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Being and Death: the Existential Quests of Rilke's *Duino Elegies*

By

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THESIS

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Introduction

Among modern poets who intensively address death as their topic, Rainer Maria Rilke is a German-language poet distinguished by his elegiac voice. Living in the age of World War I, where nihilism and a feeling of desperation of humanity prevailed, Rilke was astonished by the fact that his contemporaries remained neglected to death with its relation to man's existential existence. Modernity is surrounded by a lack of reflection of death, as is discovered by Rilke's observation. The quest on how to die a well-finished death is received by a task of life and is continuously discussed by Rilke, and his thoughts on this topic are richly reflected in his poetics of the elegy. The *Duino Elegies* (hereafter: *Elegies*) are a famous collection of ten elegies written in Rilke's late years, wherein the poet delves into the ontology of death and tries to look into its essential relation to humanity. Taking death as an independent constitution of man's authentic existence, the *Elegies* are initially a revelation of modernity's psychological wound: the crisis of belief, the discontinuity reflected in modern life, and the finitude of men, all of which are accompanied by a haunting feeling of loss and melancholy. A rediscovery of these aspects in a modern context, as revealed by Rilke, propels us to examine the inner relation between death and being in order to divert man's attention from outside material world to the inside of self, and furthermore, through pursuing what is authentic in existence, to restore man's right position in this changing world.

The modernist elegy, as claimed by Kelly Walsh in "The Unbearable Openness of Death", is a "poetics of insufficiency," since "absence, death and the finitude of human existence" are recognized as irrepressible facts in the 20th century (2009, p. 2). Rilke's elegiac voice is a typical one that reveals the psychological mark of modernity. Mourning of loss, sorrow and melancholia are lyrically expressed in the *Elegies*, yet the signal of such

sentiments has already appeared in Rilke's novel in his youth, *the Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. We may already have known that in the 20th century arises the crisis of belief, that which used to be believed in as an ideal god-like necessity recedes into the shadow, along with the deconstruction of the unity of a metaphysical scheme, as discovered by existentialist philosophy. Under such a "disastrous" deconstruction, man is forced to face his own situation in the world; that is, his unique existence, and his unescapable finitude. Nonetheless, while embracing these modern dilemmas consciously, the *Elegies* express a desire to recover from the pain of loss and absence through the means of transcendence, with little illusion of "art's metaphysical recuperation" (Walsh, 2009, p. 2). Rilke's absorption of existential philosophy has the *Elegies* reject that transcendence would simply lie in an ideal "beyond", but is rooted in man's existence. Focusing on what is fundamental in man's existence, the *Elegies* never dismiss man's determined finitude nor do they denounce the anonymous dead.

The way Rilke approaches existence is through the problem of consciousness. With tenacity he seeks for a way to overcome the existential limitation that is born with man as a conscious being. Such limitation is in the first place an outcome of problematic self-consciousness: consciousness has an intrinsic tendency of objectifying what is presented to man as existence, therefore, it sets a perpetual distance from man and the world by rendering the thing into representation. Because of the fluidity and arbitrariness of self-consciousness, representation fails to fully grasp the underlying essence of existence, which nevertheless leads to a miserable meandering of man in this world. The elegiac voice in the *Elegies* acutely discovers that the relation between man and the thing is not in harmony, that once it comes to man the reflective consciousness, he shall identify that there is an absence of ground for shared understanding, as the *Fourth Elegy* reveals through the contrast between animal's numbness and human's pathos. In this elegy, the voice laments: "We are not at one" (*Wir*

sind nicht einig)¹, there is no universal standard shared by humans because the tendency to separate the self from the integrated world is so deeply rooted in consciousness. Therefore, the hope to get out of such unavoidable boundaries seems to be a too strenuous task for an individual, yet it is the very one that Rilke takes up in his mature poetry.

The phenomenological problems of this sort are also addressed by philosopher Martin Heidegger in his hermeneutical work, with a reflection on modern society. In “What are Poets For”, Heidegger comments on Rilke’s poetics and opens a perspective on Rilke’s metaphysics related to consciousness. In the same work, Heidegger also offers an examination of the authenticity of existence, attempting to explain how the ontology of death should be related to the potentiality of innermost being. The early Heidegger used the word, “Being”, to present a primal coherence of man’s inalienable engagement in this world by the way of inquiring of self, and the same quest of how to situate oneself in the existential world is put forward by the *Elegies*, whereas Rilke uses the image of the Angel to reveal what we can call the totality of existence. With a highly mystic and religious sense, death has its debut in the *First Elegy*, and is vocalized by the great tensions between man and his lover the Angel, a pair of opposites: whereas man’s self-consciousness is insufficient, fragmentary, and unable to grasp the fundamental existence because of its nature as being self-alienating, the Angel is a being with the hypostatization of perfect consciousness, which overcomes the transitoriness and self-imposed limitations of individual consciousness, and manifests as an integrated whole in the higher degree of reality. As Rilke puts it, the Angel is “that creature in whom the transmutation of the visible into the invisible,”² it is, as an ultimate presentation of the immaterial being, “that being who assures the recognition of a higher order of reality in the invisible.”³ While the playful tension gives the life vitality of poetic creation, it is

¹ See the *Fourth Elegy*, p. 40. Trans. J. B. Leishman and Stephen Spender. All the English translations in this article are from the above authors.

² *Letter from Muzot*, p. 337.

³ *Ibid.*

nonetheless parallel to violent tearing force from the transcendental realm, as the *First Elegy* sings, “*Ich verging von seinem / stärkeren Dasein*”⁴ (I should fade in the strength of his stronger existence.) Just as the Angel takes man in through its stronger existence, the *Elegies* have it dissolved man’s presupposed interpretations of poetry through poetic language, and with a deconstruction of the meaning of objective existence, permitting one to be touched by the transcendental existence that exists in the boundless metaphysical sphere known as the Open (*das Offene*), which we will soon find in the *Eighth Elegy*.

The Open is an important notion in Rilke’s philosophy of consciousness. What does the Open mean? Is it a sort of feeling to an uncovered place or does it bear more profound meanings that are aroused by something other than a particular space? To understand what is truly connotated by the Open, Heidegger’s hermeneutic work on Rilke’s poetics can furnish our understanding of this difficult idea. The Open, characterized as an *inner* territory granted with freedom, is to be understood from the being of animals, that differs from man in that animals lack a subjective consciousness. In the *Eighth Elegy* Rilke writes of the animals: “*Mit allen Augen sieht die Kreatur / das Offene*”¹ (With all its eyes the creatures behold / the Open). According to Heidegger’s interpretation, all that belongs immediately within the Open requires an animal-like numbness⁵, in the same that in animals’ being there is an unawareness of separated self. And that means, in order to be admitted to Open and hence get emancipated from the space-trapped self-consciousness, man needs to transform his self-consciousness into a kind of unconsciousness, through which all subjective activities come into – which seems to be a moment of eternity – a pause. From the very living situation of the animals we can see that the Open, with its wide orbit of unrestrained existence, requires a renouncement of objectifying consciousness, so that man can view this world no longer from the perspective

⁴ The *First Elegy*, p. 20.

⁵ Martin Heidegger, “What Are Poets For?” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, tr. Albert Hofstadeter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p.106.

of a separated individual, but from the creatures who are surrounded by freedom when subjectivity is absent.

The above information is key to understanding the symbol of animals and its relation to the problem of consciousness. As paradoxical it may seem, in the *Elegies* there is both a demand of death symbolized as the winter, “*Bäume Lebens, o wann winterlich?*”⁶ (O trees of life, when will your winter come?); and a gaining of new life when man ultimately sees the self-satisfied being in the Open sphere. The *Fourth Elegy* first brings out a chilly complex: different from man, whose existence has departed from unity because of objectifying what is surrounding him, the migratory birds and lions are admitted by and have already been drawn into the Open through their simultaneous existence within the whole presence of nature. And the indication here is now clear: the demand of death is the means to understand and truly be accepted by self, and this is why the winter-like death is transformed into a new life that starts from the gaze of Open, if we compare the *Eighth Elegy* to the *Fourth Elegy*. Bringing such a paradox, Rilke tries to let us know that death is not to be understood from the conventional dualism of life-death, as if it were some empirical event that can be observed; with its fundamental relation to existence, death should be read as complementary to life which yet remains invisible to us, and is only to be grasped from the ontological perspective of consciousness. Rilke’s thinking is appreciated by Heidegger: animals’ being, as what is “in the world”⁷ situated by Heidegger, leads on a path for the harmonious “whole draft,”⁸ in which man is granted a possibility to redeem his constant loss because of his fluid self-consciousness and hence, to recover from the pain of absence and separation. The quest to be drawn into the emerging of totality of existence, as enveloped by that all-admitting vastness of the Open, requires man’s ceasing his existence as a separated individual. As we shall find

⁶ See the *Fourth Elegy*, p. 40.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

later in this analysis, the poet's contemplation of nature beings serves as a way to rescue consciousness from the tendency to subject-object dualism, so that man is able to break the existential confinement in spatial-temporal dimension and in a moment when extremity happens, is touched by the eternity. Such eternity, however, does not exist among the material world but only exists in an imaginary ontological field, and is given, as we have already known, in the figuration of the purely invisible Angel. "*Preise dem Engel die Welt, nicht die unsäglichen, ihm / kannst du nicht größtun mit herrlich Erfühltem*"⁹ (Praise the world to the Angel, not the untellable: you / can't impress him with the splendor you've felt). This is why the *Elegies* end with the poet's praise of the Angel; as the ineffable Angel makes the world touchable to man, hence, "not the untellable" with an awe, man has achieved a full-fledged consciousness purified of the insufficient self which comes along with a transcendence to that which simultaneously *is* with existence, the united One as beings as a whole.

From visible natural creatures to the invisible Angel, there is a transformation in regard to man's familiar perception of the world. The philosophy that lies behind this artistic mission, indicated by the *Elegies*, is concerned with existence itself, which sets a demand to go beyond the aesthetic phenomenon insofar as it touches the essence of existence. One may well think of this transformation as an outcome of a certain movement of consciousness. Through inward activities, existence is turned to be invisible in the sense that representation dissolves within a purified consciousness, and the essence, that is elusive to man's insufficient self-consciousness, emerges. Such transformation is the ground for an elegiac poetics. However, what can we know about the happening of transformation, inasmuch as nothing other than every physical existence of this world would be the starting point? As Rilke said, after his completion of *the Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, "The work of the

⁹ See the *Ninth Elegy*, p. 75.

eyes is done. Go now and do the heart-work on the images imprisoned within you.”¹⁰ By speaking of imprisonment, Rilke is thinking of the restriction of aesthetics recognized as phenomenal appearance. Observation is necessary for poetic art; however, with merely the observation of visible appearance, the poet is still away from grasping what is underlying the presence of existence. As reflected as a philosophical theme of the *Elegies*, it is only with a touch of the invisible ground of existence that man can truly attain an intimacy with the world where he dwells. The earth, for man who is not fully at home¹¹ at the beginning, finally becomes invisible (*unsichtbar*) and arises from deep within of humanity: “*Erde, ist es nicht dies, was du willst: unsichtbar / in ins erstehn?* –”¹² (Earth, isn’t this what you want: an invisible / re-arising in us?) Intimacy is achieved when transformation eliminates the distance set by representation and the limitation of vision. With man’s full embrace of his absence, his self-consciousness, along with his insufficient being, dissolves into the Angel’s absoluteness, which is effusive with overwhelming beauty. It could be said that the transformation of consciousness takes place as a countermovement of the “imprisonment” by vision. Accordingly, the “heart-work” is contributed to the pure image of what is ineffable and becomes the birth of poetic art, in which moment the world as representation collapses and is drawn into a directly intuited reality.

