusive and dense figuration in the later elegies, which refuse to reveal or reconcile. The turn towards transforming the physical world from within consciousness rather than transcendence vitalizes us. From the seventh elegy onwards, it is the world and its embodiments appraised and upheld to the Angels as if for their praise, their contemplation. Otherwise, it is the cohesion of the Angel and the puppet which produces a play that unites “what we endlessly separate, / merely by being” (Rilke 24). Man is relegated to the status of external observer, peering into the observable world—his self-consciousness barring him from joining this cohesive cycle between the all-conscious Angel and the unconscious puppet. The death of conscious being ought to liberate the poet from the cyclical bind of existence and turn to the movements of interior life so as to transform things such as they are no longer nameable, into words that do not capitulate to mastery. The world and consciousness are made to work on each other in the text in ways that do not adduce to the impetus for subjectivity or its transcendence, but rather to a reorientation towards the Open. The Open heralds Rilke’s modernist yearning for a timeless whole, an integrity not mediated by language. In the case of the animal, the intimation we have of the Open is

through its face, turned the other way, which then reciprocates our gaze and enables us to glimpse a vision of the Open in turn. The animal's gaze becomes the abyss in which our interpretations of death collapse, for it is the animal that truly effaces death. The animal encompasses a radical otherness that remains impervious to, though thoroughly aware of our gaze, and which has transported itself beyond the demand for reciprocity. For Blanchot, "this fruition of the visible in the invisible for which we are responsible, is the very task of dying..." (140).

To be certain, the Open is not mirrored on any face or surface, as on a mirror, but rather glimpsed through its cracks, through the slippages of a language that closes in on itself. The uncertainty of the Open is something Rilke essentially relays back onto the world of forms and fragments, to evince the inadequacy of our material proximities, and of a desire understood in the valence of stable and recognizable forms. If "staying is nowhere", as the speaker asserts in the first elegy, this then would imply a poetic reimagining of a world liberated of desire, of mourning (Rilke 10). It is also the function of memory to retain that elegiac moment for future recapitulation, and it is an imbrication in desire itself that facilitates the poetic monument, the attempt to linguistically convey the peculiar confluence of confinement and openness. Rilke initially begins to suggest this space not in its own terms, but rather as a negation of the spatial world ("nowhere-ness"), as a denial of "futuraity". Hovering phantom-like "loosely in space", floating in the "eternal current/ (that) sweeps all the ages", the Angels are not only those abstractions that have outgrown; but they come to serve as a referent for the Open, the unfathomable and unreachable that define our aspiration for this pure space (Rilke 11). Interestingly, Kathleen L. Komar contends that in the eighth elegy, Rilke moves away from a negation of the self to a cohesive experience of the world that lies beyond semantic markers, and that is accessed through a non-linear thinking of time (91). A slow and sustained distillation of the forces of the world impute another kind of life that is "sayable", and that commemorates the panoply of its objects--- the "house, bridge, fountain, gate, jug, fruit-tree, window" and the like (Rilke 46 44). The ninth elegy marks a return to language to project the interior and transfigured world, where one must "speak" of and from the "speechless heart", and bear "witness" in the "overflowing gaze" (Rilke 43 45). The Angels, Rilke suggests rather audaciously, would look to transience for deliverance, and urge us to transform them into "us" (46).

"Intimacy of Conversion" as the Poet's Work

“It is as if he were sure that there is in us, on account of the very fact that we are "turned away," the possibility of turning back, the promise of an essential reconversion” (Blanchot 136).

