

‘THE POET ALONE UNITES THE WORLD’: THE POETICS OF PRAISE IN RAINER MARIA RILKE’S *THE DUINO ELEGIES*

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Abstract

The poems Rilke wrote during the last years of his life are often read as a dark musing on the unravelling of culture during the years of the Great War and the decade that followed. There is an elegiac quality to many of them, but in the midst of this they give voice to what I call a poetics of praise—often explicit, as in the *Sonnets*, but also substantially present, as in the *Elegies*. It is this dimension of the latter that this article explores, considering how Rilke’s notion of the poet’s vocation influenced these poems in particular. Here, his praise is not directed toward some transcendent deity but rather toward the world and all that is ‘sayable’ about it. His work as a poet, as he had come to understand it, was to affirm a unity in this world, in the midst of the apparent fragmentation and loss that seemed an overwhelming pressure during this period. Against Wittgenstein’s claim, published within a year of the *Elegies*, that ‘the sense of the world must lie beyond the world’, Rilke insisted that this ‘sense’ or meaning could only rest in the world—or in the manner in which world in/forms us, an insight captured in his notion of ‘Weltinnenraum’ (‘world/inner/space’). The poet’s purpose, then, is to bear witness to this unity, and, in a sense, ‘unify’ the world through the posture of praise by which we take the visible world into our consciousness and come to recognise an essential inner unity amid the very real brokenness that marks its ‘outer’ form.

And we, spectators always, everywhere,
turned toward everything and never looking out from within!
All this fills us to overflowing. We arrange it. It falls apart.
We rearrange it, and fall apart ourselves.

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Who has turned us around so that,
no matter what we do, we assume the posture
of one who is always departing?¹

With these lines, a hauntingly familiar part of the modernist literary canon, Rilke closes the eighth of his *Duino Elegies*. In it and the elegy that follows, the poet celebrates what he understands as the fundamental wisdom of animals together with the simple meaning of things in their 'here-ness', contrasting this with the belaboured form of human consciousness that he saw as a false and ultimately sterile dimension of modern life. His poetic vocation, as it emerged during the first decades of the twentieth century, focused on pursuing a new state of being, which he came to refer to simply as 'the Open',² a state of being characterised by a vulnerability to the immediacy of human experience beyond the laboured machinations of reason. This pursuit shaped his work during the last decade of his life, evoking his fierce attack on what one of his interpreters recently described as 'the urgencies of [our] imprisonment by forms of perception in our "interpreted world"'.³ Put positively, one might say that Rilke understood the work of 'imagining human'⁴ most poignantly in the *Elegies* and his later writings generally, as a call to turn 'back' to the natural world. This conviction stood in stark contrast to the devastations of his age brought about through the machinations of war and under the pressures of industrialisation and commerce. Thus, while Erich Heller is surely right in reading the *Elegies* as 'an apocalyptic work', it is one in which the revelatory power of the poet's vision seeks to open a creative space within and not beyond the world, shaken as it was through the pressures of a cultural and intellectual dislocation and wracked in the vortex of political destruction.⁵

The posture of 'emphatic affirmations' (*emphatische Bejahungen*) that course through these poems, to recall Anthony Stephens' characterisation, is but one facet of the *Elegies*.⁶ Of equal significance is the manner in which they are elegiac in the traditional sense of this term, 'mourn[ing] a realm of consciousness [*Bewußtseinswelt*] that no longer exists after the First World War'.⁷ This sense of overwhelming loss and disorientation meant, for Rilke, that the survivors of this desolation had become little more than 'spectators always, everywhere', like those who without ever having arrived 'take the posture of one who is always departing'. This sense of being fated to mourn a 'lost world', of finding ourselves uprooted and drifting in a kind of 'homelessness', as it were, is a dark and brooding image. Sensing the force of these pressures in the decade following Rilke's death, the French philosopher Simone Weil would write of 'the need for roots', though for Rilke the dis-ease of the times seemed to press for something other than a political response.⁸ For he

believed that despite the destitution of the age, we might yet sense something of the fullness coursing through us, an experience not dependent on the world that seemed to have passed away.⁹

Being alert to this sense, and giving it voice, was the poet’s work as Rilke understood it. As he put it in a poem of 1921 entitled ‘Baudelaire’:

The poet alone unites the world,
which falls asunder in each of its parts.
Unprecedented is his witness to beauty,
and in celebrating what plagues him,
cleanses what lies in ruins unceasingly:

and even what is destructive becomes world.¹⁰

Thus, the poet is a kind of priest bearing witness to something abiding in a world passing away, calling in his poems to join him in what he came to understand as the vocation of praise. As he put it in a poem written in 1921:¹¹

Oh say, poet, what you do?
—I praise.

But what about the deadly and monstrous?
How do you keep going, how do you take it all in?
—I praise.

But the nameless and unnamed,
how do you keep calling out to them, poet?
—I praise.

Where does it come from, your claim to be real
in every guise and each mask?
—I praise.

