

INTERNALIZATION AND DEATH: A REINTERPRETATION OF RILKE'S *DUINESER ELEGIEN*

The seventy-five years of exegesis that have followed upon the publication of Rainer Maria Rilke's *Duineser Elegien* (1923) have brought a great variety of comments on textual parallels, influences, individual poems, or particular facets of the cycle. But considerations of the work as a whole from the standpoint of literary criticism, rather than that of philosophy or religion, seem to have crystallized into two main lines of argument. The first of them finds a 'message' or kernel of meaning in the speaker's discovery, in the Seventh and Ninth Elegies, of the meaningful human task that consists in internalizing and thus preserving the transient phenomena of the temporal world. This 'Botschaft der magischen Verinnerlichung'¹ may be defined in a vein of analytic neutrality,² or analysis may be accompanied by evaluation that is anything from reverent to acrimonious.³ Whatever their differences, however, critics taking this line accept the stance of the speaker in the Seventh and Ninth Elegies as the central and stable affirmation of the cycle.⁴ This traditional interpretation, as it may be termed, dominated Rilke criticism until the 1980s and still holds sway to the extent that a critic may state in passing as a matter of course: 'The project for salvation Rilke develops in the *Duino Elegies*, is to "inwardise" the remaining authentic things.'⁵

The second approach is more concerned to attract attention to ambivalence, verbal diffuseness, ambiguities, and contradictions in the Elegies than to extract a univocal meaning from them. Having been a distinct minority opinion characterized

¹ Eudo C. Mason, 'Die "Duineser Elegien"', in *Rilkes 'Duineser Elegien'. Zweiter Band: Forschungsgeschichte*, ed. by Ulrich Fülleborn and Manfred Engel (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1982), pp. 210–24 (p. 221).

² Kathleen L. Komar, 'The Crisis of Consciousness in Rilke's *Duineser Elegien*', *Germanic Review*, 57 (1982), 149–56 (particularly p. 153), provides a cogent and concise version of this approach. In a more extended form it can be seen in Komar's *Transcending Angels: Rainer Maria Rilke's Duino Elegies* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1987).

³ Hermann Kunisch supplies a beautifully phrased example of analysis cum admiration ('Rainer Maria Rilke', in *Handbuch der deutschen Gegenwartsliteratur*, ed. by Herbert Wiesner and others, Vol. II, 2nd edn (Munich: Nymphenburger Verlagshandlung, 1970), pp. 128–36 (pp. 132–35)). Otto Friedrich Bollnow voices respectful criticism of the metaphysical aspect of the project of internalization ('Die Verwandlung des Sichtbaren', in *Forschungsgeschichte*, pp. 112–29 (pp. 118–19)), while Christa Bürger roundly condemns 'die dichterische Verwandlung der Dinge ins "Unsichtbare"' as a manifestation of an 'antiaufklärerische Tendenz' in Rilke ('Textanalyse und Ideologiekritik: Rilkes erste Duineser Elegie', in *Forschungsgeschichte*, pp. 264–78 (p. 273)).

⁴ It is possible, though, without compromising the fundamentals of this approach, to point to certain elements that counterbalance or complicate the exultant affirmation. Thus Jacob Steiner observes that death, too, is desired and praised in the Seventh Elegy (*Rilkes Duineser Elegien* (Bern: Francke, 1962) p. 147) and that the 'Wendung ins Positive' in both the Seventh and the Ninth Elegies must be seen in conjunction with the other, plaintive Elegies (p. 208); Kenneth D. Weisinger points out that although the Seventh Elegy is 'so affirmative of the spirit of man, so confident in the achievements of man', the poet in this poem nevertheless remains 'no less isolated [...] than in any of the other elegies' ('The Structure of Rilke's Seventh Duino Elegy' (*Germanic Review*, 49 (1974), 215–39 (pp. 238–39)). More recently, Peter Hutchinson finds some disconcerting and unconvincing points in the Seventh Elegy ('Elegy Seven', in *Rilke's 'Duino Elegies': Cambridge Readings*, ed. by Roger Paulin and Peter Hutchinson (London: Duckworth; Riverside, CA: Ariadne, 1996), pp. 112–31 (pp. 120–21)), but this does not lead him to abandon his basic view that this poem is 'the first of the cycle truly to endorse the uplifting aspects of human existence' (p. 113). In the same volume, Karen Leeder similarly points to an 'undertone of doubt, despair and inadequacy' that accompanies what she nevertheless considers 'the positive poetic trajectory' of the Ninth Elegy ('Elegy Nine', pp. 152–70 (p. 152)).

⁵ Christoph Hollender, 'The Angels in Rilke's *Duino Elegies*: Theological vs. Ontological Interpretations', *History of European Ideas*, 20 (1995), 305–10 (p. 306). A similar confident and fairly recent summing-up can be found in Renate Breuninger, *Wirklichkeit in der Dichtung Rilkes*, Europäische Hochschulschriften, Reihe I: Deutsche Sprache und Literatur, 1224 (Frankfurt a.M., Bern, New York: Lang, 1991), p. 291.

by puzzlement rather than positive insights, this approach has been strengthened in the last two decades by an inspiration from the general emphasis in literary criticism on the complexities of fictionality and textuality. Its main point now resides in the conviction that the Elegies form a complicated textual process that must be viewed as an extended structure of interactive elements, none of which contains a central meaning in itself. As a result, the affirmation of the Seventh and Ninth Elegies is denied the privileged position accorded to it within the traditional interpretation. However, it is still accepted as a genuine pronouncement within the cycle, though one that needs to be correlated with other elements.⁶ Not even the representatives of this approach have, to the best of my knowledge, suggested a reevaluation of the affirmation of the Seventh and Ninth Elegies as radical as the one I am proposing.

