ROGER PAULIN

From Goethe to Gundolf

ESSAYS ON

GERMAN LITERATURE AND CULTURE
It is a natural reaction to see in Elegy Ten a kind of summation of the ideas and images of the whole cycle. The themes that we have been tracing do of course recur: angels, flowers, lovers, mythologies. And themes and motifs that dominate Rainer Maria Rilke’s whole poetic oeuvre find a voice, the image of the night sky, for instance. But the sombre grandeur of this elegy comes from the theme of death that dominates it from beginning to end, coming as it does on the heels of that affirmation of the here and now, the only existence we have, that was first introduced in Elegies Six and Seven and then reinforced in the sixfold ‘ein Mal’ of Elegy Nine. Not only is Elegy Ten the longest; it introduces in its well over one hundred lines several seemingly disjunct sequences that only move towards a thematic resolution when we are fifty verses into the text. In its lament for the dead, but in the fierce prophetic indignation at the loss of touch with the culture of pain and bereftness and death, it has echoes of Elegy Five. As in Elegy Five, what makes Elegy Ten both difficult and at the same time moving, is this juxtaposition of disparate moods, encapsulated in a mythology that takes us from ‘Klagen’ to ‘Leid-Stadt’ to ‘Ur-Leid’ (‘laments’ to ‘Grief

1 Originally published in Rilke’s Duino Elegies. Cambridge Readings, ed. by Roger Paulin and Peter Hutchinson (London: Duckworth; Riverside, CA: Ariadne, 1996), 171–91. All quotations from Rilke are taken from Rainer Maria Rilke, Sämtliche Werke, ed. by the Rilke Archive, Ruth Sieber-Rilke and Ernst Zinn, 5 vols (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1955–66), henceforth abbreviated as SW, with volume and page number; and Ulrich Fülleborn and Manfred Engel, Materialien zu Rilkes Duineser Elegien, 3 vols (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1980–82), henceforth abbreviated as DE, with volume and page number.

2 See Rainer Maria Rilke, Gedichte an die Nacht, ed. by Anthony Stephens, Bibliothek Suhrkamp 519 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1983).
City’ to ‘primal suffering’). The tone ranges from Hölderlinian sonority to the occasional foreshadowing of The Waste Land. An analogy from the fine arts also springs to mind. In 1912, the year of the cycle’s conception (and of the first fifteen verses of our elegy), an exhibition was held in Cologne by the Sonderbund, of the most significant works of the modern art movements. The examples ranged from Pierre-Auguste Renoir and Claude Monet and Max Liebermann to Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque to Robert Delaunay and Gino Severini. Cheek by jowl, one saw traditions and positions confront and challenge each other. (Seeing the repeat exhibition in 1962 was one of my lasting formative experiences.) The analogy does not work entirely. At most it reminds us that while Rilke stands at the threshold of the most radical formal experiment the twentieth century has known, he also looks back to and is firmly rooted in traditions that inform and shape the nineteenth century (Rilke’s angels, for instance, also link him with that period). But he does bring home to us the essential and timeless link between poetry and myth, that is, saying in human terms the expressible about the ultimately inexpressible mysteries of life and death, and of the timeless role of the poet set aside to recount human response to those mysteries. In our poem, we have two magic plants, one at the beginning and one at the end. For where would the poetry of proclamation and of lament, such as this is, be without its priests and their arcana?

As I said, one might expect of this elegy some kind of summation, some statement of achievement, some climactic message or some conspectual view. This would be a fair expectation after what may have appeared to have been a cyclical motion through nine different phases and modes of experience, now to become ten. There are numerous hints in letters from the period in which the Elegies were taking shape, that the search for meaning in ‘das Hiersein’, ‘das Hiesige’, essential for the Neue Gedichte/New Poems and Malte Laurids Brigge/The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge, had not been abandoned. As he writes in 1915 to Princess

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6 ‘The here and now’. Ibid., 162.
Marie von Thurn und Taxis, it is in the human that we find consolation. And to this end:

> es müßte nur unser Auge eine Spur schauender, unser Ohr empfangender sein, der Geschmack einer Frucht müßte uns vollständiger eingehen, wir müßten mehr Geruch aushalten, und im Berühren und Angerührtsein geistesgegenwärtiger und weniger vergeßlich sein: um sofort aus unseren Erfahrungen Tröstungen aufzunehmen, die überzeugender, überwiegender, wahrer wären als alles Leid, das uns erschüttern kann.

only our eyes would need to be a shade more seeing, our ear more receptive, we ought to take in more fully the taste of a fruit, we ought to be more aware of our sense of smell, and in touching and being touched more sharp-witted and less forgetful: to gain from our experiences consolations straightway, that would be more convincing, all-encompassing and true than all the suffering that can shake and undermine us.

Yet the breaking off of the Elegies in 1912 and their resumption after not quite ten years, in 1921–22, tells us that this process of lyrical perception and apprehension is beset from the outset with doubts and velleities. The ‘ineffable’, the ‘unspeakable’, the ‘un-sayable’ in the realm of the angels, is overcome only gradually in the resigned contentment with relationships in the here and now, and in the resumption of poetic confidence that accompanies it.