And that the stillness and turbulence
know you like star and storm?
—Because I praise.¹²

Such a viewpoint says much about how Rilke faced the tumult and transitions he lived through in the five decades of his life (1875–1926), a span of years that witnessed the slow but steady unravelling of an epoch before there was any clarity about what might take its place. In this sense, he is properly a ‘modernist’, insofar as one understands this term as pointing to those—like Rilke—who sensed that they were living ‘between the ages’, to recall the title given to a prominent journal of the time (*Zwischen den Zeiten*, published in Munich by

Christian Kaiser Verlag from 1923 to 1933). For as the poet would describe our plight in the Seventh Elegy:

... Our life

goes forth in changing. And always the external
 passes away in this diminishing. Where once a solid house stood,
 a construed abstraction presses itself upon us, directly, belonging
 solely to what is conceivable as if it stood still entirely within our mind.
 The spirit of the age gives shape to immense reservoirs of power, formless
 as the taut pressure it wrests from everything,
 and temples it no longer recognizes.¹³

The world of Rilke's childhood, the *fin de siècle* culture in which he came of age and pursued his profession as poet, was that of 'old Europe' as Hegel already had described it. But the cultural moorings rooted in traditions shaped over centuries were steadily unravelling as established cultural inheritance and political certainties began to crumble under pressure of new ambitions and anxieties. These shifts found expression across a wide spectrum of changes: Einstein's theory of special relativity, which cast aside the enduring logic and long established certainties of Newtonian order in the natural and cosmic realms; shifting currents in the arts, under the influence of expressionism in the visual arts and experimentalism in music and theatre; the emergence of psychology as a new discipline and private pursuit, shaped by Freud's epic charting of the unconscious as the authentic root of human being; the physical and moral dislocations and devastations brought on by the 'Great War', and the shattering—in Europe above all, and for the moment at least—of established notions of empire; and, in the year after Rilke's death, Heisenberg's publication of the uncertainty principle, which staked out the foundations for later developments in quantum physics and, more recently, chaos theory. Thus, the *Zeitgeist* of this epoch was one dominated by change. One might even say, with Rilke, that this spirit was giving rise to 'immense reservoirs of power'—which, however, were as yet both 'formless' and yet highly capable of releasing the 'taut pressure' that quivered in every dimension of reality.¹⁴

As a young poet, Rilke stood against these tides of change, clinging to the traditions of pre-industrialism before the age of mechanisation, mass production and its attendant commodification of life. In his early writings, indeed, he seems reluctant to relinquish what he felt as the weakening grip of this passing age. And yet, perhaps as an instance of this resistance, he begins to gesture in his later writings—and above all in the *Duino Elegies*, the *Sonnets to Orpheus*, and his remarkable outflow of creative work during the last several years of his life—toward the need to 'imagine the human' in particular ways that appear to be out of sync with his times. As one of his astute readers, Kathleen Komar, has recently argued, these writings chart the poet's attempt to 'understand

how human consciousness can relate to such a disorienting world’.¹⁵ In and through them, as she goes on to note, Rilke ‘explores how the individual human consciousness can respond when confronted with the loss of ordering principles and of access to any unified transcendent realm’.¹⁶

All of this could be said of many artists and intellectuals of his age, struggling to find a sense of purpose amid the fragmenting pressures of the times. Against the pressures of such unstable times, the task of seeking some semblance of coherence amid the clutter and debris of shattered cultural certainties seemed hopeless, and gave way to increasingly disjointed and fragmented expressions in the arts. As Rilke depicts this anguished place of transition and confused longing:

And suddenly, in this belabored nowhere, suddenly
comes the unsayable juncture where the pure too-little
incomprehensibly reverses—, and springs over
into that empty too-much.
Where the many-sided accounting
begins without numbers.¹⁷

This sense of an ‘empty too-much’ (*jenes leere Zuviel*) placed Rilke and his contemporaries squarely before the question of what kind of creative work could be done in the face of ‘this belabored nowhere’ of modern life. How was one to *be* and how and toward what ends might one *create* amid the currents of a period that Auden would later characterise as ‘an age of anxiety’?¹⁸ What path could be found that steered between the ‘pure too-little’ of the familiar world in its passing, on the one hand, and an ‘empty too-much’ of an undiscovered new order—or *disorder*—that seemed to be pressing forth, on the other?¹⁹

Rilke’s early poetics seemed pressured by a quite despairing assessment, to be sure, one that many of his contemporaries would have accepted without argument. Many joined him in interpreting their age as an ‘unsayable juncture’ following what seemed to be the passing of an epoch. The poet’s near-contemporary, the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset (1883–1955), gave voice to this disturbing tension in his *El Tema de Nuestro Tiempo*, appearing a year after both the *Duino Elegies* and the *Sonnets to Orpheus* were published. Ortega y Gasset voiced the conviction that the old values were falling away without any clarity about what might replace them. Precisely at this uncertain juncture, however, Rilke’s writings followed another course: he took it upon himself to offer, with a fierce clarity, a constructive path through these thickets, one buoyed by ‘an emphatic affirmation’ of life (Stephens) and giving voice to the poet’s distinctive poetics of praise.²⁰ Against the more despairing prophets of his age, Rilke stood as a witness to beauty amid ‘the ruins’, such that even what had come to be destructive he saw as bearing the

potentiality of becoming 'world' again. The poet, in this view, is not a magician, but something close to a healer in and through his art. Nowhere does this vocation, as he experienced and articulated it, become more evident than in the later poems, and above all in the *Duino Elegies* and *Sonnets to Orpheus*.