I argue that if we read the Seventh Elegy carefully in the context of the cycle as a whole, we see that the affirmation voiced in it (and reiterated in the Ninth Elegy) is not offered as a pronouncement we should regard as a main point or 'message' of the *Duineser Elegien*. Instead, *on the terms of the Elegies themselves*, the idea of internalization represents an attempt at solving existential problems that temporarily evokes the speaker's enthusiasm, but in the cycle as a whole emerges as impossible and therefore ultimately misguided. I introduce these italics in order to make it abundantly clear that my project is one of close reading rather than of *Ideologiekritik*. It is not my intention to criticize an alleged Rilkean affirmation from the standpoint of a given individual or communal ideology, but to show that what looks like an affirmation offered as a main pronouncement of the cycle in fact is no such thing because it is subverted both by other Elegies and by the manner in which it is first presented in the Seventh Elegy. In its stead, the bleak portrayal of suffering and death in the Tenth Elegy emerges as the final vision of the cycle.

It is first necessary to recapitulate briefly the main points of the first six Elegies because, however well known they may be in themselves, their relevance for the Seventh Elegy has not been defined adequately. The speaker presents three reasons for the distress expressed in his introductory need to cry out for help. First, he has a keen sense of the transience of life, illustrated by the extended metaphors of evaporation in the Second Elegy and, in the Fifth Elegy, of the ever-crumbling formations erected by the acrobats. This is a fundamental existential problem because it is perceived by the speaker as a force that drains away meaning from such potentially significant human phenomena as love (II, 55–65) and cultural achievements (VII, 50–57).⁷

⁶ Thus Anthony Stephens feels that the Elegies enact a quest for a locus of speech that would lie 'zwischen der Entfremdung in der "gedeuteten Welt" und dem Aufschwung am Ende der siebenten "Elegie"' ("Alles ist nicht es selbst" — Zu den "Duineser Elegien", in *Forschungsgeschichte*, pp. 308–48 (pp. 339–40)); Manfred Engel considers the affirmation of the Seventh and Ninth Elegies to be 'das wichtigste Beispiel für einen humanen Ausgleich menschlicher Daseinsaporien' (p. 138) in the Elegies, but also emphasizes that 'jeder der Lösungsvorschläge, die die "Elegien" formulieren, bleibt konkret und partiell' (Rainer Maria Rilkes 'Duineser Elegien' und die moderne deutsche Lyrik: Zwischen Jahrhundertwende und Avantgarde, Germanistische Abhandlungen, 58 (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1986) p. 142). Winfried Eckel observes that 'der Text den Engel nicht nur auf dem Höhepunkt der 7. Elegie realisiert [...], sondern überall dort, wo die Klage umschlägt in Rührung' (*Wendung: Zum Prozeß der poetischen Reflexion im Werk Rilkes*, Epistemata: Würzburger wissenschaftliche Schriften, Reihe Literaturwissenschaft, 127 (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1994), p. 149 (Eckel's italics)).

⁷ All references to *Duineser Elegien* follow the text in Rainer Maria Rilke, *Sämtliche Werke*, I (Wiesbaden: Insel Verlag, 1955), pp. 683–726. Arabic numerals indicate the lines referred to; when necessary, they are preceded by Roman numerals indicating the Elegy in question. Unless otherwise stated, all italics and elision points are in the original.

The second problem arises from the fact that adult human beings, unlike animals and children, are ill-adapted to an adequate cognition of the world: 'Die findigen Tiere merken es schon, | daß wir nicht sehr verläßlich zu Haus sind in der gedeuteten Welt' (I, 11-13). At the beginning of the Fourth Elegy this is exemplified by the difference between migratory birds, instinctively in accord with the seasons and the right time for departure, and human beings who, metaphorically speaking, tumble down from the sky because they have misjudged the winds and the seasons. The speaker goes on to reveal one reason for this: 'Uns aber, wo wir Eines meinen, ganz, | ist schon des andern Aufwand fühlbar' (IV, 9-10). Our mental apparatus is plagued by a deficiency that makes it impossible to perceive anything as it is in itself. We do not see 'flowering' as such, only in contrast to 'withering', and the two are indissolubly linked in our minds: 'Blühen und verdorren ist uns zugleich bewußt' (I, 6). Therefore the dead, who presumably are free from mental constraints, may discover the subterfuges and factitiousness ('Vorwand') of everything we accomplish, and nothing remains itself ('Alles | ist nicht es selbst') because our perception always distorts it by contrasting it with something else (II, 62-65).