Instead of looking for some kind of grand climax in Elegy Ten, we might reverse the process and note instead that the cycle is referential within itself in ways that make us read back and forward. We are always finding premonitions and preformulations of images and motifs that achieve their definitive utterance in one or more of the Elegies. Thus, the audience of the dead in Numbers Four and Five, ‘die unendlich Toten’, as our elegy (l. 105) will call them, beyond recall but ever-present around us, are a more accurate point of reference in Number Ten than the invocation at its opening of the angels. At most, that address will serve as a reminder that Elegy Ten owes its first fifteen verses to the initial burst of inspiration in Duino in 1912. And yet the elegy will take up, already in its second verse, what must be the central theme of grand poetry — and *stilus altus* this poetry is, make no mistake — that of singing: ‘aufsingen’ and ‘zustimmen’ (l. 107).
2). We have already had ‘ansingen’ in Elegy One. Now, ‘aufsingen’ and ‘zustimmen’ are what we do and what the angels do respectively. So, already in the first draft of 1912, as it were, Rilke had expressed the idea that, while we cannot have a dialogue with the absolute and the ineffable, we can have a kind of antiphonal song: we singing of our experience, they of theirs, not in an equal contest, of course, but in an awareness that we see what is visible, they all that is invisible. This notion, expressed in a late letter, we can apply by extension to the central image and theme of Elegy Ten: life and death. They represent two spheres of equal validity, the one merely the side of the other turned away from us for the moment, the one for the time being not cast in light (‘des Lebens abgekehrte Hälfte’). And in the unity of life and death, in this awareness, the angels have their dwelling.

But how can we sing all of this? When Rilke had completed the Elegies, his immediate reaction was in the language of religious, even hieratic utterance: ‘Aber nun ists. Ist. Ist. Amen’, ‘sehr, sehr sehr herrlich. Wunder. Gnade’. This biblical and almost liturgical language is both helpful and misleading. For we must not forget that the composition of the Elegies coincides with one of the greatest literary events of the early twentieth century: the first issue of the complete works of Friedrich Hölderlin, by Norbert von Hellingrath in 1912–14. This suddenly made certain kinds of poetic diction problematic. It sat in judgment on the nineteenth, a century which had so often been satisfied with the epigonal and the nearly good. I believe that Rilke is momentarily caught up in this event. There are clear echoes of Brod und Wein/Bread and Wine in Elegy One (and elsewhere). The very adaptation of the elegiac couplet is part of this. So too the kenosis, the emptying of oneself in the service of speaking and being spoken through; but also the more than occasional and distinctly unnerving changes of tone from the gnomic to the rhetorically expansive that we know in Hellingrath’s term, as applied to Hölderlin, as ‘harte Fügung’ (‘stone on stone without mortar’). But Hölderlin and his models, Pindar, the Psalmist and the

8 *DE*, I, 283.
9 ‘But now it is come about. Amen’. Ibid., 236.
prophets, are inimitable: where Rilke in other poetry between 1912–14 does in fact slip into the Hölderlinan mode, the result is not good. For in the years 1912–22 there can be no creating of a private mythology or religion, such as Hölderlin’s was. True, the early twentieth century is littered with the wrecks of such attempts, but few read Alfred Mombert or Theodor Däubler or Rudolf Borchardt today. And so ‘sehr, sehr sehr herrlich, Wunder. Gnade’ is an expression also of the poet’s humility at having succeeded in sustaining — even against the awesome presence of a Hölderlin — his own style and his own utterance.

As if to remind us that we are in the last statement of a cycle of elegies, Rilke in Number Ten unfolds the lexis of the elegiac: Harm, Schmerz, Leid, Klage, Ur-Leid, Zorn, Tränen, Wehmut, Trauer. The two key words of the poem seem to be ‘Leid’ and ‘Klage’: one the experienced feeling, the dolor, the pain and suffering at the ultimate loss in death; the other, again crucial for the poet, its utterance, its sound and articulation, the planctus, the lament. I would go so far as to say: the ‘lamentation’ for this elegy is also a ‘Klagelied’, Martin Luther’s word for Jeremiah’s complaint (and it is the same word that in German poetics was once used for the later term ‘Elegie’). But while this elegy reproduces the cadences of the elegiac couplet, there is no anxious attempt (as in Seven) at metrical correctness, only the framework, structure or tone of elegiac utterance. Yet if this Elegy is one thing, it is certainly not a mere disquisition on the passing of all things. Its tone is not that of Weltschmerz (‘melancholy’): we have left that ontological ‘Katzenjammer’ behind in the nineteenth century where it belongs. No, here Rilke attempts to see beyond loss and transience in order to perceive some sense, in a way to turn the tables on death (John Donne’s ‘for thou are not so’, if you like, but not quite) and to integrate death into a scheme whose totality we mortals of course never grasp (the angels do) and whose two sides we cannot experience simultaneously.

Although it is fair to say that the theme of death is omnipresent in Rilke’s oeuvre, it is also worthy of note that his thinking on the subject was intensified during the years of composition of the Elegies. It was his concern, as he expressed it in a letter of 1915, to see death as that which is experienced (that is, it happens to us all) and yet which in its reality cannot be experienced. We are always conscious of it, yet never really admit it, as ‘das gefährliche Glas unseres Glücks, aus dem wir jeden
Augenblick können vergossen werden’.\textsuperscript{12} For all that, as a later letter stresses, death is not a contrary principle. Its inner essence is in reality more conscious of life, ‘lebenswissender’,\textsuperscript{13} than our most vital moments of life. We must make it our task therefore to win death’s confidence, to learn daily of it, through seizing, as Rilke says, the fruit of the here and now and biting into it.\textsuperscript{14} Indeed a letter of 1923 will state categorically that death is the ultimate affirmer (‘Ja-Sager’), it alone says, ‘Yes’ to eternity: ‘Er, der Tod (ich beschwöre Sie, es zu glauben!) ist der eigentliche Ja-Sager. Er sagt nur: Ja. Vor der Ewigkeit’.\textsuperscript{15} In Elegy Ten, Rilke the poet is placing himself in a new relationship to death, as life fades, and a newer, paradoxically brighter, existence seems to beckon (although that, too, is ultimately ‘unsäglich’). In terms of his thanatology, however, he is also aligning himself with a strand that goes well back into the nineteenth century, say, to Ludwig Feuerbach, stating that my death is the fulfilment of all that I have lived for, all my human relationships are completed in it — for there is nothing beyond.\textsuperscript{16} More significantly, perhaps, Rilke associates himself with the Leo Tolstoy of The Death of Ivan Ilyich.\textsuperscript{17} There we read of a life of squalid untruth, of unreality, finding a final purpose as the man recognizes death to be no more than the voice that declares his life to have been untrue or unfulfilled. That voice ceases, is silent, is at an end, as physical life comes to an end. More tellingly, we think of Sigmund Freud’s injunction of 1916, ‘man muß an ihn [den Tod] glauben’,\textsuperscript{18} or of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s ‘Bejahung des Todes’,\textsuperscript{19} that ‘affirmation of death’ through which we both acknowledge and also overcome its pervasive influence on life.