It is to the former that I turn my attention in this article in order to trace the way this conviction takes form in these poems. For, as elegies, they mourn the losses of an age that was passing while at the same time voicing an invocation to a posture he hoped would shape human experience in this time of emergence: namely, one leading to or shaped by a unitive consciousness, his attempt to establish the imagination as the medium for a poetics of praise. We will come back to this; for now, it is important to recall that these poems belong to the defining works in the modernist canon. In them we find the poet—as Komar puts it—'simultaneously record[ing] his creation of a poetics and exemplify[ing] that poetics'. 'In these poems,' she goes on to say, 'Rilke wrestles with the problem of isolated self-conscious humans in search of a new unity of existence.'²¹

Precisely herein lies the challenge, as Rilke construed it: how might an artist locate what Rilke thought of as a 'new unity of existence', particularly within a culture that had been torn asunder by the dislocations of war and the unravelling of long-held cultural and religious traditions? What was one to do, as a poet, given the uncertainties that seemed to have bankrupted the intellectual inheritance of the West during the early 1920s? What reliable language could still be offered in response to the crisis—at once intellectual, spiritual, and moral—which Rilke faced with his generation, one that suggested the world to be 'fall[ing] asunder in each of its parts'? To explore the startling character of Rilke's response in the form of a poetics of praise, it is necessary to locate more carefully the intellectual world in which Rilke and his contemporaries lived and created as artists.

It is striking that 1921, just as Rilke was completing his *Duino Elegies*, was the year his slightly younger contemporary Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) published his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.²² Both of these treatises, although having nothing in common in terms of genre and form, could be read as sketches—in a far more indirect manner in the case of Wittgenstein—for what it meant to be human given the tumult of the times. Near the end of the *Tractatus*, the philosopher contends that 'the sense of the world [*der Sinn der Welt*] must lie beyond the world', just as he could also here claim that 'the solution to life's puzzle in time and space lies beyond both time and space'.²³ What he meant by such claims can certainly be read as a response to the devastations, both physical and cultural, wrought during the preceding decade.

But such a reading would be to interpret Wittgenstein in too narrow and flat-footed a manner. He was not seeking some flight into a metaphysics that

offered 'answers' to life's intractable problems, nor was he seeking an intellectual escape from 'reality' into an abstracted transcendence. Rather, the point of the philosopher's claims lay in his conviction that the meaning or sense of the world—*der Sinn der Welt*—could not be reduced to a directly experiential or empirical basis. Further, he builds his argument against any resort to scepticism, surely an 'easier' path in such times, calling it 'nonsensical' (*unsinnig*) because it 'doubts at the point where one can no longer question'.²⁴ Yet precisely at this juncture, the philosopher points to a realisation which he simply calls something 'inexpressible' (*Unaussprechliches*), an awareness that somehow 'shows' itself—and which he famously calls 'the mystical'.²⁵ And thus, as he goes on to claim in the familiar last line of this treatise: 'That of which one cannot speak must be kept silent.'²⁶ This should not be construed as a hidden affirmation of praise, but it is surely a refusal of scepticism and a stand against turning from what cannot be rationally known.

Rilke's approach to this question, his way of 'imagining human', as it were, presses further, and moves in a quite different direction. Against the grain of Wittgenstein's assertion, the poet suggests—or, perhaps better said, 'shows', in the *Elegies* and in his later works generally—that the 'sense' of the world, despite all appearances to the contrary, is still to found *within* the world. More importantly, he takes this a step further, and here we encounter one of the most peculiar and, I would suggest, magnificent, dimensions of Rilke's poetic accomplishment: namely, his invocation of praise. In bearing witness to this path, as heard in the sentence preceding the passage quoted above from the seventh Elegy, Rilke could claim: 'Nowhere, Love, will the world be other than within' (*Nirgends, Geliebte, wird Welt sein, als innen*). For, as earlier noted, Rilke goes on to suggest as this elegy unfolds that '[t]he spirit of the age is giving shape to immense reservoirs of power, formless / as the taut pressure it wrests from everything'.²⁷