The third existential problem is sensuality, and, in particular, eroticism, the deep-seated power of which is deplored in the depiction of the river god of the blood in the Third Elegy. In the First Elegy, the longing for or the enjoyment of sexual love is seen to dissipate energy better spent in developing a more perceptive attitude to the world. The escapism of love as it is usually found (lovers 'verdecken sich nur mit einander ihr Los' (I, 22)) leads the speaker to ask rhetorically if we should not 'liebend | uns vom Geliebten befreien' (II, 50-51). That wish is not fulfilled and in the Sixth Elegy the speaker returns to the problem and extends its scope. Human beings, he says, are unlike the admirable fig-tree, which swiftly passes through efflorescence to bring forth its fruit: 'ach, uns rühmt es zu blühen, und ins verspätete Innre | unserer endlichen Frucht gehn wir verraten hinein' (II, 9-10). Here it is not merely eroticism but any fulfilled enjoyment of life connoted by the 'flowering' that is seen to leave us betrayed in what we might have accomplished.

As a foil to these existential quandaries, the first six Elegies suggest a possibility of transcending them for three categories of people. What is essential for my argument is that we realize how far removed the speaker is from all of them and, therefore, not possessed of the special insight and authority associated with them. First, he clearly is not a child or one of the young dead who take leave of life while still in possession of the open, non-contrastive form of cognition. Secondly, he must diffidently place himself at several removes (VI, 28-31) from the mighty hero of the Sixth Elegy, who rushes through the temptation of flowering in order to fulfil his destiny. Finally, the speaker is by no means one of the exceptional lovers who, disenthralled from their beloved, can use their emotional state for existential explorations. He may often speak of the other, sensual kind of lover in the second or third person, as if he were not of their number, but he nevertheless reveals that he too feels encumbered by his erotic longings when confronted with the natural and cultural world's 'Auftrag' extended to him: 'Warst du nicht immer | noch von Erwartung zerstreut, als kündigte alles | eine Geliebte dir an?' (I, 30-33). Consequently, he includes himself in the 'wir' of the lovers who should free themselves from their beloved (II, 50-51).

In the Seventh Elegy, and again in the Ninth, the speaker tries to resolve the fundamental problem of transience. However, such a resolution is, in the first six

Elegies, seen to be hampered by the other two dilemmas: the deficiencies of cognition, which preclude an adequate understanding of even the temporal world, and the erotic longing or indulgence, which exacerbates the problem of cognition because it prevents lovers from transcending it by dint of their emotional state. As the speaker is himself subject to these dilemmas, it is reasonable to presuppose that if he is to advance a credible solution to the problem of transience, he will at some point indicate in what manner he has overcome them. Otherwise any statements of his that lay claim to generally valid insights must be treated with scepticism and suspicion.

Turning to the Seventh Elegy, we first encounter this strophe:

WERBUNG nicht mehr, nicht Werbung, erwachsene Stimme,
sei deines Schreies Natur; zwar schriest du rein wie der Vogel,
wenn ihn die Jahreszeit aufhebt, die steigende, beinah vergessend,
daß er ein kümmerndes Tier und nicht nur ein einzelnes Herz sei,
das sie ins Heitere wirft, in die innigen Himmel. Wie er, so
würdest du wohl, nicht minder —, daß, noch unsichtbar,
dich die Freundin erfuhr, die stille, in der eine Antwort
langsam erwacht und über dem Hören sich anwärmt, —
deinem erkühlten Gefühl die erglühte Gefühlin.

(1. 1)

In the first line and a half the speaker addresses himself, conceived as a voice that has reached maturity, and repudiates an attitude of appeal or solicitation. Since that attitude has been represented earlier on in the cycle (particularly by the speaker's appeal to the angel in v, 58–61, 94–100), this is a suitable preamble to a text that purports to suggest new solutions to existential problems. But then something strange happens. Rather than developing or exemplifying his new-found resolution, the speaker launches into a consideration of what solicitation might be like if nevertheless, despite his rejection of that procedure, he *were to cry out*. (The form 'schriest' is grammatically ambiguous, but in conjunction with the later unequivocal subjunctives 'würdest' and 'erfuh' it must also be read as a subjunctive.) This protracted fantasy first hinges on a comparison between the speaker and a (male) bird calling out to a mate in springtime. On the face of it, the parallel seems like a gratifying reversal of the Fourth Elegy's exposure of a hopeless disparity between human beings and animals such as migratory birds. But in fact it does not qualify as a significant change of perspective because it is only an example of the kind of solicitation the speaker, at this point, feels he should *not* indulge in: 'Wie er, so | würdest du wohl' stands in the wellnigh annihilating shadow of the initial negation, 'Werbung nicht mehr'.

A more abiding impression of the strophe must be the speaker's remarkable change of direction halfway through the second line as well as the reason for it: his erotic longing, expressed indirectly in the description of the bird's mating call and directly by his own similar appeal. This, furthermore, he imagines would awaken the appropriate erotic response in a female companion ('die erglühte Gefühlin'). Thereby the speaker's train of thought reveals itself as yet another instance of the eroticism that on various occasions in the past has prevented him from fulfilling his existential mission, as he was 'immer | noch von Erwartung zerstreut, als kündigte alles | eine Geliebte dir an' (1, 31–33).

