

E L E G Y 8

T rue knowledge of the world does not begin behind the eyes but in front of them, in the “Open” (“Offene”), a material space that is the locus for the creative will. Written in blank verse, the Eighth Elegy carries Rilke’s most extended meditation on what consciousness is as a psychic capacity that exerts itself through space and time. At crucial moments in the Elegy, Rilke will invoke the vitalistic presence of animals who, lacking human self-consciousness, can (“with all eyes”) fully absorb the “Open” into themselves; “they never bring the Open before themselves as an object” (Heidegger, 110). Our eyes, however, have been turned inwards, not to explore the riches of our inner selves but as an analytical medium for self-scrutiny. Small children are not, as yet, victims to this distortion, having within them a natural sense for the wonder of the new. They soon, however, lose this capacity, and become victims to the adult need for order and routine, to a repression that is not libidinal, as it had been in Elegy 3, but perceptual and cognitive. Small creatures, resplendent in their comfortable place in the womb, are now called into view, before images of flight and death appear to problematize even these smallest holdings on the world.



Mit allen Augen sieht die Kreatur
das Offene. Nur unsre Augen sind
wie umgekehrt und ganz um sie gestellt
als Fallen, rings um ihren freien Ausgang.
Was draußen *ist*, wir wissens aus des Tiers
Antlitz allein; denn schon das frühe Kind
wenden wir um und zwingens, daß es rückwärts
Gestaltung sehe, nicht das Offne, das
im Tiergesicht so tief ist. Frei von Tod.
Ihn sehen wir allein; das freie Tier
hat seinen Untergang stets hinter sich
und vor sich Gott, und wenn es geht, so geht
in Ewigkeit, so wie die Brunnen gehen.
Wir haben nie, nicht einen einzigen Tag,
den reinen Raum vor uns, in den die Blumen
unendlich aufgehn. Immer ist es Welt
und niemals Nirgends ohne Nicht: das Reine,
Unüberwachte, das man atmet und
unendlich *weiß* und nicht begehrt. Als Kind
verliert sich eins im Stilln an dies und wird
gerüttelt. Oder jener stirbt und *ists*.
Denn nah am Tod sieht man den Tod nicht mehr
und starrt *hinaus*, vielleicht mit großem Tierblick.

Liebende, wäre nicht der andre, der
die Sicht verstellt, sind nah daran und staunen. . .
Wie aus Versehn ist ihnen aufgetan
hinter dem andern. . . Aber über ihn
kommt keiner fort, und wieder wird ihm Welt.
Der Schöpfung immer zugewendet, sehn
wir nur auf ihr die Spiegelung des Frein,
von uns verdunkelt. Oder daß ein Tier,
ein stummes, aufschaut, ruhig durch uns durch.
Dieses heißt Schicksal: gegenüber sein
und nichts als das und immer gegenüber.

With all eyes, animal life looks out
into the Open. It is our eyes only
that are turned within, and encircle it on every side, like traps
set around its path to freedom. What truly
exists out there, we know only through the gaze
of the animal; for even the young child
we twist it around and compel it to see
the already formed, not the Open that is so
deep in the face of the animal. Free from
death. We alone see that; the free animal
has its death long behind it and before
it God, and when it moves, it moves
within eternity, just as fountains happen.
We never, not even for a single day, do we ever have pure
space before us, where flowers bloom eternally.
Always it is World, and never Nowhere without No:
that unsupervised purity that one breathes and
knows eternally but does not covet. A child
might lose itself quietly in this, and is
stirred. Or someone dies and is this.
For, close to death, we no longer see death,
but look out beyond it, perhaps
with the greater gaze of the animal.
Lovers, if the other one were not there blocking the view,
often come near to this, and marvel . . .
Almost, as if by mistake, it opens itself to them,
behind each other . . . But neither can
move past the other, and it becomes World again.
Continually turned to face Creation, we only see
the free realm as a mirror image, darkened
by us. Or when some animal, mutely and serenely,
looks through us. This is what fate means:
to be opposite and nothing more than that
and always opposite.

Wäre Bewußtheit unsrer Art in dem
 sicheren Tier, das uns entgegenzieht
 in anderer Richtung—, riß es uns herum
 mit seinem Wandel. Doch sein Sein ist ihm
 unendlich, ungefaßt und ohne Blick
 auf seinen Zustand, rein, so wie sein Ausblick.
 Und wo wir Zukunft sehn, dort sieht es Alles
 und sich in Allem und geheilt für immer.

Und doch ist in dem wachsam warmen Tier
 Gewicht und Sorge einer großen Schwermut.
 Denn ihm auch haftet immer an, was uns
 oft überwältigt,—die Erinnerung,
 als sei schon einmal das, wonach man drängt,
 näher gewesen, treuer und sein Anschluß
 unendlich zärtlich. Hier ist alles Abstand,
 und dort wars Atem. Nach der ersten Heimat
 ist ihm die zweite zwitterig und windig.