What Rilke means with this is gathered together in a single, ultimately untranslatable German word that we find him using for the first time in a poem published in 1914: *Weltinnenraum*, a compound word which Judith Ryan renders as 'worldinnerness', which is literally what this word says—a word made by compounding the nouns 'world' and 'room' (or 'space') with the mediating preposition 'within' (*innen*).²⁸ It is one of those distinctively Rilkean words that begs a more spacious interpretation than a single word is able to provide, as Judith Ryan ably demonstrates in her study of *Rilke, Modernism and Poetic Tradition*. She goes on to describe here the early manifestations of this conviction in Rilke's writings from the pre-war period by suggesting—astutely, it seems to me—that Rilke construed there to be 'an imaginary space that is at once inside and outside, enfolded in the human psyche and projected into outer space—the world, in other words, of the creative imagination'.²⁹

The imagination or, more properly, the *praising* imagination, builds a connection by constructing what Rilke perceives as a ‘new unity of existence’, to recall Kathleen Komar’s apt expression. This new unity binds the inner and the outer, self and world, immanence and transcendence, but Rilke goes further than this: he senses what we might conceive as an elasticity involved in what it means to ‘imagine’ human existence (or, the ‘imagining human’), locating this ‘unity’ not as some hidden dimension within reality itself, as if we could ever had any direct experience of this, but rather as an expression of human *imagining* and, more to the point, through the vehicle of human praise. On this point, unexpectedly, Rilke’s poetics only seems to stand against Wittgenstein’s claim that life’s meaning must lie ‘beyond the world’, since this ‘sense’ of the world (*der Sinn der Welt*) lies properly speaking within the *human* and not in the world itself.

This is a crucial distinction, and not simply a poet’s clever play on words. For Rilke’s notion of ‘world-inner-space’ points to what he considered our fundamental purpose as humans, which is to say the way we *make*—and not ‘*find*’—meaning in our lives. The inner organ of the imagination brings this unity of inner and outer together, but in such a way that the creative potentiality of the human becomes what is decisive in finding a *unifying* experience of life, and not some *unified* dimension as a given *within* that life. To return to Wittgenstein to clarify this point: for Rilke, the meaning of the world, which lies within the *human*, is thus neither ‘*outside* the world’ (Wittgenstein) nor somehow *within* it. This, at least, was Rilke’s notion as it took shape during the years immediately prior to the war. As he had put it most notably, in a poem of 1914:

Through all being, a single space suffices:
World/inner/space. The birds fly silently
through and through us. O, if I wish to grow,
I must look about, and the tree grows *within* me.³⁰

The description has a quite precise force when Rilke, having made his point in the opening sentence, clarifies what he means by means of a complex metaphor: in this case, his strange suggestion that a bird in flight travels *through us*, and a tree that we observe somehow grows *within us* in the act of creative perception—which is to say through a new consciousness brought about by our act of imagining and, as it were, ‘embodying’ the ‘life-force’ within us. What is so interesting in this notion, as Rilke develops and employs it in his later *Elegies*, is his suggestion that the *imagining* human—or human *imagining*—is what ultimately brings ‘sense’ or ‘meaning’ or ‘purpose’, all gathered into the stubbornly difficult to translate German word *Sinn*. And it is precisely this consciousness, a sense that attests to an outer/inner unity or *Weltinnenraum* in

the ways we perceive the world, which brings about a kind of 'unity' amid the world's fragmentation.

What Rilke is not suggesting here is that our experience of the (external) world is unimportant, nor is he saying that the 'sense' of the world lies within the *world* and in some sense transcendent or 'beyond' or 'outside' of us. His primary objective is rather to show how our sense of the world takes shape through the imaginative ways we 'create'—or 're-create'—the observed world *within us*. We are the locus for a 'new unity of existence', ours and—according to Rilke's peculiar perception—that of the world as well. In this sense, the 'world' as Rilke understood it—and by this he means all that we perceive as 'being' outside of us—is ultimately able to 'happen' within us, within the 'space' of our interior life. That is, Rilke's notion of 'world' is not an *object* that stands apart from us, but something more like a *subject* which comes to life—or into a unified state of being—within us, through our imagining and, most poignantly, in our answer: viz., in the act of praise.

Here, Rilke joins Wittgenstein in arguing against any notion that 'empirical experience' alone could suffice to create or support a sufficiently spacious sense of the world, or a proper sense of our own selves as creative beings. Not the imagination, whatever that might finally mean, but rather our act of *imagining* is what steers us toward this 'new unity of existence', to return to Kathleen Komar's perceptive insight into Rilke's *Elegies*. Imagining human is what we are ultimately made for, according to the poet, and he envisions—and, more to the point, poetically *enacts*—this elegantly, if often mysteriously, in passages like these in the late *Elegies*.

For it is here that we find Rilke directing us, as readers, toward a sense that the world provides us an opportunity to discover *ourselves* differently. We have the creative potential, the imaginative capacity, to '*look out from within*'—not simply from within *ourselves*, but rather from within the *things* in the world about us. It is his call to 'indwell' the world, to recall the word Heidegger later used in leaning on Rilke to describe the poet's vocation. This is an indwelling that enables us to experience ourselves as creative actors, as imaginative 'players', in the theatre of the world. Or, to approach this from the vantage point of our creative inner consciousness, or *Weltinnenraum*, ours is the task of bringing about a unity of consciousness that connects the world around us with our sense that this *outside* world is one we are able to transform through an imagining *within us*. The world 'needs' the imagining human, strangely, to come to itself, or to fulfill its own inherent 'vocation' in and through the 'imagining human'.