The speaker thus remains in the throes of an attitude he has deplored in himself and in others (the lovers of 1, 21–22, and 11, 60–65) as a pernicious obstacle to the

attainment of existential insights. This must count heavily against his chances of offering a generally valid existential affirmation, a point corroborated by the following two strophes. In them the speaker develops his fantasy about the mating call, describing enthusiastically how, supported by all of nature (ll. 10–11), it rises to extraordinary heights of visualized tonal beauty (ll. 12–17). This is followed by an ecstatic catalogue of the glories of summer that still lie in store at this imagined vernal point in time (ll. 18–27). Both strophes offer marvellous poetry but they are also puzzling in dwelling in rapt fascination on the beauties of sound and of summer. What is this if not an instance of the human propensity to 'flower' that was deplored in the preceding Elegy as the cause of the fact that 'ins verspätete Innre | unserer endlichen Frucht gehn wir verraten hinein' (vi, 9–10). Given all this, the ensuing fruit of the speaker's deliberations must be treated with great circumspection.

A possible objection to this approach might be that the speaker's earlier denunciation of eroticism and a more generally sensual 'flowering' should not be held against him in the Seventh Elegy because the role of these qualities has changed: in an earlier phase focused on transcendence, they were castigated, but now that the speaker has turned to a celebration of the immanent world, they can be accepted and even applauded. But that objection would be based on the faulty premise of taking for granted that from the Seventh Elegy onwards the cycle does present a glorification of immanence as its solution to the quandaries of human existence. Whether it does or not is precisely the point at issue, which in the speaker's further reflections is now coming to a head.

The speaker passes from his vernal and estival fantasy to more general considerations by emphasizing that what the summer has in store is not merely mornings, days, and evenings:

sondern die Nächte! Sondern die hohen, des Sommers,
Nächte, sondern die Sterne, die Sterne der Erde.
O einst tot sein und sie wissen unendlich,
alle die Sterne: denn wie, wie, wie sie vergessen!
Siehe, da rief ich die Liebende. Aber nicht *sie* nur
käme . . . Es kämen aus schwächlichen Gräbern
Mädchen und ständen . . . Denn, wie beschränkt ich,
wie, den gerufenen Ruf? Die Versunkenen suchen
immer noch Erde. — Ihr Kinder, ein hiesig
einmal ergriffenes Ding gälte für viele.
Glaubt nicht, Schicksal sei mehr, als das Dichte der Kindheit;
wie überholtet ihr oft den Geliebten, atmend,
atmend nach seligem Lauf, auf nichts zu, ins Freie.
Hiersein ist herrlich. Ihr wußtet es, Mädchen, *ihr* auch,
die ihr scheinbar entbehrtet, versankt —

(l. 26)

In addition to the speaker's continued preoccupation with the successful mating call, what attracts attention here is the extraordinary transition from his fantasy to the indicative mode of existential generalizations. If the fantasy came to a distinct end and were followed by a return to the idea of 'Werbung nicht mehr', it could be regarded as a long farewell to the solicitation, the eroticism, and the 'flowering' that must now be abandoned. But instead the argument moves from the fantasy straight into the generalizations (the beginning of which is signalled by the dash in line 34). Even in the second and third strophes of this Elegy, the speaker was so carried away

by the figments of his imagination that he seemed to forget their ontological status, slipping as he did from the subjunctive 'trüge' (l. 11) to a succession of verbs in the indicative mode starting with 'zuvornimmt' (l. 16). At the beginning of the fourth strophe he starts with the grammatically ambiguous 'rief' (l. 30), and then reverts to the subjunctive with 'käme', 'kämen', and 'ständen' (ll. 31–32), but again passes into the indicative mode with 'beschränk' and 'suchen' (ll. 32–33). After 'gälte' (l. 35), a different kind of subjunctive, which signals a conditional rather than an imaginary status, the indicative remains the norm. However, the speaker's statements are still related to the fantasy because they are explicitly addressed to the beloved and the other young girls conjured up within it:

Ihr Kinder, ein hiesig
einmal ergriffenes Ding gälte für viele.
(l. 34)

Hiersein ist herrlich. Ihr wußtet es, Mädchen [...]
(l. 39)

Nirgends, Geliebte, wird Welt sein, als innen.
(l. 50)

Thus not even the pivotal last statement, on which the remainder of the Seventh Elegy is predicated, is presented as the speaker's unequivocal 'message' to his audience. Instead, it is his way of addressing, within an already repudiated form of imagined 'Werbung', a female figure conjured up by his erotic longing, which has already been exposed as an obstacle to existential insight. The speaker is still in the throes of this fantasy, and his tone remains enthusiastic throughout. But we, the readers, should be alive to indications in the text that enthusiasm does not necessarily connote insight. What we witness is not an affirmation presented seriously as an important pronouncement of the cycle but an erotic fantasy-cum-philosophy, by which the speaker, at this high point of excitement, is so inflamed that he illogically slips from the appropriate subjunctive to the indicative mode, as if the fantasy were real. As the generalizations continue, there are indications of another kind, but with the same import of undermining the general validity of the speaker's statements.

In lines 36–47 the speaker points to possibilities of experiencing true being, emphasizing that such an experience can be preserved only when it is internalized (ll. 48–49). Turning from young girls in general to his imagined beloved, he subsequently makes this the focal point of the famous pronouncement, which I quote in its entirety:

Nirgends, Geliebte, wird Welt sein, als innen. 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. Diese, des Herzens, Verschwendung
sparen wir heimlicher ein. Ja, wo noch eins übersteht,
ein einst gebetetes Ding, ein gedientes, geknietes —,
hält es sich, so wie es ist, schon ins Unsichtbare hin.
Viele gewahrens nicht mehr, doch ohne den Vorteil,
daß sie's nun *innerlich* baun, mit Pfeilern und Statuen, größer!