\textsuperscript{12} ‘The perilous glass of our happiness from which we can be poured at any moment’, \textit{DE}, I, 135.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 162.

\textsuperscript{14} ‘Die ergriffene und aufgebissene Frucht des Hiesigen’, \textit{DE}, I, 204.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 284.


\textsuperscript{17} \textit{DE}, I, 137.

\textsuperscript{18} ‘One has to believe in it’. Sigmund Freud, ‘Unser Verhältnis zum Tode’, in \textit{Zeitgenöffes über Krieg und Tod, Studienausgabe}, ed. by Alexander Mitscherlich et al., 11 vols (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1969–79), X, 344

But these, necessarily sketchy, preliminaries will not take us further than the threshold of the poem. There needs to be one more preliminary, if the poem is not to withhold from us another dimension that is crucial for its understanding: the poem as myth. It is, as I stressed before, not a twentieth-century attempt at yet another private mythology, along the lines that Hölderlin had so wonderfully and tragically plotted a century before. Nor is it the renewal of myth in the way we see W. B. Yeats or T. S. Eliot or Ezra Pound doing, as say in the theme of poetic metamorphosis that Charles Tomlinson chose for the theme of his Clark Lectures some years ago. Instead, Rilke is giving a mythopoeic dimension to the world of the heart, of human feeling (the angels escape the realm of human sensation and emotion) and then in the whole range of experiences of the human heart that are subsumed under the key words of the poem, ‘Klage’ and ‘Leid’. It is not a world of cogent mythological equivalents, nor is it some kind of allegory where equivalents and correspondences slot neatly into place. For all that, we enter into a world that has its own terms of reference, its own structures and hierarchies, its own beginning and its own end.

DASS ich dereinst, an dem Ausgang der grimmigen Einsicht, Jubel und Ruhm aufsinge zustimmenden Engeln.
Daß von den klar geschlagenen Hämmern des Herzens keiner versage an weichen, zweifelnden oder reißenden Saiten. Daß mich mein strömendes Antlitz glänzender mache; daß das unscheinbare Weinen blühe. O wie werdet ihr dann, Nächte, mir lieb sein, gehärmte. Daß ich euch knieender nicht, untröstliche Schwestern,
5 hinnahm, nicht in euer gelöstes

10 Haar mich gelöster ergab. Wir, Vergeuder der Schmerzen. Wie wir sie absehn voraus, in die traurige Dauer, ob sie nicht enden vielleicht. Sie aber sind ja unser winterwähliges Laub, unser dunkel das Sinngrün, eine der Zeiten des heimlichen Jahres—, nicht nur

15 Zeit—, sind Stelle, Siedelung, Lager, Boden, Wohnort.

21 DE, II, 251.
MAY the time come when, at the end of my terrible vision, I raise up my song of praise and delight to the voice of the angels. And may the clear blows from the heart’s hammers not strike dully on strings that are soft, doubting or brittle. And may my tear-streaming cheeks shine all the more brightly; and the weeping in secret bloom. Oh how dear you will be to me then, you nights of sorrow. Would I had knelt even lower, to accept you, disconsolate sisters, given more of myself in touching your hair that was untied in mourning. We, who are wastrels of sorrows. We see them approach, into the endless sadness, hoping perhaps they will end. But they are our leaves through the winter, our dark green of remembrance, one of the times of the inward year— not merely time —, are our place, settlement, encampment, ground, habitation.

The poem opens with a fivefold repetition (ll. 1–6) of the word ‘daß’, suggesting in its optative ‘may’ or ‘o that’ the rhetorical structure of supplication or prayer or even of affirmation. We note, however, that they are all unfulfilled statements, the first four referring to future achievement, the fifth looking back to what was not done, and in its turn leading over to the sententia ‘Wir, Vergeuder der Schmerzen’ (l. 10), then the long and sustained poetic metaphor on the nature of those sorrows of which we are so prodigal. This by now familiar structure of ‘if we were to’, ‘if we but could’ forms a kind of prooemion or prologue that is echoed and perhaps answered by the final colophon of the poem (‘But if they could […] then this’ ll. 107ff.), followed by the metaphor and the rounding-off statement of general application. Set in between these ‘unfulfilled’ sections are the sustained narrative, the mythopoetic passages that trace the transition from life to death, from the ‘Leid-Stadt’ to the ‘Klage-Land’ to the ‘Berge des Ur-Leids’.