However, the moment of such a profound realization awaits long after solitude. Pain and sorrow for man’s separation from the whole must be endured. Like some kind of *allegretto*, the mystical Angel is appealed to by the poet under different circumstances in the *Elegies*, whereas the beginning feeling of horror and ecstasy under Angelic beauty – “*nichts / als des Schrecklichen Anfang*”¹³ (nothing / but the beginning of terror we’re still just able to

¹¹ “*daß wir nicht nicht sehr verlässlich zu Hause sind*” (we don’t feel very securely at home). See the *First Elegy*, p. 21.

¹² See the *Ninth Elegy*, p. 77.

¹³ See the *First Elegy*, p. 21.

bear) – is shifted to the more inconsolable sorrow in the closing episodes. The elegiac voice laments for man as the one “most transitory” (*Uns, die Schwindendsten*)¹⁴ and this conclusion comes after all the efforts that have been made for transcendence. In its unworldly beauty, the Angel, however, does not grant a metaphysical shelter whereby man can escape from his doomed perishableness to eternity. With a clear consciousness of loss, the poet acknowledges that the flux of the time would never fail to draw him into his own finitude in the most realistic world, though a glimpse of the transcendental world once elevated him.

At this point, perhaps, we may already have some answer to the following questions: how is a recovery of man from absence and loss initiated by his self-consciousness to be achieved through a transcendence of his insufficient existence? Why is transformation so urgent for man, how through it he can touch existence itself? To restore man’s authentic position in the world, which is granted by an intimacy between man and the thing, what philosophical meaning does Rilke’s poetic invisibilization bear? Finally, why is death, in its disillusioned form, demanded by the *Elegies* for man’s full presence of existence as “Being”? This article seeks to provide answers to these questions with a closing reading of the particular parts of the *Elegies*. Based upon an examination on Heidegger’s hermeneutic works, as well as Rilke’s letters and his early works, this article tries to investigate the philosophical themes of being and death in the *Elegies* through close reading, and therefore, to understand how poetic languages bear such a function to connote these existential concepts. In order to clarify how man’s existence is closely connected to his consciousness, models of consciousness will be addressed. One is that of German poet Heinrich von Kleist. Kleist presented human consciousness with the morphology of the tree, the very image that could help us get some knowledge of the triadic progress of consciousness, hence to better

¹⁴ See the *Ninth Elegy*, p. 73.

understand why Rilke prefers to use the trees – the tree in the “interpreted world” (*der gedeuteten Welt*)¹⁵ and the tree of life (*Bäume Lebens*)¹⁶ – to show certain limitations of human consciousness. The other model that will be addressed is from Rilke’s letter on man’s everyday consciousness and perfect consciousness, wherein he uses the metaphor of the pyramid to symbolize the structure of consciousness¹⁷.

It is not easy to understand, though, how Rilke’s theory of consciousness is integrated with his symbolism. Trees, animals, and that supernatural being, the most prominent Angel that arises from the invisible earth, these images are used as the metonymies of consciousness and altogether create an imminent tension in the *Elegies*. Such tension is energetic and ultimately revealed as the harmony that used to be the paradox of man’s existence; when death is no longer seen as the opposite of life but becomes the leading force that takes man toward unity, a place where new life is infused into the full presence of man’s existence, the Angel unveils its countenance through the poet’s contemplation of natural beings. As Leishman comments, the Angel in its pure invisibility bears a transcendental moment, in whose perfect consciousness “the limitations and contradictions of present human nature have been transcended,”¹⁸ as it manifests as the integrated one, that in which “thought and action, insight and achievement, will and capability, the actual and the ideal are one.”¹⁹ Due to the verbal diversity, semantic diffusion, and allusive philosophical meanings, Rilke’s symbolism is presented in a highly metaphysical mode, yet such design tears a rift, wherein the being of language emerges from an all-admitting void that underlies the poetic art. “Just as language has no longer anything in common with the thing it names, so the movements of

¹⁵ See the *First Elegy*, p. 21.

¹⁶ See the *Fourth Elegy*, p. 41.

¹⁷ “Our ordinary consciousness dwelt on the summit of a pyramid,” Rilke writes in a letter dated in 1924, “whose base broadens out in us and beneath us so much.” The poet’s hierarchy model of consciousness would be discussed later in this article. See *Selected Letters*, Letter of August 11, 1924, To Nora Purtscher- Wydenbruck, p. 386.

¹⁸ Leishman (1963). “Commentary” in *the Duino Elegies*, p.88.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

most of the people who live in cities have lost their connection with the earth,"²⁰ Rilke writes. The loss of connection between man and the world is lamentable under the devastating conquest of materialism, and the potentiality of language is covered over by the everyday use of language without a reflection upon it. For man's dwelling in this world, if his security is nowhere to be sought from the illusive imagination, should then be nothing outside of the relation between the things in this world and man himself. Words, that which can redeem the lost name of things also point the way to restore man's unique, irreducible position in the world. Therefore, it could be said that the elegies bear such a task of emancipation, that through delving into the inner relation it sets free both the language from banality and man from a jeopardized situation of being absent and lost in the world which should be intimate to him.

Modernity, and the Inquiry into the Inner-relation of the *Elegies*

The writing of the *Elegies* started in 1912. The first line of the *Elegies* was, Rilke claimed, an inspiration from a mystical Angelic voice during his visit of Princess Marie von Thurn in the Duino castle. Because of the tumultuous period of World War I, the complete collection was not finished until ten years later in 1922. Though Rilke scarcely referred to the war in his writings, he could hardly escape the prevailing depressing atmosphere of the tremendous loss of life. Destined to live in his own age, Rilke was astonished to find that death was neglected by a majority of people as something irrelevant to life in modernity. This observation was recorded in his early novel with a poetic prose style, *the Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (hereafter: the *Notebooks*) in 1910. The *Notebooks* could be regarded as a prelude to the *Elegies* for its revelation of the psychological wound of modernity, as the loss

²⁰ Rilke (1903). *Worpswede*

of man in his time puts forward a quest to redeem his existential being in this world from a prevailing absence of authenticity. Written in the form of autobiography, the novel reveals Rilke's experience in Paris. At that time, the young poet was anguished by the extravagant materialism under which men had themselves become immersed in a fancy illusion of happiness, insofar as they were constantly drawn away from a clear consciousness of their own existence in the world. Men's existence is rendered rather dim, yet this dimness does not confuse man a little because it is taken as some kind of comfort, a ready shelter, which provides nothing but an escape from the familiar that could possibly open an abyss of existence. "...They wake up breathless, let the light of a candle dissolve the darkness as they drink the comforting half-light as if it was sugared water."²¹ And Rilke later adds that this happiness granted a negligence of existence, just as "the contours that had so recently been comforting take the sharp outlines of an abyss of horror."²² Men's lack of desire to question death as a part of his nature forestalled the pursuit of an authentic life, since the alienation of death as an outside event is no less a denial of what is rooted in the deepest humanity. In the *Notebooks*, Rilke speaks in the voice of the character Malte: "Who is there today who still cares about a well-finished death? No one. Even the rich, who could after all afford this luxury, are beginning to grow lazy and indifferent; the desire to have a death of one's own is becoming more and more rare. In a short time it will be as rare as a life of one's own."²³ Rilke's discovery of man's absent-minded living, the universal nihilism that is covered over by daily routine, is also well reflected in the *Fifth Elegy*:

Plätze, o Platz in Paris, unendlicher Schauplatz,

wo die Modistin, Madame Lamort,

die ruhlosen Wege der Erde

²¹ Rilke (1910). Epigraph to *The Beauty and the Sorrow*.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Rilke (1910). *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, p. 9.

Squares, O square in Paris, infinite show-place,
where the modiste Madame Lamort
winds and binds the restless ways of the world

Here, the urban landscape of Paris presents a miniature world dominated by materialism. We find “the square of Paris” rings an echo of Rilke’s personal experience in *the Notebooks*. Of pain and solitude, the poet’s maladaptation of living in the metropolitan city distinguishes him from the others who are living in an age of banality and psychological disquietude. The image of Paris gathers some typical features of being flamboyant and extravagant, yet these sensual features of a metropolitan city are nonetheless presented as superficial, whose delicacy is dressed by an inner emptiness. In the following lines, in the same stanza, the poet uses “*Schicksal*” (Fate), a word which has a metaphysical sense of necessity. Fate, waiting for man as his inevitable morality, is to be recognized as a disastrous moment when the eternal Angel tramples upon the perishable material world, and tears open the illusion upon which man happily lives: “*O, wie spurlos zerträte ein Engel ihnen den Trostmarkt*” (O, How an Angel would tread beyond trace their market of comfort). The poet’s fierce criticism of the inauthenticity reflected in the modern age is reiterated in the *Tenth Elegy*. Here, the poet makes pain more touchable by locating it in “the streets of suffering” (*die Gassen der Leid*); he laments for man’s surrender to nihilism – a distracted emptiness that hampers man’s soul from being nourished – as if he had joined the conspiracy of falsehood. To the poet, modernity is apparently problematic, or even decadent:

*Freilich, wehe, wie fremd sind die Gassen der Leid – Stadt,
wo in der falschen, aus Übertönung gemachten
Stille, stark, aus der Gußform des Leeren der Ausguß
prahlt: der vergoldete Lärm, das platzende Denkmal.*

*O, wie spurlos zerträte ein Engel ihnen den Trostmarkt,
den die Kirche begrenzt, ihre fertig gekaufte*

Strange, though, are the streets of the City of Pain,
where, in a false quiet formed from imposed commotion,
poured out from the mould of emptiness, there loudly swaggers:
gilded noise, the bursting memorial.