Jede dumpfe Umkehr der Welt hat solche Enterbte,
denen das Frühere nicht und noch nicht das Nächste gehört.
Denn auch das Nächste ist weit für die Menschen. Uns soll
dies nicht verwirren; es stärke in uns die Bewahrung
der noch erkannten Gestalt. —

(l. 50)

The speaker returns, then, to the cycle's most fundamental existential problem, suggesting as his solution that we preserve in our minds the various human phenomena that are subject to transience, and that in our imagination we even add to their stature (l. 62).⁸ Somewhat disconcertingly, he is particularly concerned with buildings (ll. 52, 57, 73–74, 81, 82), but references to 'Musik' (l. 82) and 'Liebende' (l. 84) take in other significant human phenomena as well. However, this approach to the problem of transience fails to take account of the problem of cognition. Bearing in mind the critique of the adult human being's habits of mind in the earlier Elegies, we must ask ourselves what value the mental preservation of various phenomena may have if the necessarily antecedent cognition of them runs the risk of being seriously inadequate.

This is a question that the speaker, in his enthusiasm, ignores for the time being, but it is indirectly held before us by the structure of his argument. In the central passage just quoted his thought processes rely heavily on interrelated multiple contrasts:

1. visible, external *vs* invisible, internal (ll. 50–52)
2. cerebral 'erdachtes Gebild' *vs.* 'des Herzens [...] Verschwendung' (ll. 53, 57)
3. the present 'Zeitgeist' *vs* the attitude prevalent in the past ('einmal', 'einst') (ll. 55, 52, 59)
4. the present 'Umkehr' *vs* the past and the future (ll. 63–64)
5. the powerless 'Enterbte' *vs* us who are not confused (ll. 63, 65–66)

This ebullition of contrastive thought may seem natural and innocuous, given the points that the speaker wishes to stress. But it takes on a different complexion when we recall the Fourth Elegy's exposure of the habit of mind that makes us so ill-adapted to the world:

Uns aber, wo wir Eines meinen, ganz,
ist schon des andern Aufwand fühlbar. Feindschaft
ist uns das Nächste.

(iv, 9)

Is it not precisely this failing that the speaker exhibits abundantly in the climactic affirmation of the Seventh Elegy? Unable to focus on one thing as it is in itself, he defines everything by contrasting it with what it is not. Thereby he proves to have remained subject to the mode of cognition that in the Fourth Elegy was defined

⁸ As the quotation indicates, when the concept with which I am concerned is first introduced in the Seventh Elegy, the keywords are 'innerlich baun' (l. 62) and 'Bewahrung | der noch erkannten Gestalt' (ll. 66–67). In that poem 'verwandeln' is not used in this special sense (though in line 49 'innen verwandeln' denotes the somewhat more mundane notion of assimilating gratifying personal experiences). However, when he returns to the concept in the Ninth Elegy, the speaker says that we should transform the phenomena of the temporal world ('im unsichtbarn Herzen verwandeln' (l. 65)) and describes the mission enjoined on us by the earth as 'Verwandlung' (l. 70). Consequently many critics use the terms 'Verwandlung' or 'transformation' even when referring to the Seventh Elegy, and the whole concept may be known as 'die Verwandlungs-Lehre der 7. und 9. Elegie' (Engel, *Rilkes 'Duineser Elegien'*, p. 138, Engel's italics). I see no essential problem in this and consider 'internalization (and preservation)' equivalent to 'transformation', but I have chosen to use the former terms because they derive from the Seventh Elegy, which is the object of my most detailed analysis.

as inimical to the full perception of the world available to birds and lions. He is still at the mercy of that which renders 'voll Vorwand | das alles [. . .], was wir hier leisten' (iv, 63-64).

This must raise serious doubts about the whole concept of mental conservation. It cannot be viable if, even while he propounds it, the speaker remains hampered by the mental habit preventing us from grasping things as they are, which must surely be the prerequisite of any adequate internalization and preservation of them. How can we meaningfully strive for the inner 'Bewahrung | der noch erkannten Gestalt' (vii, 66-67) if we cannot be confident that we perceive any Gestalt properly? This point is further emphasized by the fact that the continuum of time is a particular object of the speaker's contrastive thought (concerning the present *Zeitgeist* *vs* the past, and the present 'Umkehr' *vs* the past and the future). This markedly represents precisely the perception of time that in the Fourth Elegy was shown to be one reason why adults, unlike children, cannot grasp the world as it is in itself:

Alles
ist nicht es selbst. O Stunden in der Kindheit,
da hinter den Figuren mehr als nur
Vergangnes war und vor uns nicht die Zukunft.
(iv, 64)

In the remainder of the Seventh Elegy, after the dash in line 67, the speaker names various phenomena whose 'Gestalt' is to be preserved. For all his celebration of the temporal world, he extends his earlier conception with the notion that it is the angel who ultimately safeguards the conservation of that which the speaker exhibits to him: 'in deinem Anschau'n | steh es gerettet zuletzt, nun endlich aufrecht' (ll. 71-72). This may strike us as very similar to the angel's preservation of the boy's smile and the lovers' ardour, for which the speaker petitioned him in the Fifth Elegy (ll. 58-61, 94-100). But the speaker insists that his attitude has now changed from one of solicitation to something more imperious and commanding: his 'Anruf' forces the angel to stay away (vii, 85-92). One may detect an element of pious self-deceit as well as self-aggrandizement in this, since after all it is only through the invocation of the angel that the final rescue of immanent phenomena from the flux of time can be achieved. But above all we must note that up to the very end of the Seventh Elegy the speaker fails to solve the problems of eroticism and cognition and thus, on the terms of the Elegies themselves, cannot be said to have offered a resolution of the problem of transience that would qualify as the main pronouncement of the cycle as a whole. Instead, in a moment of enthusiasm he has deluded himself into believing that he has formulated a valid affirmation, but the level-headed reader aware of the existential conditions to which the speaker is subject must view the Seventh Elegy in a different light.