The return to language and consciousness as charted above requires an intensification of awareness such that we are no longer confined in linear time; however, human beings are not only peculiarly bound to their mortality and its contemplation, but also desire transformation. One resists the ossification of identity and ultimately gives oneself over to the profound urge of transformation. The capitulation into this transformative zeal in the ninth elegy is thoroughly embedded in sensate existence:

...But this
 once, to have been, though only once,
 to have been an earthly thing – seems irrevocable (Rilke 43)

This, then is the “irrevocable” and singular import of being, one that cannot be transferred over to the transcendent realm, and that unfolds in intimate concordance with the Earth:

...oh, for a saying such as the things themselves would never
 have profoundly said. Is not the secret intent
 of this discreet Earth to draw lovers on,
 so that each and every thing is delight within their feeling?(Rilke 44)

The artistic self in its heightened consciousness repudiates the provenance of the “unsayable” here and submits itself to the “Earth” as it surges within (Rilke 44). In this poetry of the Earth, time is absorbed into space. The “nights of anguish” which till now had formed part of “the seasons of our inner year” have become “place, settlement, camp, soil”(Rilke 48). The speaker here acknowledges the “urgent command” of the Earth to be “transformation”, and its “sacred inspiration” as a particular “familiar death”, a death which enables life (Rilke 47). What had previously been accounted for as otherization, as a processual undoing of the limits of self-identification, has morphed here into an “excess of being” that aims at an intensification of presence in the temporal world, rather than “overcoming” it. This however is hypothesized in the realm of art which posits one interpretation, albeit immersive and integrating, to the terrors of the inhabited “interpreted world” that had marooned the artist previously. What the Angelic existence made palpable was the realm of loss, of death as singularity in the opening elegy, though now it is the present dilated and expanded to encompass both the past and the future within.

The construal of a personal loss memorialized as poem gives way to the evocation of transience as all-encompassing consciousness. It is not a dissolution of loss or a concomitant immobilization of death and its radical alterity by a turning inward. Rather, Rilke's poetics problematizes consciousness itself and depersonalizes it and its engagement with the corporal world through language. For Blanchot, language is the medium that effaces authorial presence, stylistics and the like. Rilke's impersonal depiction of death points to the impossibility of depicting death in language.

Yet, there is the "I" for which death, not figuratively, is pending. Blanchot talks of the poetic self in Rilke that initially resists the anguish of what he calls "anonymous death":

The anguish of anonymous death, the anguish of the "They die" and the hope for an "I die" in which individualism retrenches, tempts him [Rilke] at first to want to give his name and his countenance to the instant of dying... (127)

However, that emphasis on subjectivity is renounced as the writer submits to the compelling intensity of writing (experience), and tames the ecstatic exuberance of an individual will with images. Blanchot's steadfast refusal to explain Rilke's text(s) thematically evinces the inordinate reticence of the text itself, and the unknowability which shrouds it. The challenge seems to be to transduce the inexpressible thought into text, its silence indicating that it is inclement to the habitation of the author.

The final elegy traces an absorption of time into a mythic space, a "nowhere" as it traces the "turning back" of the newly dead in the realm of the underworld guided by the mythic figure of the "Laments". She belongs to the race of Greek sibyls and Jewish prophets, who serve as elegiac cautionary reminders of the human predicament. To be sure, this land alludes to ancient Egypt, but is to be understood as a mythic landscape that discountenances the world of objective reality.

The human's cry had fallen deaf on the ears of the Angels in the inaugurating elegy. That imperturbability had, in a certain sense, triggered the memorialization of what it means to be alive. Here we find the speaker singing "jubilation and praise to assenting Angels" (Rilke 48). As with the slow "secretive" rise of the Sphinx, "the all-guarding Sepulchre", the "written form" of a bird's cry gets inscribed as sound across the sky (Rilke 51). The interspersion of the senses sets the stage for a similar integration of joy and sorrow, both instances of the doubling of consciousness that is at the crux of Rilke's transformative project. As the speaker is escorted to the "mountains of primal grief" adjacent to a ravine, he finds himself in front of the "fountain of joy" that is also proclaimed to be a "load-bearing river" among men. It is a river that bears the load of mortal suffering and redirects it into the joyous fountain of grief;

joyous, since it is in submitting to the bleak dreadfulness of life with joyous resignation that one is finally enabled to create (Ryan 181). The image of “rich” primal grief being mined from the mountains culminates in the image of rain falling “on dark soil, in Spring-time” (Rilke 51 53). Both reinforce the role of creative fecundity in orienting us toward the unheeded aspect of death, to enshrine it in life such that the “secret weeping” bears flower (Rilke 48).