How an Angel would tread beyond trace their market of comfort,
With the church alongside, bought ready for use

Similar to the symbolic Paris in the *Fifth Elegy*, the streets of the city reflect how human lives are rendered hollow, yet such a fact remains ignored by those who are actually experiencing it. Not only is falsehood dominating man's judgment of things, whereby man takes things as commodities and measures them with an arbitrarily prescribed value, but it also corrupts man's belief inasmuch as religion is exploited as some fancy placebo to soothe man's fear of his doomed mortality. With a sarcastic tone, the poet speaks of the genitalia of money (*der Geschlechtsteil des Gelds*), indicating that there is a rampant proliferation in the market value that is as shocking as obscenity. In this place, we need to pay attention to the rhetorical devices that Rilke uses. What does the poet really mean by "deathless" (*Todlos*)? Referring to immortality, it is associated with religious belief mentioned earlier: "*hinter der letzten Planke, beklebt mit Plakaten des 'Todlos'*" (behind the last hoarding, plastered with placards for "deathless"). Obviously, "deathless" is an irony here which is used to strike the determined fact that has been intentionally twisted, and thereby woven into man's illusion. While man's fetishism of commodities has immersed him in a life of opulence, such an opulence turns out to be a real poverty, because it causes man to lose connection with what he is born with, his existence as a man. Along with the bloom of commodities is man's

increasing desire to hold wealth, and to restore all that are at present as if they were the mummified body of eternity. Such desire is inevitably followed by a false belief of immortality, which seems to be no less than the modern superstition of the unknowable death. In this circumstance, man's fear of death has never been driven further; instead, death, which is constitutional of one's livelihood, has been given way to a death of anonymity produced by the massive others. This is rather like a horrible self-exile. In an analysis of Rilke's thanatology, Maurice Blanchot points out that young Rilke was appalled by and therefore shrank from "a mass-produced death, ready-made in bulk for all and in which each disappears hastily,"²⁴ which is, "death as an anonymous product, an object without value, like the things of the modern world."²⁵ The fact behind the irony of the deathless is appalling, as it reveals a rampant attack from a death well disguised under decadent hedonism and man's ignorance of his own existence, in an age where the bareness of humanity cannot be compensated.

There is an agony of existence in modern times, wherein men are alienated from a true life yet this sort of illusion-obsessed, mind-absent living is normalized as some convention. In the *Tenth Elegy*, the worldly picture of the city street is shaped into an estranged stillness by poetic language: "*Freilich, wehe, wie fremd sind die Gassen der Leid – Stadt*" (Strange, though, are the streets of the City of Pain). Such pain, persistent with the poet as he is clearly aware what is happening around him, is not consolable. He writes: "*Draußen aber kräuseln sich immer die Ränder von Jahrmarkt. / Schaukeln der Freiheit! Taucher und Gaukler des Eifers!*" (Outside, though, there's always the billowing edge of the fair. / Swings of Freedom! Divers and Jugglers of Zeal!) The use of genitive case gives an overwhelming feeling, that men's self-identity has been overwhelmed, dominated, and

²⁴ Blanchot (1982). "The Work and Death's Space" in *The Space of Literature*, p.123.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

therefore, gotten lost under his fanatic passion to the mass emptiness. A bunch of random and dizzying images are used to create fragmentary moments and a sense of detachment. A kind of surrealistic feeling emerges, and delineates the poverty of man's interior. Diver, jugglers, those onlookers who are drumming and bawling; shots, booths, and theatres in which commodities invade and occupy man's attention, all of these are engulfed by an unstoppable flux of time yet so oddly bringing forth a sorrowful silence, which is moulded into an unlively stillness when the time, that is more abstract and hidden from blustering life, looms up from the fleeting moments. It brings a total upset of worldly temporality, under the power of poetic language: extravagance is turned into a banality, value into meaninglessness, and the granted happiness cannot reduce the great sorrow when the Angel turns its gaze upon the puppet-like humans. As the physical city landscapes are rendered ever more fragile and phantasmal, that which is intangible, and which underlies temporality, the abyss, then reveals itself as the underlying reality of the sensual phenomenon of everyday life.

There is a rift between the phenomenal world and the abyss upon which men live with forgetfulness. In contrast to the former, experienced with transitoriness nevertheless for men is the most sensible mode, absence turns out to be fundamental yet remains untouched. In "What Are Poets For?" Heidegger claims, "The time remains destitute not only because God is dead, but because mortals are hardly aware and capable even of their own mortality. Mortals have not yet come into ownership of their own nature."²⁶ Heidegger identifies a dissolution of the bond between man and things because of modern's obsession with market value, for treating things as a production necessarily involves objectification, and the trade that has been based upon the market value reduces things into a state of namelessness. "In

²⁶ Martin Heidegger, "What Are Poets For?" in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, tr. Albert Hofstadeter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 91.

self-assertive production, the humanness of man and the thingness of things dissolve into the calculated market value of a market,” says Heidegger, and such an arbitrary and almost brutal treatment “subjects all beings to the trade of a calculation that dominates most tenaciously in those areas where there is no need of numbers.” (1971, p. 112) By “no need of numbers”, Heidegger is indicating something beyond measure, something that cannot be understood from banal convention. Such being is praised by the *Elegies* with the image of the Angel, as previous analysis reveals that the Angel stands for an abstract time that is neither assigned to perishable material or does belongs to the illusionary belief of god. Therefore, Rilke is regarded by Heidegger as a modern poet in a destitute time. Conscious of the destitution of his own age, Rilke discovered that under the obviousness of man’s existence in the world, death itself, or the being of death, remains unquestioned and hereafter a loss of self prevails. On the other hand, the world that should have shared intimacy with man was reduced to a trading place, a fancy stage where absent-minded happiness is displayed. Distracted by the artificial spectacles, the visible phenomenon, men are tempted to look outside of their inner being, as their thoughtlessness of the authentic existence turns them away from the life of their own as the sole reality. With a sense of eschatology, as we well notice in the *Tenth Elegy*, the devastation of transient buildings from the Angel may remind us of the Bible: “People were eating, drinking, marrying and being given in marriage up to the day Noah entered the ark. Then the flood came and destroyed them all” (Luke 17:27). A crisis has been prophesied, and its endangering of Men’s dwelling in the world, as revealed by modern elegies, comes true in Rilke’s age.

There is a universal loss in the modern age, and the task to redeem man from his blindness to his being, to restore his position in this world, that is pristine and uncovered by falsehood, is urgent. The abyss of existence is covered over by a hedonism granted by

materials, yet it has never been annihilated. Where is the authentic being of man among the triumph of absence? How, in an age phantasmal phenomenon seems to preside over the fundamental essence of existence, could man again bring back an intimacy between him and the world? The *Elegies* provide a possible way to these dilemmas. That is, a faithful devotion the inner self, which starts from the contemplation of natural beings. In Rilke's vocabulary, Nature stands for a world free from a presupposed functionality, as well as from the boundary of subject-object dualism imposed by market value. Nature is called by Rilke the *Urgrund*, "the pristine ground,"²⁷ as Heidegger indicates; it is the ground for those beings that men are, and in this sense sometimes Nature is simply called by Rilke "Life."²⁸ The life that, absorbed by natural beings and presented with an inner vitality, is different from modern life; for nature is the ground – of man on the one hand, of plant and beast on the other – and this primal ground of beings has "since ancient times been called Being."²⁹ Heidegger's investigation of the etymology of Nature propels us to rethink Rilke's demand to contemplate natural beings: "If you will stay close to nature, to its simplicity, to its small things unnoticeable, those things can unexpectedly become great and immeasurable."³⁰ Therefore, the original questions come to be: how is man able to rebuild his connection with Nature, insofar as that "great and immeasurable being" reveals itself to him from within? As a promising way to live an authentic life, why does the quest for inner existence ultimately lead one to death, a grand and new death described by Rilke as "that friendly death" (*der vertrauliche Tod*)?³¹

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger writes: "Dying is something that every Dasein itself must take upon itself at the time... In dying, it is shown that mineness and existence are

²⁷ Martin Heidegger, "What Are Poets For?" in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, tr. Albert Hofstadeter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p.99.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Rilke (2010). *Letter to a Young Poet*, p. 34.

³¹ See the *Ninth Elegy*, p. 77.

ontologically constitutive for death.”³² Heidegger speaks of the relation between being and death as inseparable. The question is, how does one approach his own being through delving into the ontology of death? And, presented with a great paradox, how could death be accessible to the living one, while he is still existing in this world?

Dying towards the Higher Consciousness

“What can be said at all, can be said clearly; and whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.” Wittgenstein’s unspeakableness echoes the mystic death presented in Rilke’s poetics. *The Elegies* are a literary space of inner death. The word, “inner”, shall not be taken as that common sense of spatial relation as inside versus outside; the “inner” has nothing to do with spatial dimension but is related to what is most intimate to man, the self. The impossibility to grasp the essence of death from its peripheral attributes, as if it were some object of biological pathology, is taken by poetics as a challenge, through which thinkers and poets try to question death *per se* through the artful power of language.

The *Elegies* attempt to respond to the inner quest of death and being through its distinctive elegiac voice. Mourning for the unavoidable fate of man’s finitude, the *Elegies* express a pain of the insufficiency that is rooted in man’s transitory existence, while still entertain a hope to transcend it. However sorrowful its voice sounds, the *Elegies* do not refrain from critiquing the disastrous effects on human-world relation under the modern environment. Meanwhile, it also sustains a secret passion, which seems to require an anti-modern task, to regain the connection with that once broken value of metaphysical unity, through a death-like annihilation of individuality. The pattern of Rilke’s elegiac poetics could be found in Jahan Ramazani’s modes of poetic mourning, when he states that “the poet does

³² Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, tr. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p.284.

not override but to sustain anger, not to heal but to reopen wounds of loss” (1994. xi). The very action, reopen, is recognized as a radical purification of consciousness in Rilke’s case, which is associated with the poet’s demand of internalization.

The space in which the inward movement takes place is characterized by what Rilke called *Weltinnenraum*³³, the inner world space. According to Gosetti-Ferencei, *Weltinnenraum* envelops an imaginative space of “the interior of the things inside a non-contained consciousness” (2007, p.311). With all visible existence being internalized into the fundamental ground of beings, insofar as consciousness is purified of the aesthetic phenomenon of perishable material existence, the poet therefore managed to preserve the constant loss in time through preserving things to an imaginary ontological field. And this field, as if revealed through eternity, is in the metonymy of the invisible earth, whose manifestation simultaneously emerges with the appearance of the Angel.³⁴

The way to the transcendental invisible has its start from the perception of visible existence. Image for Rilke, as mentioned in the introduction, bears a deep connotation that is far more than the sheer reference of a physical object. It would be helpful to think of Rilke’s rose image in his thing-poem: the rose is presented simultaneously as openly blooming and hiding itself, which indicates that the revelation of beauty is in an immediacy with the beauty as the secret itself.³⁵ Just as the pure contradiction of rose is presented in a simple image and is in harmony, the visible existence and the transcendental invisible are also inseparable,

³³ “*Durch alle Wesen reicht der eine Raum: / Weltinnenraum.*” (One space spreads through all creatures equally— inner-world-space). Rainer Maria Rilke, *Possibility of Being: A Selection of Poems*, tr. James Blaire Leishman (New York: New Directions, 1977), p.108-109.