The above interpretation of the Seventh Elegy, and particularly its reference to the speaker's defective powers of cognition, receives strong support from the following poem. The transition from the Seventh to the Eighth Elegy could hardly be more startling:

Glaub *nicht*, daß ich werbe.
Engel, und würb ich dich auch! Du kommst nicht. Denn mein
Anruf ist immer voll Hinweg; wider so starke
Strömung kannst du nicht schreiten. Wie ein gestreckter
Arm ist mein Rufen. Und seine zum Greifen

oben offene Hand bleibt vor dir
 offen, wie Abwehr und Warnung,
 Unfaßlicher, weitauf.

(vii, 85)

MIT allen Augen sieht die Kreatur
 das Offene. Nur unsre Augen sind
 wie umgekehrt und ganz um sie gestellt
 als Fallen, rings um ihren freien Ausgang.
 Was draußen *ist*, wir wissens aus des Tiers
 Antlitz allein;

(viii, 1)

Even as blank verse is substituted for the usual falling metre of the cycle, so the triumphant, somewhat aggressive mood of confident self-assertion yields to one of subdued sadness. A telling aspect of this is the tone of recital. Reading out the Seventh Elegy, one would tend to speak in a loud voice, particularly towards the end, but the beginning of the Eighth Elegy is written in such a way that it must be spoken softly. A palpable change of mood has occurred, one that seems to signal that the festivities are over and need to be considered in the cool grey light of the dawn that follows inevitably.

This change of mood has a counterpart in the ideas that are very clearly put forward in the Eighth Elegy. The poem reiterates the earlier points about human cognition: our inability, as the opening lines put it, to see what really *is* outside the circle of our inverted perception. This recalls a fundamental oversight in the affirmation of the Seventh Elegy, and all the more so as the point is repeated, almost laboured throughout the Eighth (ll. 14–19, 29–31, 33–34, 66–69), as if to make sure that the earlier illusion is destroyed once and for all. Significantly, we are also reminded of the speaker's fascination with a beloved which, given the existential conditions of the Elegies, further distorts his vision:

Liebende, wäre nicht der andre, der
 die Sicht verstellt, sind nah daran und staunen . . .

(viii, 24)

To these ideas already familiar from the first half of the cycle the Eighth Elegy adds a new dimension. To some extent anticipated by the earlier celebration of the period in childhood that was free from the experience of past and future (iv, 65–75), it specifies a reason for our faulty cognition:

Was draußen *ist*, wir wissens aus des Tiers
 Antlitz allein; denn schon das frühe Kind
 wenden wir um und zwingens, daß es rückwärts
 Gestaltung sehe, nicht das Offne, das
 im Tiergesicht so tief ist. Frei von Tod.
Ihn sehen wir allein; das freie Tier
 hat seinen Untergang stets hinter sich
 und vor sich Gott, und wenn es geht, so gehts
 in Ewigkeit, so wie die Brunnen gehen.

Wir haben nie, nicht einen einzigen Tag,
 den reinen Raum vor uns, in den die Blumen
 unendlich aufgehen.

(viii, 5)

Our perception is thus blocked by our awareness of death, which forms a barrier turning our gaze back into our human 'Gestaltung' of the world rather than allow it

to take in the totality of existence available to animals and small children. In relation to the Seventh Elegy, this suggests an augmentation of the interpretation given above by indicating yet another stumbling-block for that poem's attempt at affirmation: if the defective cognition undermining a meaningful inner conservation of percepts is grounded in our awareness of death, it can evidently never be overcome, since we can hardly rid ourselves of that awareness.

The Eighth Elegy, then, undercuts the affirmation of the Seventh radically and directly, but the Ninth, curiously, takes up the argument from the Seventh as if the intervening caveats had never been voiced. True, it adds the notion that it is specifically through language that the inner preservation of the transient phenomena of our world can be achieved: by naming, saying, and praising (ll. 31-35, 42-43, 52-53). But this hardly helps us to understand how a mental or linguistic conservation of various phenomena can have value if they have not been perceived adequately, or why we should not mistrust a speaker who even in his climactic final statement markedly continues to uphold the cripplingly contrastive tripartite division of time:

Siehe, ich lebe. Woraus? Weder Kindheit noch Zukunft
werden weniger Überzähliges Dasein
entspringt mir im Herzen.

(IX, 77)

Thus, for all its rekindled enthusiasm, the Ninth Elegy offers a credible affirmation no more than the Seventh because it fails to address and overcome the trammelling dilemmas of that poem, which, by now, have been further underlined by the Eighth Elegy.