In this series of invocations or petitions, the poet begins with the awareness that perhaps only the moment of death, some day (‘dereinst’), at the moment of full recognition (when he emerges from the ‘grimmige Einsicht’), will be the fitting moment to sing the angels (‘aufsingen’),
receiving not only their nodding approval (‘zustimmenden’ — a double meaning in the German) but the harmony and concinnity, where poetic and angelic voice are part of the same process, ‘auf-’ and ‘zu-’, as one reaches out in song and the other picks up the theme of the other voice. Indeed, this image of singing is carried over to that of the hammers of the piano on the strings and becomes one of performance: may they all be tuned and taut. Song or melody leads over to weeping and the first indication that the act of singing or invoking is also a poetic act of charity. For the coming alive and affirmation of the nights of lamentation is a new awareness: human acts, as Elegy Seven reminded us, are not only worthy when they produce tower or pylon, but also the qualities of ‘Innerlichkeit’, mercy and pity. Thus, the grief-stricken nights (l. 8) of weeping become the first of those elegiac mythical creations: the sisters whom I did not (past tense now) recognize for what they were (did not kneel before, whose hair untied for the rite of mourning I did not touch), unaware as I was that ‘Schmerz’ is not only inextricably bound up with existence, but actually has substance, more substance perhaps than a life that is limited only by ‘Glück’. That knowledge and consciousness is then transferred into a supremely beautiful poetic line: ‘Sie aber sind ja / Unser winterwähriges Laub, unser dunkeles Sinngrün’ (ll. 12–13). Here the metre and rhythm of a near-hexameter is utilized to bring out both the possessives ‘unser’ but also the images of evergreen growth — with a hidden touch in that ‘Sinngrün’ that needs a brief gloss. For one might read ‘Sinngrün’ as a bold compound metaphor, playing on ‘Sinn’ as sense, or even on the verb ‘sinnen’, contemplation or reflection. That association would be legitimate. Yet ‘Sinngrün’ or ‘Singrün’ (from ‘sin-’, long past, long ago) is the plant that in German is also called ‘Wintergrün’ or ‘Immergrün’, that grows on the graves of the dead — and in English is the humble periwinkle, vinca minor. It is also one of the magic plants that remind us of the primitive links between divination and poetry.22 Not only that: grief and sorrow are part of the ‘inner year’ of human experience, that is ‘heimlich’ (l. 14), both familiar (related to ‘homely’) and secret or hidden. And from the botanical, Rilke switches images

to ones (six in all) of human habitation, the ‘Wohnort’ (l. 15), the ‘Sitz
im Leben’, where we dwell, keeping the double association that we
have in English for the word ‘dwell’, for both the physical necessities
of existence and for the inner life. Both ‘Sinngrün’ and ‘Wohnort’ are,
metrically speaking, spondees, a feature of this elegy, with their equal
stress on both syllables. In this they are quite different from the distichs
of German classical verse, where the Greek or Latin spondee is normally
rendered by a trochee. Thus, many of the key words of the poem, the
most elegiac of the cycle, have a stately accentuation in both sense and
sound (‘Leid-Stadt’, ‘Leidland’, ‘Ur-Leid’).

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 Turm, das platzende Denkmal.

O, wie spurlos zerträte ein Engel ihnen der Trostmarkt,
den die Kirche begrenzt, ihre fertig gekaufte:
reinlich und zu und entäuscht wie ein Postamt am Sonntag.
Draußen aber kräuseln sich immer die Ränder von Jahrmarkt. 
Schaukeln der Freiheit! Taucher und Gaukler des Eifers!

Und des behübschten Glücks figürliche Schießstatt,
wo es zappelt von Ziel und sich blechern benimmt,
wen ein Geschickterer trifft. Von Beifall zu Zufall
taumelt er weiter; denn Buden jeglicher Neugier
werben, trommeln und plärrn. Für Erwachsene aber
ist noch besonders zu sehn, wie das Geld sich vermehrt,

alles, das Ganze, der Vorgang —, das unterrichtet und macht
fruchtbar ........

Alas, though, how alien the streets of Grief City,
where in the counterfeit silence, made of a surfeit of noise,
blatantly struts the form that is cast in the mould
of emptiness: the tinselly din, the statue burst open.

O, how an angel would trample to nothing their Cure-All Fair,
with the church hard by, the one bought to order:
tidy and shut and forlorn like the Post on a Sunday.
But outside curl around still the amusement park’s edges.

And prettified happiness’ shooting gallery, befigured,
targets all jostling, each jangling the other,
when a good marksman scores. From claps to chance-taking
on his way he lurches; for sideshows are there for the curious.
their barkers hailing and drumming. Adults Only!

Special attraction! The reproduction of money (anatomical
details),
not just for amusement: money’s organs of gender;
the whole lot, nothing left out—, what they get up to — a
lesson and.
brings you results .......

The poem now breaks off abruptly from the fifteen verses that came to
Rilke in 1912. He had drafted quite a different continuation in 1913, with
a sustained nature image following on from ‘winterwähriges Laubwerk’
(the 1913 variant of ‘Sinngrün’). In 1922, however, nature was first to be
alienated before being given a function in the wider scheme of the poem.
That disjunction comes also in the marked and sudden incongruity of
‘alas, though’, the fairly colloquial ‘Freilich’ (l. 16) and the high-style
‘wehe’, the elegiac word that runs through the whole cycle. From
nature’s cycle, and a secure place of dwelling, we move to the ‘Leid-
Stadt’, where there is no dwelling-place, and a long, sustained catalogue
of all that is cheap and counterfeit and vulgar. This city of grief, this
Pandaemonium, has two aspects. First, there is a section where the very
strident awfulness produces a paradoxical kind of silence, a failure to
say (‘aus Übertönung gemachte Stille’, l. 17f.), where words like ‘Lärm’,
‘prahlt’ and ‘vergoldet’ set the tone. Note ‘der vergoldete Lärm’, like
‘sich blechern benimmt’ lower down, with their bold transference of
senses, as if the poet in his outrage cannot find the connecting links of
meaning. Is it a real city, like one of those ‘Plätze in Paris’ from Elegy
Five where Madame Lamort holds sway? Certainly the drumming
and general commotion is the same. Or is it, as some commentators
have suggested (Hans-Georg Gadamer, Romano Guardini), actually
the city graveyard, the necropolis, with its false pomp, a living proof
of how outwardness has triumphed over inwardness, of how even the
church — in Rilke’s fierce joke (‘wie ein Postamt am Sonntag’) — forms
one of the sides of the ‘Trostmarkt’ (l. 20) and is thus taken over by
commerce and brokerage. The angels — the last time, incidentally, that
we encounter them in the cycle and here in a kind of apocalyptic or