³⁴ See the previous discussion on the invisible Angel, which arises from the innermost of self as an outcome of the transformation of consciousness.

³⁵ “Rose, o pure contradiction, desire/ to be no one’s sleep beneath so many lids”; such contradiction is shaped by rose’s blooming as well as self-veiling petals, “it’s that, petal against petal, you rest / within yourself, inside.” (*trans.* David Need). See Rilke’s posthumously published French poem, *Les Roses*. In the symbol of rose, is an effable intimacy – unknow is its origin yet is emanating around the existence – between man whose existence becomes peripheral, and the thing that has been directly experienced. As we can see later, such intimacy is also born by the tree image, whose existential branches reach to inner life through an ascending-forward movement of self-consciousness.

while the latter is the highest form that one's purified consciousness can reach. There is a direct intuition aroused by certain images. Believed by Rilke since his early youth,³⁶ intuition is the one through which man can come across with what is veiled to be too elusive in the empirical world. Hence, we understand, the invisibilization in the *Elegies* is by no means an attempt to deny or eradicate the realistic existence in order to deify some ideal emblematic existence, but should be understood as the pure presentation of the content of intuition, which is simultaneously intrinsic in the exact presence of the images themselves. Therefore, the images in the *Elegies* are not open to the romantic imagination of existence, but they should be understood directly from existence itself. "You must give birth to your images. / They are the future to be born. / Fear not the strangeness you feel."³⁷ Rilke's demand, to give birth to birth of images, then, is a process of deconstruction concerning the interpretation of everyday phenomena and the imagination of some ideal being, such that the movement toward the true connotation of the images, which will be analysed in the following passage, is only to be reached through a purified consciousness.

The requirement of transforming one's objectifying self-consciousness into internalization, as developed in Rilke's poetics, starts with the contemplation of natural creatures. The poet's introspective contemplation on the unconscious beings, those of trees and animals, repetitively appears through the *Elegies*. In order to understand how the living of these beings bears a solution for man's loss and absence resulted from his insufficient being, we need to know in what way the trees in the empirical world differ from the trees of life (*Bäume Lebens*)³⁸ according to Rilke's philosophy of self-consciousness. With their

³⁶ In a letter to Nora Purtscher-Wydenbruck, August 11, 1924, Rilke writes: "From my earliest youth I have felt the intuition (and have also, as far as I could, lived by it) that at some deeper cross-section of this pyramid of consciousness, mere being could become an event..." The idea that consciousness is hierarchical, presented like a pyramid whose vast base is the deepest self-consciousness could get, would be discussed later in this analysis.

³⁷ Rilke (1986), A Sabbath Poem.

³⁸ See the *Fourth Elegy*, p. 40.

unprotected beings integrated into nature therefore free from care and anxiety, animals and trees point out a way for man to realize that profound potentiality inside his insufficient self. This very potentiality, which ultimately comes out as a freedom when man ends the painful separation with his opposite lover, is realized when he unites with the Angel - Involuntarily drawn by an impersonal death, man has his object-obsessed self-consciousness purified to “a non-contained consciousness,” as Gosetti-Ferencei put it. As shown in the *Eighth Elegy* and the *Ninth Elegy*, nothing is alienated from a full-fledged consciousness that is non-contained, purified of material existence. What remained ungraspable within existence becomes transparent; the Angel, dawning upon man as a self-revealing of the invisible, emanates its beauty which illuminates the full presence of man’s Being. Therefore, the poet makes a bold assertion which we could read as both the initial creation and the ultimate goal of the *Elegies*, namely that to come across death, which forever “turned away from us,”³⁹ is the “greatest consciousness of our being”⁴⁰ that man can achieve.

1) From Signal to Inner Life: Tree, Animal

In a letter written in February 22, 1923, Rilke avers, “Only for him to whom even the abyss was a dwelling place of death will the paradise we have sent on ahead of us be retrieved.” The abyss now is known as the invisible facet of existence. However, from where does there come some light for our recognizable everydayness, which would bring the hidden meaning behind the phenomenon to light? If we think of the earlier mentioned “heart-work”, as it relates to Rilke’s poetic invisibilization, we should well find that the invisible is nothing outside of existence itself; however, it is situated in the ground of beings and is to be viewed from the complete, undivided wholeness of very existence of things.

³⁹ Rilke, *Selected Letters* 393.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

For Rilke, solemnity dwells in the thing. Since man's impression of the world is foremost drawn from what is in sight, the presence of existence enables man to understand the world. However, instead of taking the thing as some entity that gathers a bunch of knowable attributes, Rilke stays wary of conventional knowledge, and refuses to take a prescribed understanding of things. For explanation as such renders the thing as a comprehensible object, whose primal existence is therefore reduced to the content of a concept. Yet the prescribed interpretation is experienced in everyday life in order to make existence approachable by man's understanding, and its usage is enhanced by, and constrained within the language of everydayness. The arbitrary, rather imposed explanation of existence is criticized in the *First Elegy* in the tree image:

*Es bleibt uns vielleicht
irgend ein Baum an dem Abhang, daß wir ihn täglich
widersähen; es bleibt uns die Straße von gestern
und das verzogene Treusein einer Gewohnheit,
der es bei uns gefiel, und so blieb sie und ging nicht.*

There is perhaps some tree or other on a slope that
we see again each day; or a street left over
from yesterday, or the familiarity of a habit that
has taken up residence with us and, happy there,
remains and will not go away.

Almost mundane, common as a part of surroundings, the tree looks to be too familiar for vision. However, the tree's being familiar to man is not based upon an intimacy. The tree is familiar in the way that man gets used to what he sees and thinks of as a tree-like object. In this sense, man familiarizes himself with the existence of the thing by some concept that is

arbitrarily and incompletely associated with the content of the vision, but not the thing itself. In the same stanza, the poet speaks of some strange feeling of not being secure, not at home, as man is in “the explained world” (*der gedeuteten Welt*). The word *deuten* means “to construe”, and could also mean “to interpret”, “to explain”. This well indicates that the world construed upon the concept is an illusion, and the insecurity exactly looms from the illusionary faith in the knowledge of an object. Because of the contingency of existence, any explanation is restrained by definite limitations and thus turns out to be deflected and conditional; explanatory words are rather sliding upon some particular phenomenon of existence, yet cannot get deep into its surface and grasp the essence of being.

There is a loss between the sheer existence of the thing and what man used to think as a thing, just as there is an unrecoverable blankness between the very contingent present and the past routine. The “street of yesterday” (*Straße von gestern*) well reminds one of memory. The preservation of memory, similar to the explanatory language being preserved by its functionality in everyday use, is much like an attack on convention: there is a discrepancy between the embeddedness in existence and the subject, whose consciousness projects this direct embeddedness as representation - a targeted object of incomplete knowledge. With an emphasis on the past tense, what fluxes through the poet’s mind is a feeling of being unreliable (*nicht sehr verlässlich*). There is a rift between man’s distinct perception of the tree, and a pre-existing yet intelligible mode of the tree as if it were the necessity that one wishes to be. The tree image in the *First Elegy* is marked by a use of irony. Such a familiar scenario connotes an unsolved question that violently breaks from the continuum of convention, which is taken for granted by human consciousness and enhanced by functional language. The unease of the tree stirs echoes of that nauseated feeling revealed by phenomenologist Sartre in his novel *Nausea*, in which he uses the thing-in-itself to stand for the impenetrable existence of the thing. The same is true of “habit” (*Gewohnheit*). It is intended to uncover the

invested meaning of existence, so as to bring out the hidden facet - the absence of ground for existence.

These images arouse a skeptical attitude toward empirical knowledge, followed by the poet's existential anxiety: if man's conceptual knowledge is unable to justify the sheer being of existence, and if what seems to be an infallible interpretation is inadequate to explain the being's contingency, then what else can man trust to live upon this world? In order for man to stay in a truthful relation between himself and the world, what is the way to rebuild the lost connection under universal absence? On man's touching of the invisible that looms from the convention and concept, as indicated by the tree, the abyss tears itself open to man and the explained world (*der gedeuteten Welt*) collapses. Things that are situated in the relative relations no longer remain solid, but are "loosely fluttering in space" (*so lose im Raume flattern*). The hidden facet of existence is followed by a desperate impenetrableness of self, inasmuch as man is unable to identify himself from the other if there is no separation of self from the surroundings in the first place. As man's existence is no longer positioned rightly because of the loss of connection with the world, the result is that his self comes to be meandering, and more elusive as he tries to ground his own being upon absence. In *the Notebooks*, Malte finds that such a self is rather construed but not self-justified, not complete but dependent on the other existence; it is no more than a phantasmal image reflected by the mirror: "We discover that we do not know our role; we look for a mirror; we want to remove our make-up and take off what is false and be real. But somewhere a piece of disguise that we forgot still sticks to us."⁴¹ This trouble of identifying the self leads to the dilemma of self-consciousness. An illusion of interpretation and definition must be removed, so that there

⁴¹ Rilke (2016). *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. Oxford University Press.

could be a turn from painful absence to the full presence of existence for men, through which those at a loss “find the way to their own nature.”⁴²

Such a disillusionment, whose occurrence yet still remains unclear, is metaphorized into the “Night “(*die Nacht*) evoked by the poet. Night has a bittersweet taste in the *First Elegy*, as it is sung by the poet, “the longed-for, gently-disillusioning night” (*die ersehnte, sanft enttäuschende*). The coming of Night is all unanticipated as it rather like a blow from the void - the exterior or the utmost depth of everydayness. However, the poet thinks such Night should not be rejected or disdained, but in its vagueness lies a hope for those separated lovers, as it is this “which anxiously lies ahead for the solitary heart” (*welche dem einzelnen Herzen / mühsam bevorsteht*). A paradox is presented here: on the one hand there is the Night that cannot be expected; on the other hand, despite of its vagueness, such Night does not have itself eluded into emptiness, yet being an enigma, it is long desired as if it were an upcoming event. As the Night is hoped by the poet’s solitary heart, could we say, it forebodes a sort of unification, which is to be a redemption of man’s loss and pain from the abyss of existence?