Like the Eighth Elegy, the Tenth stands in a dialogic relation to the preceding poem. It starts out by briefly re-enacting the elation of the Ninth, and if the idea of mental and linguistic internalization truly constituted the central affirmation of the cycle, it would be natural for the Tenth Elegy to exemplify it by some kind of affectionate account of the phenomena of the temporal world. But in fact it takes a very different turn. Thus, to begin with, it works against an easy acceptance of the preceding affirmation by making little or nothing of it, the implication being that its suggested solution of existential problems is not a durable one. The same conclusion can be drawn from the two main questions that the Tenth Elegy does address.

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;⁹ it has even been suggested that the cycle would be better off without it.¹⁰ But given the interpretation that I have urged, these new directions are essential to the cycle, constituting as they do yet another challenge to the preceding attempts at

⁹ A particularly outspoken example is provided by Jack Stein in 'The Duino Elegies', *Germanic Review*, 27 (1952), 272-79 (pp. 277-78): melancholy and depression 'recede more and more before a triumphant jubilation which culminates in the Ninth Elegy, originally intended as the final one (the tenth is clearly an afterthought)'. Stein has nothing else to say about the Tenth Elegy, but continues to expound the Ninth.

¹⁰ Komar quotes the end of the Ninth Elegy and comments: 'Rilke might well have ended the *Elegies* here at the heart of himself and existence. In fact, one may wish he had' ('The Crisis of Consciousness', p. 153). Committed as she is to the notion of a genuine affirmation in the Seventh and Ninth Elegies, she still has problems with the Tenth five years later in her book-chapter on it. In *Transcending Angels* she starts her discussion by announcing that 'Rilke's tenth elegy presents a difficult critical problem' (p. 169) and wages a valiant but convoluted battle to explain why it is, as she must conclude, that the 'tenth elegy cannot provide a culminating example of the poetics Rilke envisions' (p. 196).

affirmation. First, the Tenth Elegy formulates a new view of suffering, not the excruciating hollowness of contemporary society (ll. 16–33), but the genuine suffering inherent in the human predicament:

Wir, Vergeuder der Schmerzen.
Wie wir sie absehn voraus, in die traurige Dauer,
ob sie nicht enden vielleicht. Sie aber sind ja
unser winterwähriges Laub, unser dunkles Sinngrün,
eine der Zeiten des heimlichen Jahres —, nicht nur
Zeit —, sind Stelle, Siedelung, Lager, Boden, Wohnort.

(x, 10)

Rather than attempting to curtail our suffering, we should, according to this, accept it as a part of existence that is both perdurable and somehow beautiful, as the metaphor of the evergreen leaves suggests. Since it has been the speaker's aspiration so far to find strategies for overcoming the suffering caused by the existential quandaries, this represents an entirely new attitude. It is not irreconcilable with his anguish in the first six Elegies, which may now be seen as a genuine existential experience, though one that should be embraced rather than resisted. But the appreciative conception of suffering clearly undercuts the attempt to transcend it in the Seventh and Ninth Elegies. Even as a project and a dream, that attempt now appears to have been misguided.

Much the same is true of the other main focus of the Tenth Elegy, its portrayal of death. It first appears as the last item in the contemptuous description of the marketplace of contemporary society:

... Oh aber gleich darüber hinaus,
hinter der letzten Planke, beklebt mit Plakaten des 'Todlos',
jenes bitteren Biers, das den Trinkenden süß scheint,
wenn sie immer dazu frische Zerstreuungen kaun ... ,

(x, 34)

This is clearly a sarcastic criticism of people's craving, by means of various amusements, to suppress their awareness of death. Whether we should also apply it to the speaker's earlier procedures is not quite clear, but an intriguing question emerges: in his efforts to overcome transience through mental preservation, has the speaker displayed the attitude that is now castigated of one who tries to veil his own mortality? Has he, too, in a fashion different from the denizens of the amusement park, but nevertheless, been sipping the beer 'Todlos'? If we decide that the answer is to some degree affirmative, doubt is again cast on the value of the affirmation attempted in the Seventh and Ninth Elegies.

In what follows the Tenth Elegy adopts the contrary procedure of looking death straight in the eye. It charts the trajectory of one of the young dead through the intermediate Landscape of Laments, which still has some features in common with human life, into a further stage of death where his companion, a personified 'Klage', must leave him after pointing out

die Quelle der Freude. In Ehrfurcht
nennt sie sie, sagt: — Bei den Menschen
ist sie ein tragender Strom. —
Stehn am Fuß des Gebirgs.
Und da umarmt sie ihn, weinend.
Einsam steigt er dahin, in die Berge des Ur-Leids.
Und nicht einmal sein Schritt klingt aus dem tonlosen Los.

Aber erweckten sie uns, die unendlich Toten, ein Gleichnis,
 siehe, sie zeigten vielleicht auf die Kätzchen der leeren
 Hasel, die hängenden, oder
 meinten den Regen, der fällt auf dunkles Erdreich im Frühjahr. —

Und wir, die an *steigendes* Glück
 denken, empfänden die Rührung,
 die uns beinahe bestürzt,
 wenn ein Glückliches *fällt*.