23  DE, I, 90f., SW, III, 64ff.
eschatological role — not knowing any distinction between the inner and the outer life, would crush this under foot, without trace, recalling Expressionist images like Ludwig Meidner’s imploding cities or Georg Heym’s visions of destruction. But already we hear the sounds of ‘roll up, all the fun of the fair!’ In Elegy Nine, human achievement was measured in terms of the craftsman’s art. Here, everything is dominated by frauds, mountebanks and hucksters. Rilke’s Vanity Fair takes us from sideshows of ‘Freedom!’ to ‘Enthusiasm!’ to ‘Happiness!’ The images become jangled and kaleidoscopically jumbled as the things to be won in the shooting-galleries, and the shooters themselves, change sides, as it were (the jumping for joy of the marksman is transferred to the targets and prizes themselves). But, ‘you haven’t seen anything yet’. Adults Only, anatomical waxwork displays that lay bare, with the lovelessness of the sexologist’s manual, the sex act of money, money — that makes this world go round. If, as I suggested, this prophetic wrath reminds us of the Expressionists’ visions of destruction, their clean sweep through material values, it is also where Rilke comes closest to The Waste Land. Yet we should not forget that all along, he has not abandoned his approximation to classical elegiac verse, and in l. 34 that tone begins to reassert itself.

...Oh aber gleich darüber hinaus,
35 hinter der letzten Planke, beklebt mit Plakaten des “Todlos”,
jenes bitteren Biers, das den Trinkenden süß scheint,
wenn sie immer dazu frische Zerstreuungen kaufen...,
gleich im Rücken der Planke, gleich dahinter, ists wirklich.  
Kinder spielen, und Liebende halten einander, — abseits,
40 ernst, im ärmlichen Gras, und Hunde haben Natur.  
Weiter noch zieht es den Jüngling; vielleicht, daß er eine junge Klage liebt..... Hinter ihr her kommt er in Wiesen. Sie sagt:  
Weit. Wir wohnen dort draußen......
Wo? Und der Jüngling
45 folgt. Ihn rührt ihre Haltung. Die Schulter, der Hals —,
vieleicht
ist sie von herrlicher Herkunft. Aber er läßt sie, kehrt um,  
wendet sich, winkt... Was solls? Sie ist eine Klage.

...O but further beyond,
35 past the last billboards, stuck over with posters for ‘Deathless’,
that bitter beer that seems sweet to the drinkers
only as long as they chew fresh distractions to go with it ....
Past the boards, just beyond, there, things are real.
Children are playing, lovers embracing, — away from the others,
40 pensive, on a few blades of grass, and dogs — do as dogs do.
The boy is drawn further on; perhaps he’s in love with a young Lament. And he follows after her over the meadows. She says: Far. We live away out there.
Where? And the boy follows, touched by her walk, her shoulder, her neck, perhaps she’s of noble descent. But he leaves her, turns round, about once again, waves ... What’s the point? She’s a Lament.

But (‘Oh, aber’), outside, beyond the last paling fence, there is the first vestige of reality (‘wirklich’, Rilke’s italics). Note the fences plastered with advertisements for that ‘unreal’ ale ‘Todlos’ (l. 35), for the denial of death is, in the terms of this Elegy, a denial of any meaningful existence. But how real, despite the underlining of ‘wirklich’, is this bleak space outside the city? At most we could say that here there is some freedom — for children, lovers and dogs — some demonstration of feeling, but it isn’t much. But it is also a final glance, almost over our shoulders, at three of the important strands and symbolic figures in the landscape of the whole cycle: children, imperilled in their innocence by death; lovers, who so seldom achieve a true meeting of souls; and animals, who do not share our sense of death.

Although there is no break in the poetry, in that Rilke does not introduce a space such as he will do later on, the poetry now enters a new sphere. It leaves for good that world where all is counterfeit or half-fulfilled. But before we enter into the new realm, we the readers should not forget with what poetic virtuosity Rilke has castigated that false and tinselly world, keeping a kind of prophetic anger sustained in the long near-distichs and displaying his full powers of virtuosity in the images of city and funfair. This is one side of the lament that this poem entails, the lamentation over the great city.

But now we have ‘den Jüngling’ (my italics), unprepared, presumably one of the young people or lovers, for whom the few blades of grass provided a place for their feelings. As in the great set-piece dream sequences in Romantic novels (and as in dreams themselves), the transition into another sphere of consciousness is imperceptible. It
would seem that the realm of ‘Klage’ is but an extension of the so-called ‘real’ world. We must forget the reminiscences of Homer or Virgil or Dante — or even of Rilke’s two great poems ‘Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes’ and ‘Alkestis’. For here there is no descent into the shades, no passing through waters. And yet for all that we seem to be in some kind of transitional realm between the city of suffering and the finality of death. Here live ‘Klagen’, the expression and manifestation of pain both suffered and articulated. But in this space, their country, there is paradoxically more light and beauty than in the city that has been left behind. The boy, who follows the ‘Klage’, is presumably still alive, not yet ready to reflect on the ultimate futility of existence in the ‘Leid-Stadt’, and certainly not yet ready to engage in a dialogue. He turns back (‘Was solls’).