All this, for Rilke, steers beyond a sense that we must seek meaning from outside the world, or beyond our experience, in our desire to find some unifying sense of purpose to shape our existence. Now, for Rilke this '*Sinn*'—i.e. sense or meaning—of life lies *within us*. It has to do with our

ability to constitute this unifying sense in a way that joins outer and inner, world and self, space and time. In and through the daring of this act, we find ourselves ‘going forth in the changing’, as Rilke puts it in the seventh Elegy. In the passage preceding this, we hear the poet offering a vivid example of how this experience might be conceived:

Being-here is marvelous. You knew this, young girls, even *you*
 who seem bereft of this, submerged—, you, dwelling in
 the city’s most horrid alleys, festering there, exposed to the
 garbage heap. For each of you there was an hour, or perhaps
 not a full hour, an experience hardly accountable by
 the measure of time between two instances—, where you had
 being. Everything. The veins filled with being.
 But we forget so easily that which the laughing neighbor
 neither covets nor envies in us. For we want to lift it up
 so that others can see what we’ve been given to know of
 this most visible happiness, transforming all this within us.³¹

This sustained metaphor of how one might ‘go forth in transforming’ illustrates how far Rilke had come from his dark and despairing ruminations on urban life as voiced in his earlier novel *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. There he had described the dismal horrors of the city as he experienced them as a young writer living in Paris during the century’s first decade. But from the time he began this poem cycle, in 1912, to his eventual completion of the *Elegies* a decade later, we find him suggesting that our work is *not* to find a beautiful world in which to dwell. No, our work is to *transform* that world within our own inner experience, and thus to bring about our *own* transformation, in part by daring to ‘celebrat[e] what plagues him’. In the seventh Elegy, Rilke voices this spatial and psychological perspective, in the passage above, by pointing to an experience in *time*, perhaps only a moment, when we sensed the abundance of life *within* us, when we realised that we had ‘everything’, our ‘veins filled with being’. Ours is the task, in our ‘imagining’, to transform the outer experiences of life, our sense of ‘world’, in that inner ‘*Raum*’ within us—*Weltinnenraum*. And precisely this, according to Rilke, is the ‘most visible happiness’ we can know, and the gift of ‘being’ we have to share with others.

In the arc of this development in his poetic vocation as we find him giving it form and substance in the later *Elegies*, we see how Rilke came to view the *human* ‘vocation’, as it were. For his primary interest in the *Elegies* is to suggest how we as humans create what he understood as a ‘new consciousness’; through this unifying sense of self and world, of world *in* self, or ‘*Weltinnenraum*’, by means of which both *we* and the *world* constitute a ‘whole’. Our vocation, in other words, lies precisely in the power of a unifying imagination, and through the shaping of this consciousness we come to

know our essential purpose as human beings. The making of this *Weltinnenraum* is what gives us a true sense of our lives in the world, and of the world in our lives (i.e. '*der Sinn des Lebens*'), and it is this that calls us to praise—not God, or some being transcendent to us, but rather what we might describe in English as 'worldself'.

Such a line of thought, or imagining, leads to what I consider the apogee of the *Duino Elegies*, where Rilke voices what he comes to believe to be the ultimate purpose of our lives. This passage is found not in the tenth and last *Elegy*, but in the penultimate ninth. Space does not permit more than a sketch of this denouement, which Rilke carefully elaborates in the form of a warning and invitation in the final *Elegy*. It must suffice to say at this juncture that Rilke's notion of our vocation, discovered through our experience of a unifying consciousness, finally leads not to contemplative silence (*pace* Wittgenstein), which seemed close to the human longing for transcendence as Rilke articulates this in the opening *Elegies*. The inner movement he sketches takes him—and his readers—beyond silence, refusing the indulgence of a defeated acquiescence to the traumas of the times.³² It comes rather as an invitation to the work of praise, for it is praise as Rilke understands it that constitutes our sole and proper response to what is beautiful (*das Schöne*) amid the shattered fragments of our lives and world. This is the call that is ours to claim, not in spite of but rather in the midst of even what is destructive in life. For there is an essential 'fullness' of being, a sense (*Sinn*) of what our being means for us, and this in spite of the desolation we find ourselves facing. For '[b]eing-here is marvelous' (*Hiersein ist herrlich*) and for this reason praise is our 'natural' and given vocation:

Praise the world to the angel, and not the unsayable, because you cannot impress him anyway with some marvelous sense of fulfillment; in the universe, where he feels things more fully than you, you're but a beginner. So show him what is simple, that which is passed from one generation to the next, as something that is ours that lies near our touch and within our sight. Speak the things to him. Then he'll stand in greater wonder, just as you stood watching a rope-maker in Rome, or a potter along the Nile.³³