This efflorescence of the soul is traced in the final elegy by a reversion to textuality, the “doubly-unfolded page of a book” (Rilke 52). The act of inscribing and thereby transmuting suffering into a written code relies on decoding the hieroglyphic of the owl’s sound transcribed as shape on the sky. It entails walking silently along the valley on the way to the mountain of grief. Death is an affirmation of a conceivable mark. The grim realities of death are obfuscated, as is the stubborn insistence of a personal dying. There are only, rather, the remnants of a mystifying silence, a deadening of sound that leads to an intensification of the senses that is analogous to the sentient reading mechanism Blanchot suggests is demanded by literature itself. Blanchot eloquently accounts for death as not an end, but a means to awareness: “Death exists not only, then, at the moment of death; at all times we are its contemporaries”(132). However, he goes on to account for the intractability of death:

Why, therefore, can we not accede immediately to that other side, which is life itself but related otherwise, become other, the other relation? One might be content to recognize the definition of this region in its inaccessibility: it is "the side which is not turned toward us, nor do we shed light upon it." Thus it would be what essentially escapes, a kind of transcendence, but of which we cannot say that it has value and reality, about which we know only this: that we are turned away from it(Blanchot 132).

If writing is this turn towards impersonality, in these poem, it also adduces to the salvation of objects of the world. Death for Rilke is a means to confronting its nothingness – a readier dying which then assuages the impossibility of death and its demand for authenticity by ensuring this moment of recuperation. This essential survival that denies death is the authentic dying that does not belie our anxiety of death, or aspire for transcendence. Blanchot writes “Death enters into its own invisibility, passes from its opacity to its transparency, from its terrifying reality to its ravishing unreality”(146).

The recuperation of death happens in language, in the written word. It is something immanent in language that enables the poet to realize this unreality, to mould loss as a metaphor for a

deferred transition. It is language, particularly poetic language that facilitates a turning toward the immanent and that transforms existence. The poet is its essential “translator”, and the poem’s space is one where “no longer is anything present, where in the midst of absence everything speaks (in)... the center of the eternal movement” (Blanchot 140). The elegiac moment is thus itself transformed to retain traces of all that perishes. The transient moment of beauty, of love is conflated onto the eternal. The dispossession of death, of an authentic dying is not renounced or attacked and agitated against; instead, it is interiorized to bring upon a tear on the fabric of life itself. It is art which eventually affirms itself. The imprint of authentic death, remains embedded in language, and is not renounced as the lost object of mourning. It is entrusted upon the written word to facilitate glimpses of the lost object synthesized into unified consciousness. The task of rethinking death compels Rilke to rethink the process of grieving in the final elegy through mythic invocation. The elder Lament escorts him for the greater part of the journey, but leaves him finally in solitary contemplation, and to an expansive joyous grieving. This is the “Open”, the interior space of the world, traceable in poetry, but resisting closure:

And we, who think of ascending
joy, would feel the emotion,
that almost dismays us,
when a joyful thing falls (Rilke 140).

This traversal of space somewhere between an ascent and a descent is also the journey from the individual death to the anonymity of dying, of the continual dissipation of the self that underlines both Rilke and Blanchot’s writing. The journey of the anguished speaker of the first elegy to the collective impersonality of dying traced in the denouement reveals the impossibility of dying that countenances the presence of suffering in the work of art. Death draws visible forms into the realm of the invisible, and this process of interiorization structures our experience such that it lies beyond our conscious mediation. This indeterminate realm does not act on the subject, but works through it. Pushed into becoming-other, the poet finds himself confronting the void of death, which is evinced in the elegies in the form of an accentuated susceptibility to being constituted by the external world, its myriad objects and relations. It is the “experience of this impossible, impersonal death which is also the source of imagination’s transforming movement in the work of writing” (Marshall 234).

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