Only the young dead have this capacity, as they start their journey towards the land of silence. We have to ask ourselves a question at the outset of this journey. Leaving aside any notion of allegory: is ‘Klage’, the articulation of grief, its poetic expression even, that which accompanies the dead until they are, in the real sense, fully dead? For at the end of the journey there can be no sound, all is ‘tonlos’ (l. 106). The passage from life to death is made clear by the words ‘ersten Zustand’ and ‘Entwöhnung’ (l. 47f.): the Lament instructs and takes under her wing the young dead and shows them things that life knew little of, ‘Duldung
und Leid’ (l. 49f.) as garments of beauty. We note in passing that it is
the young maidens among the dead who are initiated into these secrets,
an extension of those ‘Früheentrückten’ (‘who have died too soon’) of
Elegy One who no longer need us, the living. But it is in fact the boy who
is led by an older Lament into the land of the dead. She tells him — and
us — of the landscape and history, the reality of expressed suffering, in
a sequence of poetry that, appropriately, is remarkable for its expansion
of line and its sonority and dignity.

55 Aber dort, wo sie wohnen, im Tal, der Älteren eine, der
Klagen,
nimmt sich des Jünglinges an, wenn er fragt: — Wir waren,
sagt sie, ein Großes Geschlecht, einmal, wir Klagen. Die Väter
trieben den Bergbau dort in dem großen Gebirg; bei Menschen
findest du manchmal ein Stück geschliffenes Ur-Leid
60 oder, aus altem Vulkan, schlackig versteinerten Zorn.
Ja, das stammte von dort. Einst waren wir reich. —

55 But there, where they live, in the valley, one of the older
Laments
answers kindly the boy as he asks: — We were,
she says, a Mighty Nation, once, we Laments. Our fathers
dug out the mines there in the high range of mountains; men
sometimes will show you an ancient fragment of Suffering,
polished,
60 or, out of a crater, Wrath, molten, rock-hardened.
Yes, we took it from there. Once we were rich. —

This world of the Laments we must sketch briefly. It is a real and also a
mythical landscape. It reflects a hierarchical order in the affairs of men
and in nature, where all the elements shown and explained to the boy
are extensions of the rites surrounding the dead. These are the Laments
that were once part of the rites of passage and departure. Rilke describes
them in his Requiem. Für eine Freundin/Requiem for a Lady Friend (1908) as
‘Klagefrauen’, whose duty is ‘Klagen nachholen’,

24 ‘Lamenting women’; ‘catching up the laments’. SW, I, 653.
this country: ‘Wir waren, / sagt sie, ein Großes Geschlecht, einmal, wir Klagen’. Where once there was delving and digging of the passions, the bringing up out of the depths of ‘Ur-Leid’ and ‘Zorn’ — those familiar with German Romanticism will recognize the potent symbols of mining as self-discovery\textsuperscript{25} — we have archaeology. Now, there are just a few pyroclastic fragments, and silence (the loss of that ‘aufsingen’ in lament).

And with ease she guides him through the Laments’ wide expanses, shows him the columns of temples or the ruins of fortresses, where the Laments’ princes once held wise sway. Shows him the tall

\textsuperscript{25} Theodore Ziolkowski, \textit{German Romanticism and Its Institutions} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 18–63. Since I first wrote this article, my friend and colleague Patrick Boyde (who discussed Elegy Four in the volume from which this essay is taken) has drawn my attention to Rilke’s enthusiastic reading of the \textit{Gilgamesh} epic during the crucial years before the completion of the Elegies. The phrase ‘geschliffendes Urleid’ reminds us of the journey from life to an understanding of death, which is common to both works, ‘Urleid’ summoning up the universal grief that they also share.
tear-trees and fields of Doleful in blossom
(known to the living only when it’s still in first leaf);
shows him the creatures of sadness, grazing — sometimes
a bird starts, and unfolds, flying low as they gaze upwards,
the pattern of letters made by her cry in the loneness.

At evening she leads him to the tombs of the patriarchs
of the race of Laments, the sybils and sages.
At nightfall their footstep is softer, and shortly,
bright as the moonlight, looms up
the tomb standing watch over all,
brother to that on the Nile, the lofty Sphinx:
face of the chamber hidden in silence.
And they take in with wonder the regal-crowned head, that
forever,
not speaking, laid the face of man
on the scales of the stars.

But the landscape also informs of a once wise order and rule — ‘einstens’
(l. 65) — now represented by a kind of Baalbek or Palmyra. The land
itself, is, however, still fertile with plants and herds, unlike the counterfeit
and sterile ‘Trostmarkt’ and ‘Leid-Stadt’ that now seems so far behind.
Note that ‘Wehmut’ — I have rendered it as Doleful — thrives here
and flowers; here the evergreen, the symbol and emblem of mourning,
actually bursts into flower. We hear, too, from l. 62 onwards, how the
verse sustains this account by assonating the many ‘ei-’ sounds: ‘Und sie
leitet ihn leicht durch die weite Landschaft der Klagen’, ‘einstens weise
beherrscht’, ‘Zeigt ihm die hohen’.

Two words stand out in the account that follows: ‘Aufschaun’ (l. 69)
and ‘Schaun’ (l. 82). They, and the word ‘zeigen’ (ll. 62, 64) that recurs
in the poem’s colophon (l. 107), indicate a strand of seeing and showing
and signifying and indicating that is part of the elegiac process, part
of the ‘aufsingen’. But it is also the sign of a set of extraordinary poetic
images that signify not just the poetic way of seeing, but the enhanced
vision that is granted to the dead and which (in the final image of the
poem), were they able, they would grant to us. Thus the bird (l. 68f.)
that suddenly starts up before our eyes transfers the sound of its cry
to a set of written characters; the optical and the aural are no longer
in separate compartments of perception. So, too, with the image of the
sphinx (l. 76f.) and the owl.
We have one or two details to clear up before we attempt that image. It is night (note that wonderful ‘mondets empor’, l. 73); we are led down to the figures of the doubly dead, who are dead in the realm of death and exist only as monuments — to the dead. It isn’t Egypt, but clearly we are in a valley of tombs where a culture similar to Egypt’s once held sway, and we remember that no other culture gives death a greater significance in its cosmogony. From now on, only the moon and the stars shine down on the land of the dead. The bold verb ‘mondets empor’ expresses the effect of seeing the most majestic death monument of all, in the moonlight: the sphinx — ‘erhaben’, ‘krönlich’, the lord of all in this land, where ‘Klage’ has its supreme place in the hierarchy of emotions. The sphinx contains a burial chamber which is hidden and inaccessible but which through ‘Schaun’ can be seen on the face of the sphinx, and that face, expressing human features, has taken on such a significance that it has, in Rilke’s image (l. 77f), been placed on the balances of the stars (a double meaning, ‘Waage’ denoting a pair of scales and also Libra), has become like Orion or Castor and Pollux, a named constellation. And the scales of the stars might be taken to signify the equipoise and harmony between life and death that is achieved in this sphere between the two states.