It is time for us to reconsider the familiar phenomenon that is shown as the certain appearance of existence that constitutes man’s everyday life. In Heidegger’s language, rooted in the everydayness is an “ownmost potentiality”⁴³ for being that is “non-relational and not to be outstripped,”⁴⁴ yet man’s indifference to such average everydayness leads to a crisis whereby one is pushed away from his “uttermost possibility of existence.”⁴⁵ The very way to let this uttermost possibility happen, asserted by Heidegger radically, is in one’s relation to death. Death and its existential relation to being is clarified in *Being and Time*, that it is “a

⁴² Martin Heidegger (1971). “What Are Poets For?”, p.91

⁴³ Martin Heidegger (1973). *Being and Time*, p.299.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

possibility-of-Being which Dasein itself has to take over in every case. With death, Dasein stands before itself in its ownmost potentiality-for-Being” (p. 294). Dasein in Heidegger’s language means “being-there”, which is regarded as the experience of being peculiar to human beings in regard to their unavoidable selfhood. Here, speaking of death’s profundity in its potentiality of Being, that the illuminated completeness of existence, Heidegger is suggesting a new way to look at the self by turning from outside phenomenon to the interior of man’s existence. To put it more specifically, Heidegger indicates a demand of internalization by jumping out of the confinement of all relativity and contingency of phenomenon, with an examination of the relation between existence as the facticity and man’s inner self-consciousness. The same quest is also put forward in the *Fourth Elegy*, wherein Rilke thinks consciousness as both a dilemma and a possible solution for man’s confronted existence that is uniquely involved in the world as an outcome of his subjectivity. The connotation of the tree image changes in the *Fourth Elegy*: indicating a radical break-up with the empirical and conceptual world, here, the “trees of life” (*Bäume Lebens*) has gone beyond the physical object, which is nonetheless a random representation of consciousness of what it *is* as the tree’s existence. Whereas the *First Elegy* deconstructs the objective knowledge and thereby, reveals a potential damage as being alienated from the existence *per se* induced by the image of the tree with its everydayness, the “trees of life” suggests a way to build a reliable human-world relation, through which man gains a new life by being lifted from the abyss of existence. If there is a possibility for man to exist as being well-grounded upon the world of dwelling, as we will soon find, the only solution lies not outside, but within the dilemma of subjectivity. The *Fourth Elegy* first begins with a question mark, the unsolved complex of self-consciousness:

O Bäume Lebens, o wann winterlich?

Wir sind nicht einig. Sind nicht wie die Zug-

vögel verständigt.

Oh, trees of life, when winter?

We are not at one. Unlike the birds of
migration, we have no shared understanding.

According to Christopher Trogan's interpretation, Rilke adopts the model of consciousness from Heinrich von Kleist, in which a triadic progression of consciousness is purposed: man's consciousness has its roots in the inorganic world, its trunk in the human world, and its branches in the transcendental world (2014, p. 268). Unlike the tree that unconsciously grows in the inorganic world, man who possesses the trees of life is at first perplexed by his self-consciousness, as he arises up from that inanimate nature. As is noted before, the consciousness of self arises through separating itself from its surroundings, and such a division is doomed for consciousness to fail to grasp existence as a whole, hence turning out to be insufficient. This separation of consciousness is followed by a process of objectification, as things are rendered as the intentional objects, under such circumstance, consciousness leads to the foundation of self by alienating what is initially integrated within consciousness itself. The *Fourth Elegy* reveals to us, the disharmony in the trees of life lies in the fact that man, as a conscious being, is born as "not one" (*nicht einig*). Man's consciousness is problematic in that it must separate self from the totality of existence in order to build up man's personhood, yet it still desires for the initially state of its origin, the primal existence as an indivisible whole. The desire to turn back to original unity is metaphorized as man's seeking of his opposite lovers in the *Elegies*. Resonating that myth of Aristophanes' round men, the sorrowful separation, along with an unsatiable desire, is expressed in the *First Elegy*: "*als kündigte alles eine Geliebte dir an?*"⁴⁶ (as if every event

⁴⁶ See the *First Elegy*, p. 23.

announced a new lover), “*daß wir liebend / uns vom Geliebten befreien und es bebend besteh*”⁴⁷ (in loving, we freed ourselves from the loved one, and quivering, endured). Unlike the migratory birds (*Zugvögel*), which fly in the air of freedom and which have not arrived at a recognition of the season pattern, man is well aware that time passes during his life, and along with it is the unstoppable changes that render things lack of a universal ground to exist. This is why man has no shared understanding like animals which freely follow their instinct. Due to such insufficiency, the outcome of the evolution of consciousness, he is thrown into endless loss and solitude.

Another example of the tension of consciousness is also presented with a bizarre play between the self-conscious dancer and the transcendental Angel, which comes later in the *Fourth Elegy*. Yet untouched by the gaze of the transcendental Angel, the self-conscious dancer is still trapped in the absence that resulted from his fluid consciousness; he needs to wait, to suffer the floating emptiness (*das Leere*), with half-filled masks (*halbgefüllten Masken*) hiding his real countenance behind. In a word, he has to wait for the happening of a pure event (*einen reinen Vorgang*), through which the abyss under the phenomenon is turn to be the exact ground – the meaning of existence – as he is no longer troubled by his elusive consciousness. The dancer, as the persona of the self-conscious poet, is made as a counterpart of the tree trunk of the human world. The poet seeks to be elevated from the abyss of phenomenon insofar as to achieve a full presence of existence, which, symbolized as the Angel, only exists in the transcendental world, manifested as an unseparated totality of consciousness.

The triadic progression of consciousness, that is hierarchically presented with the consciousness of the inorganic (root), the human (trunk), and the transcendental (branches), is integrated within the single tree image. These different parts are not secluded to each other,

⁴⁷ Ibid.

instead, they belong to the same continuum of consciousness. And this well points out why the solution should lie in consciousness itself: man needs to traverse the middle part of the tree trunk, to go beyond the limitations of representation, and as far as to an almost impossible extremity, he is to meet the end of this empirical-transcendental continuum solely through the transformation of consciousness. A bird's eye view of such model of consciousness reveals a sophisticate turnaround: man develops self-consciousness in order to be differentiated from the inorganic surrounding environment, and this costs him the price of freedom as well as an exemption from existential anxiety and agony; however, apart from all limitations it brings, yet there is a great potentiality in consciousness, which is simultaneously innate and transcendental. The original harmony of wholeness is granted by this potentiality, but man must first seek for his opposites, the separated lover of him, through the transformation of consciousness – it is only in such transformation man is to realize that the subject-object dualism is a self-imprisonment of consciousness, to be emancipated from the phantasmal representation which in turn results his absence. To achieve this goal, the poet indicates that man must directly deal with the negation, when he tries to understand his own existence through the thing he confronts: “*Uns aber, wo wir Eines meinen, ganz, / ist schon des andern Aufwand fühlbar. Feindschaft / ist uns das Nächste*” (We, however, whenever we speak of one thing, / already feel fully inclined towards its opposite. / Hostility is second nature to us). Hostility is induced by the representation; as consciousness is fluid, dynamic, subject to change, the object of consciousness is reflexively rendered an unstable image. However, representation, though arbitrary it seems, is adopted by Rilke as a way to introduce man to the higher invisible world of the Angel. As claimed by Kelly Walsh, in the *Elegies*, representation is needed “both to relate to this world and to invoke a unified whole existing outside of representation,”⁴⁸ just as that is presented with the example of Rilke's rose image

⁴⁸ Kelly Walsh, “The Unbearable Openness of Death: Elegies of Rilke and Woolf” (2009), p. 6.

earlier, there is “not only an inexhaustibility of finitude, but also a profound disenchantment”⁴⁹ in the representation. As there would be no such great joy of unification if there were separation at first, the transcendental existence is only to be desired, reached, and therefore, infusing the true life to man through a desperate effort to move forward the perfectness, the whole unity of existence.

The philosophy of consciousness is a frequent topic of Rilke’s works, and in many cases, he tries to seek a unification with the undivided, absolute consciousness in the ontological field. Fully engaged in the world as the whole of all beings, consciousness is able to enter into that vast sphere designated by Rilke as “the Open” (*das Offene*). This concept is analysed by Heidegger in “What are Poets For”. Heidegger reads the Open as a phenomenological term, and he refers it to an unblocked sphere that is free from the arbitrariness and uncertainty resulted from the representation:

The Open is the great whole of all that is unbounded. ...The confinement within the boundless is established by man’s representation. The oppositeness confronting him does not allow man to be directly within the Open. In a certain manner, it excludes man from the world and places him before the world — “world” meaning here all beings as a whole. In contrast, what has the character of world is the Open itself, the whole of all that is not objective. (1971, p. 105)

Several points are made in Heidegger’s clarification of the Open. First, as an ontological term, the Open stands neither for something void nor nothingness, but is an indiscriminated containing of all that is unbounded in its own sphere; second, the Open excludes man from its sphere under the circumstance that man takes representation as existence, yet the character of the Open’s being “non-objective” indicates a way for man to

⁴⁹ Ibid.

enter into that promising world, “all beings as a whole,” through a direct face-to-face encounter. The Open, for Rilke, means both the presence and the distinctive characteristic of nature. Such sphere of being visible and fundamental at the same time, is marked by the existence of animals and plants. From an observation of animals, the poet comes to an understanding of what the Open is, and what a pure simplicity is granted to enter into the Open, which yet remains to be a foremost difficult task for a conscious man. “One will cling to Nature, to the simple in Nature, to the little things that hardly anyone sees,”⁵⁰ says Rilke, and in a moment things “so unexpectedly become big and beyond measuring.”⁵¹ The things, that become big and beyond measuring, show their intimacy to man which right starts from the disenchantment of representation. And this intimacy for now is only assigned to animals, lamentably. While animals are “*in the world*” without blockage, man is too aware of himself, and because of his objectification activity man sets himself in a position of being “over against the world”⁵² – he is “*before the world*,”⁵³ as Rilke puts it. Free from this self-imposed tension, the unconscious animals are admitted into the Open, as they exist in the way of having already been integrated as a part of the Open, “the non-objective character of full Nature.”⁵⁴ Every existence in nature, or in that open sphere of the all presence of being, bears a profundity itself which is to be realized when consciousness is no longer obsessed with self, but led and introduced to the pristine existence as an undivided whole. When man is at a lower degree of consciousness, as which animals already are, his self-imprisonment of viewing the world as a limited object is turned into a new vision, which he is involuntary drawn to and gets immersed. This is exactly the transformation of consciousness: whereas the objectifying consciousness must set its target in a physical space and therefore in the

⁵⁰ Rilke (1903). *The Letters to a Young Poet*.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Heidegger (1971). “What are Poets For?”. *Poetry, Language, Thoughts*, p. 106.

⁵³ For the distinction of the being of man as “before the world”, and of the animals as “in the world”, see Heidegger’s “What are Poets For” (1971), p. 106.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p.110.

uncertainty of time, consciousness that is purified of selfhood does not have such limitation. And along with the dissolution of temporal-spatial space is the rising of a much vaster inner space, full of passion and freedom, “*die erweiterte Luft fühlen mit innigerm Flug*” (the greater air in birds’ more ardent flight). Similarly, at the end of the *Fourth Elegy*, the poet writes:

*Und irgendwo gehn Löwen noch und wissen,
solang sie herrlich sind, von keiner Ohnmacht.*

And somewhere lions still roam, all unaware,
In being magnificent, of any weakness.