In chronicling several moments he had experienced years earlier, compressed memories he had carried within him since an earlier visit in Rome and trip to Egypt, Rilke suggests how the outward things we experience become truly ours in the remembering. Or, more to the point, he points to how it is we stand in awe of them for the radiance to be found in their ordinariness, in this case otherwise unremarkable encounters with an Italian rope-maker and an Egyptian potter. Such experiences exemplify what it is Rilke has just claimed, addressing us as readers as if to say: pay attention to what is happening to you in the unremarkable moments of life and in the world all about you. And, in doing so, prepare yourself to bear witness to them in the form of praise. For

we are made to praise the *world* about us, and in so doing to unify our world within us—*Weltinnenraum*.

This, then, is the crowning achievement and the consequential outcome of Rilke's poetic work. Praise, he finally comes to see, is our proper work, steering us toward our vocation as 'artists of being'. For it is through praise that we find the means by which we find ourselves able to constitute a 'new unity of existence', recalling his affirmation of the poet as one who 'unites the world / which falls apart in each of its parts'. In praising, the poet does not 'make sense' of a shattered world, but bears witness to 'the beautiful' in a manner unprecedented and otherwise indefensible. In so doing, the poet gives voice to an inward seeing, one that 'cleanses what lies in ruins' to the point that even 'the destructive becomes world' within us—that is, as *Weltinnenraum*. How is this to occur? Through praise, or as he puts it in one of the later 'Sonnets to Orpheus', and ultimately this means through song, since song is 'the 'pressing task' by which the earth finds its fulfillment: 'Song is being' (*Gesang ist Dasein*). Praise is a form of song, and song a way of praising, one Hermann Kunisch has pointed to as a way of 'transforming' the world in our experience such that the *Elegies* stand as what he aptly calls 'a hymnic utterance'.³⁴

No longer does Rilke look to God, or a higher being, to effect this longed-for unity in a world shattered by the agonies of war and unsettled by the shifting of long established cultural moorings. For him, the poet has come to take on this role as a restorer of what was lost, through an interior 'making' of world. And, if unity is the goal, praise is the 'pressing means' of this 'change' (*Verwandlung*). Thus, while Judith Ryan is surely correct in pointing to Rilke's understanding of the task of art 'not so much as that of representing reality, but of transforming it into what he termed 'das Unsichtbare' (the invisible)',³⁵ the arc of meaning in his late poems suggests that Rilke extends the movement from *visibility* to *invisibility*, from outer to inner, in order to point to a further denouement in the *audibility* of praise. It is not a divine word Rilke longs for, but rather a human word capable of renewing this lost unity, and Rilke imagines this occurring, first, within the poet and only then through the poetic word within us, in and through the world. *Weltinnenraum*.

From the vantage point of this achievement, it is no more than the whisper of a dream to arrive at the claim Rilke proffers in the *Elegies*: namely, that all of this expresses nothing less than the world's 'desire' to complete the circle of human creativity, giving audible form to the world's 'will', as Rilke understood it, to participate and indeed delight in bringing about a lost unity, to effect what he had described as a 'new consciousness'. Here, the language is that of awe and gratitude, and it is ultimately this conviction that gives a sense of purpose to Rilke's 'poetics of praise', lending both form and substance to his vocation as he comes to express it in the post-war poems and above all in the *Elegies* and *Sonnets*. Thus, from the dark sense of the shattered and lost

unity with which the poet and his contemporaries faced their world, Rilke comes to claim his vocation as one who enables the world ‘to arrive *invisibly* within’, a path voiced as praise by which he experiences ‘an immeasurable sense of being / well[ing] up in [his] heart’:

Earth, isn’t this what you want, to arise *invisibly*
within us?—Isn’t this your dream,
to be for once invisible?—Earth! invisible!
What, if not transformation, is your pressing task?
Earth, you Love, I will. Oh believe that I don’t need more
of your springtimes to win me over to you—one,
ah, a single spring is already too much for my blood.
Namelessly, I am now betrothed to you, across the distances.
You were always in the right, and your sacred imagining
brings us finally to our trustworthy death.

Look, I’m alive now. And for what, then? Neither childhood nor the future
can diminish me. . . . An immeasurable sense of being
wells up in my heart.³⁶

REFERENCES

¹ Und wir: Zuschauer, immer, überall,
dem allen zugewandt und nie hinaus!
Uns überfüllt. Wir ordnens. Es zerfällt.
Wir ordnens wieder und zerfallen selbst.

Wer hat uns also umgedreht, daß wir,
was wir auch tun, in jener Haltung sind
von einem, welcher fortgeht?

Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Duino Elegies*
8, ll. 66 – 73 (KA 2, 226). All translations
from Rilke are my own unless
otherwise noted. References to the
Duino Elegies are hereafter noted as
DE with number and lines. R.M.
Rilke, *Gedichte 1910 bis 1926*, vol. 2, in
M. Engel, U. Fülleborn, H. Nalewski
and A. Stahl (eds), *Kommentierte Ausgabe
in vier Bänden* (Frankfurt am Main and
Leipzig: Insel Verlag, 1996), hereafter
cited as *KA*.

² This theme emerges prominently in the
eighth Elegy; for a critical discussion of its

function in Rilke’s work, see Rilke, *KA*
2, 676–8. Rilke’s use of this term seems
to have been borrowed, or shaped in
large measure, from the writings of
Alfred Schuler, whom Rilke had read as
we know from one of his letters to Marie
Taxis, 18 March 1915. The term also
plays a prominent role in Hölderlin’s
poetry, memorably in lines from his
great poem-cycle ‘Bread and Wine’:

... So komm! daß wir das Offene
[schauen,
Daß ein Eigenes wir suchen, so weit es
[auch ist.
Fest bleibt Eins; es sei um Mittag oder es
[gehe
Bis in die Mitternacht, immer besteht
[ein Maß,
Allein gemein, doch jeglichem auch ist
[eignes beschieden,
Dahin gehet und kommt jeder, wohin er
[es kann.

- F. Hölderlin, 'Brod und Wein', in *Gedichte* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1963), p. 109.
- ³ A. Stephens, 'Duineser Elegien', in M. Engel, *Rilke-Handbuch. Leben—Werk—Wirkung* (Stuttgart and Weimar: Verlag J. B. Metzler, 2004), p. 380.
- ⁴ This was the theme of the ISRLC Conference in Leuven (September 2014), where an earlier version of this article was first presented.
- ⁵ E. Heller, *Nirgends wird Welt sein als innen. Versuche über Rilke* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 1941), p. 67. See also his discussion of Rilke in his later volume, *The Disinherited Mind. Essays in Modern German Literature and Thought* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961).
- ⁶ Stephens, *Rilke-Handbuch*, p. 380. See also Gerhard Ammelburger, *Bejahungen. Zur Rhetorik des Rühmens bei Rainer Maria Rilke* (Würzburg: Königshausen and Neumann, 1995).
- ⁷ Stephens, *Rilke-Handbuch*, p. 366.
- ⁸ S. Weil, *The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties Toward Mankind*, trans. from the French by A.F. Wills (London: Routledge, 1952); the original French edition, published posthumously in 1949, was entitled *L'enracinement* (Paris, 1949).
- ⁹ For further discussion of this point, see my article, "'There Is a Verge of the Mind": Imagination and Mystical Gesture in Rilke's Later Poems', in F.B. Knox and D. Lonsdale (eds), *Poetry and the Religious Imagination. The Power of the Word* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), pp. 209–20.
- ¹⁰ Der Dichter einzig hat die Welt geeinigt, die weit in jedem auseinanderfällt. Das Schöne hat er unerhört bescheinigt, doch da er selbst noch feiert, was ihn peinigt, hat er unendlich den Ruin gereinigt: und auch noch das Vernichtende wird Welt. [KA 2, p. 191].
- ¹¹ This untitled poem of Rilke's, written as a dedication to Leonie Zacharias, is found in Rilke, *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 3 (Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 1976), p. 249.
- ¹² Oh sage, Dichter, was du tust?
—Ich rühme.
Aber das Tödliche und Ungetüme,
wie hältst du's aus, wie nimmst du's hin?
—Ich rühme.
Aber das Namenlose, Anonyme,
wie rufst du's, Dichter, dennoch an?
—Ich rühme.
Woher dein Recht, in jeglichem
[Kostüme
in jeder Maske wahr zu sein?
—Ich rühme.
Und daß das Stille und das Ungestüme
wie Stern und Sturm dich kennen?
:—weil ich rühme.
[KA 2, p. 193]
- ¹³ ... Unser
Leben geht hin mit Verwandlung. Und
[immer geringer
schwindet das Außen. Wo einmal ein
[dauerndes Haus war,
schlägt sich erdachtes Gebild vor, quer,
[zu Erdenklichem
völlig gehörig, als ständ es noch ganz im
[Gehirne.
Weite Speicher der Kraft schafft sich der
[Zeitgeist, gestaltlos
wie der spannende Drang, den er aus
[allem gewinnt.
Tempel kennt er nicht mehr.
[DE 7, 50–56]
- ¹⁴ DE 7, 55.
- ¹⁵ Kathleen L. Komar, 'The Duino Elegies', in K. Leeder and R. Vilain (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Rilke* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 81.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 82.
- ¹⁷ Und plötzlich in diesem mühsamen
[Nirgends, plötzlich
die unsägliche Stelle, wo sich das reine
[Zuwenig
unbegreiflich verwandelt—, umspringt
in jenes leere Zuviel.
Wo die vielstellige Rechnung
zahlenlos aufgeht.
[DE 5, 81–86]