His gaze cannot grasp it, so early dead, unsteady. But their beholding, over the top of the diadem, scares out the owl. It, slow in its flying, barely touching the cheek, where it rounds at its fullest, softly it draws into the new

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26 DE, I, 322.
dead’s hearing, on both halves of the paper, 
folded in two, the outline that hand cannot trace.

The boy, newly dead, cannot take in the awesomeness of this monument. 
But ‘ihr Schau’ (her looking, or their looking — it could be both, l. 82) 
brings out from behind the ‘Pschent’ — a grandly exotic word for the 
crown of Upper and Lower Egypt — an owl. Rilke in 1911, lying in the 
moonlight in front of the sphinx, had seen just this. The newly dead 
— and by implication we who mourn the young dead — need some 
idea of the dimension of this state, through ‘Schau’. The owl flies along 
the cheek of the sphinx, the finest contour (‘die reifeste Rundung’) into 
which the human face has been formed; it traces in the ear of the dead 
that contour, records it acoustically ‘über ein doppelt aufgeschlagenes 
Blatt’ (l. 87). As if taking a sheet of paper and folding it double to 
indicate the two sides, the owl, non-articulate, but tracing with its wing, 
and the ear, receiving the written character with the new ‘Totengehör’ 
(l. 87), make clear that our senses in death extend beyond any earthly 
physical capacity.

Und höher, die Sterne. Neue. Die Sterne des Leidlands.

90 Langsam nennt sie die Klage: — Hier, 
siehe: den Reiter, den Stab, und das vollere Sternbild 
nennen sie: Fruchtkranz. Dann, weiter, dem Pol zu: 
Wiege; Weg; Das Brennende Buch; Puppe; Fenster. 
Aber im südlichen Himmel, rein wie im Innern 
einer gesegneten Hand, das klar erglänzende “M”, 
das die Mütter bedeutet...... —

Doch der Tote muß fort, und schweigend bringt ihn die ältere 
Klage bis an die Talschlucht, 
wo es schimmert im Mondschein:

100 die Quelle der Freude. In Ehrfurcht 
nennt sie sie, sagt: — Bei den Menschen 
ist sie ein tragender Strom. —

And higher, the stars. New ones. The stars of the Land of 
Suffering.

90 The Lament names them slowly: — Here,
behold: the Rider, the Staff, and the cluster of stars they call Garland of Fruits. Then further on, nearer the Pole: Cradle; Path; The Burning Book; Puppet; Window.
But in the southern skies, pure like the palm of a hand that is blessed, ‘M’ burning clearly and brightly, standing for Mothers...... —

But the dead boy must depart, and in silence the older Lament brings him as far as the gorge of the valley, where there gleams in the moonlight the spring of joy. In hushed tone she names it and says: — Among men it is a mighty river. —

And so the Lament now shows the boy the constellations in the heavens. They are all to be taken as symbols of different processes of transition (‘Wiege’, ‘Weg’, ‘Stab’, ‘Reiter’) or of fruition and achievement (‘Fruchtkranz’), of vision beyond oneself (‘Fenster’), of hope and renewal (‘Puppe’, both in the sense of Elegy Four and in the meaning of chrysalis). Horses and riders in the stars fascinated him in other contexts (‘Heißt kein Stembild “Reiter”?’, ‘Is there no star called Rider?’ ask the Sonette an Orpheus I, xi, and a late poem of 1924 likens falling stars to horses). The burning book might seem to be the poetic icon, in the German one letter away from the burning bush (‘not consumed’), giving light and being incandescent in itself. Rilke is, of course, playing on existing names of constellations, like ‘Puppis’, or stars, like ‘Vega’ (‘Wega’ in German), adding a few of his own, equally concrete and exotic. They culminate in that ‘M’, lighting up the whole of the southern sky (Job’s ‘chambers of the south’, 9:9; the ‘W’ of Cassiopeia upside down), a good luck sign in palmistry, but reminding us that mothers, in the terms of these elegies (especially Elegy Six), are also destined to lose what they have borne. Speech now has no further function — ‘schweigend’ l. 96 — as the Lament brings the boy through the last stages of his journey towards silence. She has imparted her wisdom to him — and in a sense the poet, through the poetic act, is imparting it to those who mourn the young dead. The mourning learn that the dead have the ‘sense’ of their dying explained to them in the wisdom of the ‘Klagekulturen’ that are

28 SW, I, 737
unfolded before them (not, we note, through a theogony that makes of death a mystery or a terror). The ‘Quelle der Freude’ (l. 99) suggests perhaps that there is an inner link between grief and joy; it is that which may spring up again in those who are left behind ‘bei den Menschen’ (l. 100) in mourning.

The poetry becomes more laconic and poignant as the language of lament gives way to silence: ‘stehn am Fuß des Gebirgs’ (l. 103), ‘da umarmt sie ihn’ (l. 104), ‘Einsam steigt er dahin’ (l. 105). We learn nothing of the nature of the ‘Ur-Leid’ (l. 105); only he will experience that in the loneliness of death. He is no longer accessible to lament or even language. When laments are silent, when the ‘Klage’ is no longer with the young dead, he is dead in the sense that he belongs to those whose loss we can now bear, or to those who we know are in the land of silence and forgetfulness (‘das tonlose Los’, l. 105).