And the free animals reappear in the beginning of the *Eighth Elegy*, when the poet achieves what we shall recognize as the “invisibilization”, a process of emptying all the images reflected by the materials insofar as a non-contained consciousness meets a transcendental purity:

*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.*

With all eyes, animal life looks out
into the open. Our eyes only
are turned within, and encircle on every side, like traps
set around its free, outward path.

A new world arises from animals’ gaze, along with an invisible vision. Man who turns his gaze toward the interior, who finally reaches animals’ vision of the invisible, is emancipated from the emptiness where the desperate dancer is trapped. This event happens only when

man's consistently activated consciousness is transformed into a state of an animal-like numbness. In this sense, Heidegger sees being's relation to the Open "the unconscious one of a merely striving-drawing ramification into the whole of what is,"⁵⁵ and the being of animals holds as a perfect example. Animals are in an inert state of consciousness, and their very being, which is "by nature benumbed,"⁵⁶ is therefore undifferentiated as a univocal part of nature. Moreover, Rilke radically asserts that "the free animal has its death long behind" (*das freie Tier / hat seinen Untergang stets hinter sich*). Here, what the poet sees is a bold possibility. Animals do not foresee death as a certain point as their physical demise, among their perception there is no division of presence and future. Simply following all that is natural, animals remain unaware to death that is rooted in every perishable existence; they are neither conscious of their determined death, nor too conscious as Malte acts to be in the *Notebooks*, to die a unique death of one's own – such indifference exempts animals from care and anxiety, from the terror of death that is nonetheless reduced to an imagination of the necessity by man. By saying that animals have their death long behind, Rilke recognizes a continuum, in which death is no longer separated from one's living but comes to be a starting point of new life, that awaits at the end of man's struggle to the unity. If we can compare animals in the *Fourth Elegy* with the panther in Rilke's early poem,⁵⁷ we could say that these creatures share a similarity in that they live in a domain of a self-satisfied sphere, a crystalized metaphysical field, wherein only a purified consciousness – as strong as the will of life – is participating in all existences, and acting itself out to be the presence of reality.

⁵⁵ Ibid, p.106.

⁵⁶ Ibid, p.106.

⁵⁷ Rilke (1903). *The Panther*. The poem depicts a panther locked in the zoo. Tired as it is at being imprisoned, the creature has its gaze ultimately transcend the limitation set by the bars through its graceful dance - with a greater loss of will. The will may well remind one of Nietzsche's individual will in contrast to Will to power. The Image (*ein Bild*) mentioned in the poem, is much like the invisible beauty in the elegies in that they both emerge on the condition that individual will or consciousness surrenders when it encounters the very impersonal metaphysical entity, termed by Nietzsche "the essence of life" (Nietzsche 1989b, §2.12; Cf. 1968, §254), and in Rilke's case, the higher reality where the Angel dwells.

2) Desire for the Unbearable Beauty: the Angel, and Man as the Lover

To understand the *Elegies*, it is important to know what the Angel (*der Engel*) stands for. The Angel, who possesses the highest form of consciousness, represents the greatest depth that man's self-consciousness can reach. By speaking of depth, we may well remember that continuum proposed by Kleist's model of consciousness as discussed before. Similarly, Rilke speaks of human consciousness as being hierarchical, and as having a potentiality to reach its extremity, which belongs to the transcendental realm. In a letter cited by Heidegger, Rilke gives a straightforward illustration of the structure of consciousness. He views man's consciousness as a sort of pyramid: the base of consciousness "broadens out in us and beneath us"⁵⁸ with great vastness and depth, writes Rilke, "the more deeply we see ourselves able to penetrate into it the more boundlessly do we seem implicated in these factors of our earthly, and the widest sense worldly being which are independent of space and time."⁵⁹ The upper apex of the pyramid, recognized as the ownmost potentiality that consciousness can achieve, is credited by Rilke as "Being, in its simplest form,"⁶⁰ and such a characteristic of being the simplest can be directly found in the Open itself. We can see how the Open and Being in its simplest form are not different things but together connote the same ontological existence from Rilke's explanation. In a letter dated 25 February 1926, Rilke talks about the Open and intentionally differentiates its vastness from a mistaken sensual feeling aroused by certain spatial existence:

By the 'Open', therefore, I do not mean sky, air, and space; they too are 'object' and thus 'opaque' and closed to the man who observes and judges. The animal, the flower,

⁵⁸ Rilke, *Selected Letters*, Letter of August 11, 1924, To Nora Purtscher- Wydenbruck, p. 386. Quoted by Heidegger, "What Are Poets For?", pp. 128-29.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

presumably is all that without accounting to itself, and therefore, has before itself that indescribable open freedom.⁶¹

Animals and plants in the Open point a way for man to achieve his potentiality as Being. Perhaps we may find that Rilke has suggested a seemingly paradoxical way to overcome the insufficiency of man's consciousness. Whereas the being of free animals betokens a lower degree of consciousness, the Angel, however, is manifested as a transcendence to higher consciousness in which subjective activities that start from the foundational ego are suspended. Christopher Trogan uses the theory of unity to explain this paradox. He explains that there is a unity "between the inorganic and transcendent," and such unity may reveal itself only when man is looking inward (2014, p. 273). The question is, what awaits man at the end, when he realizes that within the life of animals and plants is an "indescribable open freedom"? Or shall we say, what does man truly encounter when he touches transcendence, through an introspective contemplation?

A brief review of the *Fourth Elegy* will be helpful to understand how the transcendental Angel occurs. The clue is given by the former metaphor, the trees of life. It comes uneasily, like an ill omen: "*O Bäume Lebens, o wann winterlich?*" (Oh, trees of life, when winter?) This line is read by Trogan as a lamentation, as he points out that the persona of the poet is still at a distance from intuition and is trapped in his self-consciousness, "where distraction prevails and there is a constant focus on the process of the seasons rather than on the experience of any one season itself" (2014, p. 269). However, such a view is not sufficient to explain how the winter is relevant to the solution of problem of consciousness. Here, the poet seems not to reject but is rather awaiting, almost praying for the occurrence of a certain event – death.

⁶¹ Cited by Heidegger in "What are Poets For?" *Poetry, Language, Thoughts* (1971).

The coming of winter is disastrous yet of vital importance. Paralyzing man's consciousness, it destroys man as an individual, but at the same it renews and nourishes a new life – of animals' freedom and likewise a carelessness to the future – with a force of revival, which is far more powerful than man's personal will. In this sense, death, as a renunciation of self-identity, is rather evoked by the poet; and there is an unspeakable hope, which is to lead toward transcendence: through a purification of self-consciousness, which comes as deathful as cold winter, the trees shall give the bloom to a much more expanded inner life. The winter for the trees of life does not lead to Keats' posthumous Spring⁶² which lags behind the devastating winter in a recantation. Instead, there is a simultaneity in the winter addressed by the elegiac voice, that is, along with the chilling of consciousness, life and death are manifesting in the same as yet unimaginable harmony: "*Blühen und verdorren ist uns zugleich bewußt*" (Flowering and decaying are to our minds the same). While life stands for presence, visible and approachable aspect of man's existence, death reveals itself as an abyss-like absence, the negation of self-identity, and the unintelligible facet of existence that has been hidden from elusive consciousness. Through an encounter with winter, an overwhelming power of death, man's consciousness withers from this encounter, while, at the same time it is elevated by such an unforeseeable force. Representation dissolves, and instead it is an invisible view that is admitted to be seen by the wholeness of being. This occurrence is utterly unempirical, irrational, and is as unexpected as the Night (*die Nacht*). This is why at the beginning of the *Fourth Elegy*, when the poet is ready to be drawn into creaturely unconsciousness, there is a mixed feeling of hesitation and ecstatic forgetfulness; as a man, he cannot expect death, yet a realization of his fully illuminated existence must depend on the transcendence from death.

⁶²John Keats (1820), *Ode to the West Wind*.

Hence, we know it is death that connects man to the transcendental by putting him at the circular end of the continuum of consciousness. Sharing the animals in an absence of human consciousness, however, the Angel absolutely differs from worldly creatures as it is an imaginary, completely invisible being. This necessarily means, that to let the occurrence of the Angel happen, man must look more and further inward, far enough to reach what is invisible, which should be an excess of his limited being as what is merely within presence. In other words, he must entertain a hope to have his insufficient existence be overcome by the Angel, through a transcendental death. This propels us to rethink of the meaning of the Angel, which is explained by Rilke in a letter:

The Angel of the *Elegies* is the creature in whom that transformation of the visible into the invisible we performing already appears complete... The Angel of the *Elegies* is the being who vouches for the recognition of a higher degree of reality in the invisible. --Therefore "terrible" to us, because we, its lovers and transformers, still depend on the visible.⁶³

However, to encounter the unknown is horrible; what man is to confront surpasses him and thereby, invites his existence to be transformed. The Angel reaches "a higher degree of reality in the invisible," and its invisibility assures it to be independent of images, and therefore exempted from arbitrary representations. Superior to any existence which is limited to a certain space and subject to the changing of time, the Angel is complete in its full presence of existence, wherein that which to man remains invisible is also admitted. The Angel, in the sphere of the Open and in its wild sense independent of space and time, may well remind one of Plato's Beauty itself, which retains a self-satisfied perfection unlike those beings that are fragile in time. The *Elegies* try to convey to us that such purity only exists in the world of inner space (*Weltinnenraum*), yet must to be achieved entirely from visible and finite

⁶³ Letter to Witold von Hulewicz. 13 November, 1925.

existence. Just as Beauty itself is not the beauty of something but remains universal, so is the invisible Angel that comes along the poet's appreciation of things in the world without judgement. Upon having a glimpse of Beauty, however, the elegiac voice cries in pain, when it realizes that the Angel still remains untouchable for him and there is a horrible indifference in its Beauty:

*Denn das Schöne ist nichts
als des Schrecklichen Anfang, den wir noch grade ertragen,
und wir bewundern es so, weil es gelassen verschmätzt,
uns zu zerstören.*

For Beauty is nothing
But beginning of Terror we're just able to bear,
And why we adore it so is because it serenely
Disdains to destroy us.

The Angel is "terrible" (*schrecklich*) not because it entertains some intention toward man, which makes it strictly distinctive from the religious god who punishes injustice; the transparent serenity of Duino's Angel suggests that the complete perfection of its existence is absolutely higher than man, and such perfection in the ontological realm is unmovable and untouchable; yet it is revealed to man through a full-fledged consciousness, and therefore it comes as an anguishing, bitter, yet profound opening.