- ¹⁸ W.H. Auden, *The Age of Anxiety: A Baroque Eclogue*, ed. by A. Jacobs (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).
- ¹⁹ For a careful discussion of this period in Rilke’s life, and his relationships with others as expressed through letters and visits, see D. Prater, *A Ringing Glass: The Life of Rainer Maria Rilke* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), esp. ch. 8.
- ²⁰ For a thorough discussion of this point, and the connection between Rilke’s approach to praise, see Ammelburger, *Bejahungen*.
- ²¹ Komar, pp. 82–3.
- ²² In its initial German publication, Wittgenstein entitled this treatise *Logisch-Philosophische Abhandlung*, and published it in the series *Annalen der Naturphilosophie*, ed. by W. Ostwald; a German-English bilingual edition followed in 1921, in the *International Library of Psychology Philosophy and Scientific Method*, edited by C.K. Ogden, and was published as *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* with an Introduction by Bertrand Russell (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner; New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1922).
- ²³ See Wittgenstein, *Tractatus* § 6.41 and § 6.4312.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, § 6.51.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, § 6.522.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, § 7.
- ²⁷ *DE* 7, 50–56.
- ²⁸ See further, W. Günther, *Weltinnenraum. Die Dichtung Rainer Maria Rilkes* (Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 1925).
- ²⁹ J. Ryan, *Rilke, Modernism and Poetic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 108.
- ³⁰ Durch alle Wesen reicht der eine Raum: Weltinnenraum. Die Vögel fliegen still durch uns hindurch. O, der ich wachsen will, ich seh hinaus, und in mir wächst der Baum.
[KA 2, p. 113]
- ³¹ Hiersein ist herrlich. Ihr wußtet es,
[Mädchen, ihr auch,
- die ihr scheinbar entbehrt, versankt—,
[ihr, in den ärgsten
Gassen der Städte, Schwärende, oder dem
[Abfall
Offene. Denn eine Stunde war jeder,
[vielleicht nicht
ganz eine Stunde, ein mit den Maßen der
[Zeit kaum
Meßliches zwischen zwei Weilen—, da
[sie ein Dasein
hatte. Alles. Die Adern voll Dasein.
Nur, wir vergessen so leicht, was der
[lachende Nachbar
uns nicht bestätigt oder beneidet. Sichtbar
wollen wirs heben, wo doch das
[sichtbarste Glück uns
erst zu erkennen sich giebt, wenn wir es
[innen verwandeln.
[DE 7, 39–49]
- ³² See J.W. Storck, ‘Poesie am Rande des Schweigens. Zum Enigmatischen in der späten Lyrik Rilkes’, in *Centro Studi ‘Rainer Maria Rilke. E il suo tempo’*. *Atti del decimo convegno* 9 (1982), 13ff.
- ³³ Preise dem Engel die Welt, nicht die
[unsäglich, ihm
kannst du nicht großtun mit herrlich
[Erfültem; 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. Er wird staunender
[stehn; wie du standest
bei dem Seiler in Rom, oder beim
[Töpfer am Nil.
[DE 9, 52–57]
- ³⁴ Kunisch rightly sees the direct correspondence of the *Elegies* and *Sonnets*, interpreting the well-known claim voiced in the third of his ‘Sonnets to Orpheus’ as the key to grasping Rilke’s notion of the poet’s vocation as we find it in his later writings: “‘Gesang ist Dasein. Für den Gott ein Leichtes” (I, 3). Das ist die Formel, die die “Sonette an Orpheus”

für das schicksalhafte Ineinander von Dichten und Existenz finden, wie denn überhaupt der Sinn dieser selbständig und göltig neben den Elegien stehenden Gedichtreihe darin besteht, das Dasein des Menschen als eines Singenden, d.h. Rühmenden zu begründen und zu feiern. Was aber Gesang für den späteren Rilke bedeutet, darauf geben die Elegien und Sonette gemeinsam Antwort, diese die hymnische Aussage jener verdichtend und verknappend.' H. Kunisch, *Rainer Maria Rilke. Dasein und Dichtung* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1944), p. 42.

³⁵ Ryan, p. 157.

³⁶ Erde, ist es nicht dies, was du willst:

[*unsichtbar* in uns erstehn?—Ist es dein Traum nicht, einmal unsichtbar zu sein?—Erde! unsichtbar!

Was, wenn Verwandlung nicht, ist dein
[drängender Auftrag?

Erde, du liebe, ich will. Oh glaub, es
[bedürfte

nicht deiner Frühlinge mehr, mich dir zu
[gewinnen—, *einer*,

ach, ein einziger ist schon dem Blute zu viel.

Namenlos bin ich zu dir entschlossen,
[von weit her.

Immer warst du im Recht, und dein
[heiliger Einfall

ist der vertrauliche Tod.

Siehe, ich lebe. Woraus? Weder Kindheit

[noch Zukunft

werden weniger. . . . Überzähliges Dasein
entspringt mir im Herzen.

[*DE* 9, 67–79]