(l. 99)

These strophes that bring the cycle to an end are as disturbing as they are moving. Although we have been indirectly encouraged to embrace mortality, the picture of death is a bleak one: a lonely path into the realm of soundlessness and pristine suffering (ll. 104–05). It is in relation to this that we must see the quiet celebration of life in these lines. It does not constitute a repetition or corroboration of the earlier 'Hiersein ist herrlich' (vii, 39), which was based on entirely different and, as is now clear, mistaken assumptions. Instead, when we are told that life contains enough joy to make up 'ein tragender Strom', we should see the statement in relation to that which is prominent in this concluding Elegy: the limbo of the Landscape of Laments, where joy is but a small fountain, and the desolate inner realm of death, where it can hardly exist at all. Similarly, we must note that the happiness of the downward movement towards the earth is suggested by the dead, who, if they could communicate at all, would look back on earth wistfully from their hopeless final stage of being 'die unendlich Toten' (l. 106). More than anything else, perhaps, this underlines the desolation of death, which makes even life, with all its agonizing and inescapable existential quandaries, an object of nostalgia.

The Tenth Elegy, then, disclaims the affirmation of the Ninth in two ways. Indirectly, it does so by giving a bleak portrayal of death without making any mention of the proposed palliative of mental and linguistic preservation. More directly, it takes issue with the assumption that suffering and death need to be overcome rather than accepted. One could say that while the Eighth Elegy casts doubt on the *viability* of the affirmation attempted in the Seventh, the Tenth disputes the *value* of such attempts in both the Seventh and the Ninth Elegy.

In the light of this analysis, we can see that the Seventh and Ninth Elegies form only one stage in the process of the cycle as a whole. Their function within that totality therefore calls for an assessment different from the traditional one structured round their allegedly valid affirmation.

From an aesthetic point of view, first of all, the role of these poems in the cycle resides in the contrast and welcome change of mood that their jubilant elation provides in a sequence that might otherwise seem too uniformly elegiac and problem-laden. Also, their dual relation to the other eight poems, whose vision they seem to transcend but to which they must ultimately subordinate themselves, engenders a tension that strikes me as aesthetically more pleasing than the rather simple and predictable pattern of the traditional interpretation (problem posed in Elegies I–VI, problem solved in VII and IX, with some modifications in VIII and X).

From the point of view of the speaker's psychology, the Seventh and Ninth Elegies also carry considerable conviction. They movingly show a persona in whom, in the course of a long exposition of the insurmountable causes of his anguish, the need for existential sustenance has grown so urgent that it begets a beautiful though

chimerical conception of a meaningful escape from the trammels of transience. The fact that the manifestation of that need is momentarily allowed to override everything that the speaker knows about the human condition shows further psychological insight on Rilke's part. One could say that he presents a phenomenon analogous to that of a (temporary) religious conversion where intellectual expostulations yield to emotional exigencies, a procedure we know the human mind to be perfectly capable of.

In the discursive process of the cycle, the Seventh and Ninth Elegies fulfil an important but complex function in preparing us for the bleak final vision of the Tenth. Without them, that vision would still be possible, but its summing-up of the other, plaintive Elegies might seem too simplistic and predictable. As it is, the speaker reaches his final dark portrayal of death by a satisfyingly inventive and circuitous route. He is granted an attempt at solving the existential problems as he had formulated them in the first six Elegies, and, quite convincingly, only when that solution fails to endure is it necessary to go on to the first main point of the Tenth Elegy: that pain and anguish are inescapably inherent in the human condition (x, 10–15). It also seems apposite that in the Seventh and Ninth Elegies, the speaker is allowed to proceed with his battle against transience as far as a spurious solution before he can voice the Tenth Elegy's second main point: its conception of death as unmitigated tragic inevitability and sheer obliteration.

In a wider perspective, this means that more pointedly than hitherto, the *Duineser Elegien* must be described as a work of their time of publication, four years after the end of the First World War and one year after T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Whatever their echoes of a literary past, they do not genuinely belong to a tradition of prophetic annunciation represented by such works as Klopstock's 'Wißbegierde', Novalis's *Hymnen an die Nacht*, and Hölderlin's *Brod und Wein*. This is because, in the last resort, the *Duineser Elegien* announce very little with any finality. Their procedure of subverting themselves and their temporary certitudes gives them a distinctly modernist character. In their consideration of the human plight they explore many solutions and palliatives but only to discard them and arrive at rock bottom: the certainty of suffering and the certainty of death. Philosophically, too, this starkness of their vision, pointing forwards to Celan¹¹ rather than backwards to the Romantics, marks them out as a work of our doubting and despondent century and makes them eminently well suited to their position as one of its literary landmarks.

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¹¹ This link is of course regularly mentioned in Celan criticism, though often more in terms of Celan's allusions to individual poems or locutions in Rilke's *œuvre* than with regard to the two poets' vision of life. See, for instance, James K. Lyon, 'Rilke und Celan', in *Argumentum e Silentio: International Paul Celan Symposium/Internationales Paul Celan-Symposium*, ed. by Amy D. Colin (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1987), pp. 199–213. An interesting attempt to draw a line from the *Duineser Elegien* even closer to the end of our century, and in terms of the writers' outlook on life, is made by Christine Marschall in *Zum Problem der Wirklichkeit im Werk Peter Handke: Untersuchungen mit Blick auf Rainer Maria Rilke, Sprache und Dichtung*, 43 (Bern, Stuttgart, and Vienna: Haupt, 1995), Chapter 8.

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