Desperation comes along with the shadow of death. This is because the invisibility of the Angel also brings a deconstruction of the simulacrum of the ideal, presupposed to be an inductive model of existence that false hope relies on. However, paradox after paradox, the Angel's independence from the finitude of what is all present simultaneously indicates a potentiality of transcendence. And that means: man, confined to being here and now, must

have his transitory consciousness transformed, insofar as along all that is perishable, his own limited existence is overcome and therefore comes to be in a state of non-existence, when embraced by the Angel's transcendental consciousness. Heidegger regards such a sphere, to which an overwhelmed man is drawn as the "pure draft" and the "globe of Being." He writes: "This being is drawn into the pure draft by one side and the other of the globe of Being. This being, for whom borderlines and differences between the drawings hardly exist any longer, is the being who governs the unheard-of centre of the widest orbit and causes it to appear."⁶⁴ In this moment, man's consciousness is no longer the consciousness of an object but of a fulfilled void; through transformation, consciousness alone has the potentiality to draw man's being into the sphere of Being insofar as such being is no longer differentiated from its opposites, and what has been alienated by the individual consciousness as otherness is once again assimilated into the original unity. This purification, in the same sense of an annihilation of self, is characterized by Blanchot as the death of impersonality. With regard to the relation between death and transformation, Blanchot points out that there is an impersonality in the death enlightened by the Angel: "The impersonality toward which death tends in Rilke is ideal. It is above the person: not the brutality of a fact or the randomness of chance, but the volatilization of the very fact of death, its transfiguration at its own centre."⁶⁵ Because it becomes too marginal in the personal sense, death in the *Elegies* is separated from that desired death that one wishes to die in an affirmation of one's unique existence, that is, death as Malte struggles to achieve it; being impersonal, death does not bend itself to the sort of matter which can be possessed as if it were some personal belonging, but turns out to be a medium-like place where the mutual relation between I (the one without personhood) and the invisible is maximally appreciated. It is, according to Blanchot, "a death such that I would be

⁶⁴ Heidegger (1971). "What are Poets For?". *Poetry, Language, Thoughts*, p. 131.

⁶⁵ Blanchot (1982). "The Work and Death's Space" in *The Space of Literature*. p. 149.

supremely invisible in it and it visible in me.”⁶⁶ To become invisible through death betokens a possibility which is for man almost impossible, that is, to be fully integrated with, and thereby to become the perfect existence itself. Therefore, Blanchot comments, this is the moment of a great impossibility, of both a negation and an affirmation from a non-subjective I. To vanish in the appearance of the Angel is an action that attempts “to stretch this self as far even as death, to expose myself to death, no longer excluding but including it – to regard it as mine, to read it as my secret truth, the terribleness in which I recognize what I am when I am greater than myself, absolutely myself or the absolutely great.”⁶⁷ This transformation, under the power of death is manifested as horrible and ecstatic simultaneously, and it casts out another dimension of time, in which man’s finitude remains marginal when the greater Being emerges. Rilke regards such realization as his primary artistic task; he asserts: “This world, regarded no longer from the human point of view, is perhaps my real task, one, at any rate, in which all my previous attempts would converge.”⁶⁸

Like Nietzschean Dionysian power, death with its overwhelming annihilation of individuality brings a dissolution of existence. And it leads the annihilated one, with his personal voice surrendering inasmuch as his selfhood is purified, to directly experience that mystic void, which negates the borderline between life and death along with the emerging of the Angel: “*Engel (sagt man) wüßten oft nicht, ob sie unter / Lebenden gehn oder Toten*” (Angels, (they say), are often unable to tell / whether they move among living or dead). Among the transparent evaporation of joy and pain, the impersonal countenance of death looms up. This experience of being outside of oneself is the foundation upon which the *Elegies* are founded as a whole. As mentioned before, Rilke speaks of such transformation as no longer seeing this world from the human point of view, such that the enriching power

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid, pp. 128-129.

⁶⁸ Rilke. *Briefe aus den Jahren 1914-1921*, p. 80.

summoned by the Angel grants a new view, or perhaps, simultaneously an esoteric experience, that is set from the standpoint of eternity symbolized as “the eternal torrent” (*Die ewige Strömung*). Man is drawn into an atmosphere which one can call religious, and the beginning of this atmosphere is vocalized as the Angel’s lure-call: “*ich verginge von seinem / stärkeren Dasein*” (I would expire from its greater presence). The call of the mystical Angel is, to borrow T. S. Eliot’s famous words, “the point of intersection of the timeless with time,”⁶⁹ as it is an unexpected event that occurs outside of worldly temporality. Differentiated from quotidian temporality, the mystical origin of creation rejects any intentional interpretation but only opens to what is revealed as a whole through poetic languages, the direct experience of Being.

Despite all difficulties, Rilke suggests a way, or more precisely a detour, for this extreme possibility of transcendence— as he always mentions in the letters to the young poet that patience and the endurance of solitude is necessary for man’s inner growth to thrive. “Love your solitude and bear with sweet-sounding lament the suffering it causes you,”⁷⁰ as Rilke writes. This attitude is a testament to his stay in the Duino castle in 1911, in a state of attentive expectation that led to the creation of the *Elegies*. Suffering of separation, agony of absence and an unexpectable hope of transcendence were embraced by him. If the Angel is the too flashy realization of transcendence, then what could the preparation of such a happening be? To speak more precisely in terms of transcendence, it means a solution of a paradox, that is, whereas man must endure his existential limitations of merely being here and now, he yet looks forward to a promising full presence of existence that comes from the nearest future. In “The Nature of Language,” Heidegger writes about such a paradox of the

⁶⁹ T. S. Eliot (1941). *Four Quartets*.

⁷⁰ See Rilke’s *Letter to a Young Poet*, p. 40.

unique existence of man, “because where we already are, we are in such a way that at the same time we are not there” (1971, p. 93). The finitude of man bears such a profound potentiality that transcendence has already been integrated with all that is in presence. With the notion of integration is revealed that what is in presence is both a not-yet situation and a foresight of a much greater existence, that is not realized yet but has already been endowed with such potentiality. Rilke reflects this tension in the images, the to-be-leaving arrow that shoots toward the future, and the bow that endlessly defers its leaving:

*Ist es nicht Zeit, daß wir liebend
uns vom Geliebten befreien und es bebend bestehn:
wie der Pfeil die Sehne besteht, um gesammelt im Absprung
mehr zu sein als er selbst.*

Is it not time that we, loving, should free ourselves
from the loved-one and, trembling, resist: as the arrow
resists the bowstring tension, in order to become,
gathered in its release, greater than itself.

Characterised with intensity, there is a dialectics in existence: it is, and it is *not* as negation of its current situation. The negation, indicated by the opening of transcendence, is a profound “hostility” (*Feindschaft*) that is seen by Rilke as an essential characteristic of the undetermined existence of human beings. While man’s changing consciousness grants him a freedom to renounce his situation of being here, such freedom also brings the pain of absence, because there is neither a solid ground for man to understand his transient existence nor some ultimate destiny that could be predicted, which used to be taken as the overarching ideal by ancient metaphysics. Therefore the elegiac voice laments, “For remaining is

nowhere” (*Denn Bleiben ist nirgends*). Kelley Walsh interprets the above stanza as suggesting that there is an impersonal force indefinitely deferring the arrow’s release, each loss increases the bowstring’s tension, in the way that Rilke’s poetics does, she comments, which brings to itself an infinite endurance until the confines of normal consciousness and representation are broken when full consciousness is fulfilled (2009, p.7). Yet this suffering and endurance, regarded as the “oldest pain” (*ältesten Schmerzen*), is necessary to strive for the goal that leaves personal affairs behind. Just as the force is innately holding the arrow and bowstring against each other, as far as through such intensity a perfect self-sufficiency comes into being, the desire that invites man to embrace his opposite lovers also leads him to a complement, through the consistent painful negation of his existence. This is as inevitable as the circle’s being round. Because such dialectics of existence also indicates a self-closure, which encloses man’s limited presence and his absence that always lags behind him, that always turns back towards him, together into the same unity. This is also the metaphysical mechanism of the music of poetics, and one may hear an echo of the bow-arrow image from another direction, in Heraclitus’ epigram, “back-stretched connexion in the bow and lyre.”⁷¹ What functions as musical is indicated by being prophetic; as with the *Elegies*, the beseeched unity is prophesized through an infinite stillness, as absence, a power of negation implicated by the bow, not only confines man in his presence, but the will to overcome it finally looses itself unto a new start – a start which resonates with the origin of Rilke’s poetics. When the arrow finally looses itself, an irresistible tearing force, empowered as the Angel’s overcoming annihilation, has itself been realized at the same time as man’s transcendence of all the limitations born with his innate self-consciousness.

⁷¹ From the chapter “Heraclitus” in *Presocratic Philosophers*, by G.S. Kirk, J.E. Raven and M. Schofield, 1983, p. 192.

Another way indicated by the poet to realize this achievement, which is simple yet too hard as well, is love. In the *Symposium*, Socrates learns from Diotima, a woman who asserts herself as the teacher of love: “Come, tell me the cause of these effects as well as of the others that have relation to love” (207c7-8). Like an ascending ladder, as recounted in the platonic dialogue, love elevates man from the beauty of the physical body to the invisible beauty of truthfulness, whose self-revelation is accompanied by man’s gaze on Beauty itself. In a like manner, the *Elegies* take desire and love as an important topic. Indispensable for man’s realizing of his own transcendence, desire for the perfect Angel is the same as the desire for the full presence of Being. As analysed before, man’s consciousness fails to grasp such wholeness due to objectification; what then differentiates the desire from individual consciousness? Perhaps, the following short lines by Simone Weil, titled “To Desire without an Object”, would be helpful for us to understand the same underlying point conveyed by the *Elegies*: “We suffer because the departed, the absent, has become something imaginary and unreal. But our desire for him is not imaginary. We have to go down into ourselves to the abode of the desire which is not imaginary.”⁷² Desire is different from intentional consciousness in that it has a passion in itself, as the desired Angel is also the inevitable force that draws man into his desire – man, the Angel, and the desire of transcendence is therefore made into a trinity, from which a light is shed upon the invisible wholeness of all beings. Desire goes beyond the phenomenon but has its root and final goal in the transcendental; it

⁷² Simone Weil (2003). “To Desire without an Object”. In *Gravity and Grace*, pp. 62-65. Weil’s idea of “love in the void” finds an echo in the *First Elegy*, that man’s desire for his opposites finally dissolves in the inexhaustible beauty of the Angel – a self-clearness of the void, symbolized as mirrors: “*Spiegel: die die entströmte eigene Schönheit / wiederschöpfen zurück in das eigene Antlitz*” (mirrors: which draw up anew the beauty that they beamed forth / and now return into their own countenances). The relation between Rilke’s Angel and Christianity will be briefly introduced later. Ascending towards the Angel not only grants a purification in poetics, but a purification of that imaginary relation to otherness, which is alienated by self-consciousness and henceforth comes to be ungraspable. As Erich Heller writes, “Rilke succeeds in concluding an everlasting truce with the anonymous powers on the other side—by appropriating their territory ‘inwardly.’ Where man knew merely the terror of the monstrous emptiness of the beyond, there is now the peace of ‘reiner Bezug’, the pure relatedness, which is so pure because no real ‘otherness’ enters into it” (171).