They halt at the foot of the mountains.
And there she embraces him, weeping.

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Aber erweckten sie uns, die unendlich Toten, ein Gleichnis,
siehe, sie zeigten vielleicht auf die Kätzchen der leeren
Hasel, die hängenden, oder

meinten den Regen, der fällt auf dunkles Erdreich im
Frühjahr. —

Und wir, die an steigendes Glück
denken, empfänden die Rührung,
die uns beinah bestürzt,
wenig Glückliches fällt.
But were they to waken for us, the endlessly dead, a symbol, behold, they would point to the catkins on the bare hazel, hanging downwards, or have us believe in the rain that falls on the dark soil in springtime. —

And we, who think of happiness rising, our hearts would be moved more than perhaps we could bear, when a happy thing falls.

There Rilke will not leave us, in total silence, with no words, no sound. We come back to that ‘would that’, ‘would but’ of the elegy’s opening that told us what, but for our inadequacy, would be the true purpose and function of the poetic act. They, ‘die unendlich Toten’ (l. 107), are beyond articulation, but were they able, they would give us this likeness. It is a double image, one of the hanging catkins on the hazel bush, and of the spring rain on the ground (‘Erdreich’, l. 110, suggesting perhaps already dug for cultivation). Rilke was not always secure in his botany, despite the many flower and plant images in his poetry, not least in this cycle. The conceit of the fig tree in Elegy Six is not encouraging. In fact, Rilke originally wanted the willow catkin to express the image of hanging and falling, but, as anyone knows, it does not hang down. The alteration is significant, not just for getting the facts right, but for assuring the integrity of the text, for the ‘Ding’ must be congruent if it is also to be charged with meaning. Botany aside, and Rilke’s intention with the image aside, we note that he has chanced on an image that may go beyond his original first association: the hanging catkins of the male flower. But then it is unlikely that he ‘chanced’ on anything. These flowers are in themselves not fertile, they cannot produce fruit on their own, but they are the promise of it. Similarly, the rain is not the fertility itself, but it brings about the process of fruition and plenitude. Was he thinking of the hazel’s other associations, as one of the first of the bushes of the hedgerows to show blossom? It is a magic plant, revered in many religions, but notably the Germanic, and for that reason it is the twig used for the water-diviner’s rod. The German for that rod is

29  DE, I, 269.
30  Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens, III, 1527–42.
'Wünschelrute’, itself the title of one of the shortest, but most telling poems in the language, informing of the power of poetry to open up the secrets of the things around us, ‘die Dinge’. It is Eichendorff’s little poem:

Schläft ein Lied in allen Dingen,  
Die da träumen fort und fort,  
Und die Welt hebt an zu singen,  
Triffst du nur das Zauberwort.  

There sleeps a song in all the things  
Dreaming on and on,  
And the world begins its singing  
If you touch the magic word.

The catkin and the rain, which fall, are the symbols of this final colophon of verses. But does not hope spring eternal in the human breast; does not our heart leap up when we behold; and is this poem not prefaced with the poet’s action upwards in that verb ‘aufsingen’? No, we experience ‘Rührung’ (l. 113), implying being touched by the emotions — to our surprise (‘Bestürzung’, l. 114) — when hopes of happiness are dashed, when, in the terms of the poem, a young life is unfulfilled; but we come by the same token to the realisation that the so-called unfulfilled life may have its own happiness. That is perhaps one aspect. The other is the awareness that the sadness produced by falling is overcome in the hope of life that emerges from it. Rilke himself claimed that this should not be taken to imply a cyclical movement, some kind of mere biological organic process; instead, the gesture of falling in itself brings happiness. We might, however, feel justified in setting his view aside. There is the evidence of another poem; from the year 1922, with the same imagery, where rain and earth, respectively, represent the processes of death and mourning. And the Elegies urge us to a resolution by the very fact of

32 According to Katharina Kippenberg, Rainer Maria Rilke, Duineser Elegien. Die Sonette an Orpheus, Manesse Bibliothek der Weltliteratur (Zurich: Manesse, 1951), 172. Thus, Rilke would seem to stand in marked contrast to the thinking of Wilhelm Fließ, with whose views on life and death he was familiar (DE, I, 137f.). Cf. ‘Der Tod schafft nach einer bewundernswürdigen Ordnung Raum für das erwachende Leben’. Wilhelm Fließ, Vom Leben und vom Tod. Biologische Vorträge (Jena: Diederichs, 1924), 93.
33 DE, I, 218.
their being a cycle, but not to any easy or mundane conclusion, neatly tied up and of an easy consistency for all readers. Instead, there is the awareness that poetry mediates, but in an interreaction of language and symbol that is never direct. We search therefore for indications of resolution, perhaps in terms of that ‘Quelle der Freude’ (l. 100) that the Lament mentions in awe (‘in Ehrfurcht’). But it can be no coincidence that both the poem and the whole cycle end on the word ‘fällt’ (Rilke’s italics). The elegiac verse can also be read in a way that is different from the printed image, where the lines tail off into a colophon (and a colophon was originally the printer’s signature; here it is the poet’s). Run the third-last and the fourth-last lines together and the last two, and you will find a couplet that bears some resemblance to the elegiac distich (it’s actually closer to two pentameters). Any correctly turned distich will end on a strong beat — it has to — but only the great elegy will end on a strong beat and a word that sums up the whole of what has gone before. Hölderlin’s ‘Brod und Wein’, that some might see as the very greatest elegy in the language, does it with the final word ‘schläft’. Rilke’s, certainly one of the greatest, achieves it with the word ‘fällt’.