reciprocally elevates man into the higher reality, where there exists a fully developed, non-contained consciousness, devoid of images.⁷³

Here, man sees a hope to preserve his irreversible loss that is made visible over his lifetime. Hopeful as he is to do so, the poet believes it as the motivation of art, he asserts: “Really, nothing prevents me from finding all things inexhaustible and intact: where would art find its point of departure if not in this joy and this tension of an infinite beginning?”⁷⁴ It could be said, it is through the poet’s incessant desire towards such infiniteness, and thereby endured suffering, that the *Elegies* are henceforth infused with a vitality, a sort of life energy that is unique in the elegiac voice yet remains universal as being the beginning of all poetic art. It is also this desire, which can be compared to piety, that immerses the *Elegies* as a whole in a religious atmosphere while keeping the work independent from any religion. This makes Rilke’s rupture with Christianity quite noticeable. In a letter to his Polish translator, Rilke expressed his attitude to Christianity when he pointed out that Duino’s Angel has nothing to do with the Angel in Christian heaven.⁷⁵ However, this assertion rather makes one more curious as to why Duino’s Angel gives off such an emanating divinity, which is undeniable as a prominent character of the *Elegies*. Rilke’s religiosity is complex; his God seems to be a medium that introduces him into an intimate relation between existence and death – the most distinctive feature of Rilke’s God lies in its intimacy to man’s innermost humanity. God for Rilke means a God for human beings, it is not just exclusive to the “beyond” world, but is connected to what is immediately embodied in the world as reality, and overall, to that unique worldly existence of mankind.⁷⁶ Rilke’s contemplation of humanity is well reflected in a letter of 1923, to Karl von der Heydt:

⁷³ See Gosetti-Ferencei’s definition of Rilke’s *Weltinnenraum*, cited above.

⁷⁴ Quoted by Blanchot in “The Work and Death’s Space” p. 152.

⁷⁵ *Briefe aus Muzot*, 337

⁷⁶ In a letter dated to January 6, 1923, Rilke expressed his dislike of Christian conceptions of Beyond, because of their “making those who have vanished more imprecise to us and above all more inaccessible”. What Rilke seeks is an emphasis on humanity, of man’s finitude and a possibility to

It would be inconsistent with the passionateness of the Angels to be spectators; they surpass us in action precisely as much as God surpasses them. I regard them as the assailants par excellence, and you must defer to me here—I've given security: for when, on my return from a thorough immersion in things and animals, I was looking forward to a course in humanity, lo and behold! The next but one, angelity was set before me: thus I've skipped people, and am now looking cordially back at them.

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What Rilke expects is a movement of return: he is not satisfied with gazing at the perfect beauty but looks forward to turning back to man's dwelling on the most real, touchable earth. It seems paradoxical, though, that Rilke has gone too far as he radically asserts that the inner being is more admirable than the outer space as the latter "hardly bears comparison with the dimensions, with the depth dimension of inner being,"⁷⁷ and "does not even need the spaciousness of the universe to be within itself almost unfathomable."⁷⁸ However, his emphasis on the inner spiritual movement is not intended to degrade worldly beings, as the letter above mentions. It is for a more comprehensive appreciation of all existence without personal bias. On the one hand, "a thorough immersion in things and animals" brings a freedom of vastness that has been granted by the Open, but it nevertheless turns the poet's gaze back to the tangible, yet perishable existence which depends on the empirical world to be experienced. Still, insufficient self-consciousness would resume, and a recognition of the absolute difference between the Angel's perfect being and man's deflective existence as becoming comes afterwards. Whereas a hope of transcendence is in the first place taken from the ownmost potentiality of humanity, it cannot escape to look back to the earthly living of human beings. In this world, whose infinitude has been astonishingly glimpsed, man's life

transcend his limitation, his concern is, as he says, not "being that side" of an imaginary world but being here and now.

⁷⁷ *Letter from Muzot*, August 11, 1924

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

overall is transitory and irreversible; and death, although it permits a transcendence of existential limitations, as the fundamental nature of humanity, is itself untranscendable for all the efforts made by art. This is why the elegiac voice not only propels man to carry out the transformation of the invisible, “– *Erde! Unsichtbar! / Was, wenn Verwandlung nicht, ist dein drängender Auftrag?*” (Earth! Invisible! What, if not transformation, is your pressing task?) – for its perpetual meaning of life given by that moment of self-realization, but also lamentably makes an acknowledgement: “*Uns, die Schwindendsten. Ein Mal / jedes, nur ein Mal. Ein Mal und nicht mehr*” (Us, the most fleeting. Just once, everything, / only just once. Just once, and no more than that). Fully acknowledging man’s finitude is no doubt painful, and perhaps it becomes even more inconsolable once the nostalgic memory of the Angel revives deep in the heart. As a self-conscious man, in an extreme moment he is to be emancipated by an irrational, creaturely power, yet he must keep on taking the responsibility of being a human, that is, to accept what is destined in him without illusion. In its superlative form, “the most fleeting” (*die Schwindendsten*) is rather bittersweet. The *Elegies* do not seek for a recovery of existential pain that should be realized once and for all. As Kelly Walsh points out, by consciously holding onto the lost object, the poet refuses to bring his grieving to an end (2009, p. 2). And in this sense, the transformation inspired by death is just like a Sisyphean task, which has a climax realized through the most joyous pain, but without end.

Death and the Demand of Art

Characterized by dynamic language and poetic tension, the *Duino Elegies* utter what should remain in the silent realm, being and death, from its unique voice. Starting his observation of wide-prevailing absence and loss in modernity, Rilke resorts to poetic language to restore an authentic relation between man and world. Poetic mourning goes beyond what is universal in a particular age to that universal in perpetual humanity: man’s

limited existence, reflected by the representation of the world, is a result of problematic self-consciousness which initially develops as the foundation of self. Tensions between the poet's elegiac voice and the impersonal Angel construe versatile vocal parts, through such suffering, and ultimately, being elevated, his self-consciousness manages to achieve a transcendence of existential limitations, hence to unite with a perfect consciousness of the totality of being.

Transformation, recognized as a process of the purification of self-consciousness, is put forward by the *Elegies* as an important philosophical theme. As with many of Rilke's thing poems, the *Elegies* are highly metaphysical. They start from an observation of man's existential circumstance and other natural existences, and express an enthusiastic desire to recover from man's loss and absence through breaking all confinements of convention, of a reduced arbitrary world as representation, so as to reach the invisible reality wherein man would embrace his full presence as Being. Such an event occurs only in an imaginary ontological field credited by Rilke as the Open, until light is shed upon the inner space through contemplation and a long period of solitude. Rilke's metonymy of animals and plants indicates how a conscious man's viewing of the world would result in a perplexed dilemma of existence, while also suggesting a possible way to turn back to the original state before the generation of self-consciousness, therefore to resume the harmony between man and things that surround him. In contrast to objects, whose independent existence is tinted by the contingency of fluid consciousness, beings in the Open sphere are turned from the abyss-like absence to a state of transparency, they exist simultaneously in nature and in a unity beyond. To be admitted into the Open, man would have to cease his interpretation of the world, hence all subjective activities enter into numbness; he must also dismiss the wish to die a personal death, as if it were some certain point that awaits at the end of his life. At the same time, the transcendence towards a perfect state of existence is realized as a self-overcoming power of

consciousness, which, with a collapse between the self and its opposite otherness, occurs as an impersonal death brought forth by the Angel.

What does death, in the sense of an annihilation of individuality, contribute to the creation of art? As mentioned in the previous section, Rilke looks forward to a course of turning back to humanity, Can we then say that such a turnaround gaze is unavoidably followed by a deeper sorrow, in the sense that to resume from the Angel's blessing with a loss of consciousness is as painful as being thrown into man's doomed finitude? With clear self-consciousness, it seems that by indicating the "human course," the poet is determined to reject being cured through metaphysical power and to accept the overall limitations that a man must bear. The first question could be answered from Rilke's attitude towards art, which could be called "piety." In a letter on Cézanne, Rilke writes: "Just as the creative artist is not allowed to choose, neither is he permitted to turn his back on anything: a single refusal, and he is cast out of the state of grace and becomes sinful all the way through."⁷⁹ Rilke's piety of art is rooted in his belief that art has the capability to rid man of a certain judgement of existence, which nonetheless is outside his own imagination of the presupposed model of what is ideal. As the image of the tree in the *First Elegy* reveals to us, man's intentionality is imposed on existence, and his arbitrary interpretation would be a refusal of what exists exactly as being itself; to overcome this tendency is the artistic task demanded by Rilke. As we have already seen, overcoming such a tendency of consciousness, reflected as a way of purification in the *Elegies* as a complete work, is metaphorized as man's uncountable surrender to the Angel's indifferent beauty. And under such purification, the poet remains to be, or rather he *is* that purified voice. With its perfection and completeness, not only does beauty betoken the same height of the being of language, but manifested through its void, as the poetic art attempts to present it to us, it is a unity where life and death are no longer

⁷⁹ October 23, 1907, letter to his wife. Rilke's Letters on Cézanne.

separated from each other but come to be on the same continuum of a higher reality. This is why the Angel is the “true figure of life,”⁸⁰ its power is praised by Rilke as a sort of life energy, “the blood of the mightiest circulation flows through both.”⁸¹ The overwhelming terribleness of the Angel, then, is converted to an intimacy with man’s ownmost existence and an essential security. The Angel is the truthful reality that one can experience through his infinite approach to death. Therefore, the poet declares, death is man’s friend: “Death is our friend precisely because it brings us into absolute and passionate presence with all that is here, that is natural, that is love...”⁸² Death calls upon man’s passionate love of what is given to his heart, yet death’s impersonality secures it still to be covered in myth. Death “stands before eternity and says only: Yes.”⁸³ This “yes”, the assertion from death of its annihilation and elevation, is uttered in Rilke’s own way as elegiac poetry.

The recovery from separation and loss, however, is not permanent for the poet. If there should be an ultimate achievement of consolation, it is endlessly deferred by the elegist's constant holding of what has been irreversibly lost for man, which is on the same side as his belief in humanity. As a modern elegist, Rilke mourns not for a particular event, but for the sake of transcendental memory, which at the same time asserts man’s inner power of self-realization and also brings him a much deeper sorrow. The quest of transformation is ignited by a passion of transcending man’s finitude, and the memory of momentary eternity remains along the path of one’s life, which is all he can live through within his own finitude.

⁸⁰ Rilke, Letter to Witold von Hulevicz. 13 November, 1925

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Rilke. Letter to Countess Margot Sizzo-Noris-Crouy Epiphany, 1923

⁸³ Ibid.

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