O Seligkeit der *kleinen* Kreatur,
 die immer *bleibt* im Schooße, der sie austrug;
 o Glück der Mücke, die noch *innen* hüpfet,
 selbst wenn sie Hochzeit hat: denn Schooß ist Alles.
 Und sieh die halbe Sicherheit des Vogels,
 der beinah beides weiß aus seinem Ursprung,
 als wär er eine Seele der Etrusker,
 aus einem Toten, den ein Raum empfing,
 doch mit der ruhenden Figur als Deckel.
 Und wie bestürzt ist eins, das fliegen muß
 und stammt aus einem Schooß. Wie vor sich selbst
 erschreckt, durchzuckts die Luft, wie wenn ein Sprung
 durch eine Tasse geht. So reißt die Spur
 der Fledermaus durchs Porzellan des Abends.

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

Should that proud animal, coming to meet us from a different direction
possess our type of consciousness—,
it would wrench us around in its sway. For it feels Being as eternal,
untouched, and has no eye for
its own condition: is pure as is its gaze beyond.
And where we see the future, it sees everything
and itself in everything, cured forever.

And yet there lies in the warm and alert animal
weight and concern for a great melancholy.
For it too remains subject to a something
that often overwhelms us—memory,
as if what we are pressing toward
had once been nearer, more precious and our contact
with it eternally tender. There everything was breath;
but here it is distance. After the first homeland,
the second is dubious and windswept.

Oh, tiny creatures in their bliss,
who remain forever within the womb that
bore them to completion. Oh, the happiness of the midge
that still leaps within, even on
its wedding day. For the womb is all.
And look at the half certainty of the bird,
which knows both from their source,
as if it were the soul of an Etruscan,
that of a dead man, who has been received by space
but with his reclining figure as a lid.
And how distraught is the one that
has to fly and leave the womb. As if
terrified of its own self, it zigzags through the air,
just like a crack running through a cup.
Just so does the trace of a bat
tear through the porcelain of an evening.

But we: spectators, forever and everywhere,
turned to everything but never beyond.
This fills us totally. We put it in order. It falls apart.
We put it in order again, and fall apart ourselves.

Wer hat uns also umgedreht, daß wir,
was wir auch tun, in jener Haltung sind
von einem, welcher fortgeht? Wie er auf
dem letzten Hügel, der ihm ganz sein Tal
noch einmal zeigt, sich wendet, anhält, weilt—,
so leben wir und nehmen immer Abschied.

Who has turned us around this way,
so that we, whatever we do, have the disposition of someone
forever departing? As if on that final ridge, where the valley
shows itself entire once again to him,
he turns around, pauses and stands still—,
this is the way that we live: forever departing.

“With all eyes, animal life looks out / into the Open. It is our eyes only / that are turned within” (“Mit allen Augen sieht die Kreatur / das Offene. Nur unsre Augen sind / wie umgekehrt”). The opening stanza, with its encapsulating enjambments, shorter line lengths and measured largely iambic meter, offers a compact statement on the superiority of animal over human perception. This stanza and the next comprise Rilke’s major statement on what constitutes our capacity for knowledge, and on the imposed and self-imposed obstacles facing the full realization of that capacity. The inversion of subject and predicate in the first line, where the verb comes before the noun, lends it an epic quality, underscoring the Olympian perspective on the world enjoyed by animals. Animals cross the full spectrum of sensibility in the *Elegies*. The sure sensitive knowledge possessed by the “canny animals” (“findige Tiere”) in the First Elegy is replicated in the shared understanding of the birds of migration in Elegy 4 and the lions that know no self-consciousness in the same Elegy: all are joined through the common capacity of instinct, which does not require deliberation to find its way in the world. Other such self-certain animals include the ethereal birds of transcendence in Elegies 1 and 7, which combine the expansiveness of flight with an integrity of inner life, and the brute nature of the fornicating or defecating dogs (“Hunde haben Natur”) in the tenth Elegy, but which nonetheless have their own visceral integrity. At other times, animals possess, as with the swan in the Sixth Elegy, an emblem of transformation, and the owl in Elegy 10, an enigmatic bearer of the written word, a purely symbolic function. In all cases, the animal motif represents a figurative elevation in the text, its appearance pointing to a meaning beyond the animal.

In this Elegy, however, the animal is approached from within, as a subject in its own right, seen in terms of its fuller, because unmediated, grasp of the physical world. The first stanza begins with one of the most memorable lines in the *Elegies*: “With all eyes, animal life looks out / into the Open. Our eyes only / are turned within” (“Mit allen Augen sieht die Kreatur / das Offene. Nur unsre Augen sind / wie umgekehrt.” The lengthy first stanza introduces a major statement on looking as the most consummate means of securing a full knowledge of the world, a statement formed in tetrameter lines of variable meter (in fact, its argument is a product of this complex but assertive meter). A major theoretical position is being firmly staked out. “Kreatur” is a broader concept than “Tier” and its standard translation, “animal,” meaning a “created thing,” an “animate being” (*OED*), or “creation” as it appears

in the Bible. “Kreatur” is the living base of the human in nature, and as such what Rilke is locating in the creature is also a human capacity. The phrase “with all eyes,” instead of the standard “with both eyes,” stresses the plenitude of perception that is granted to animal life, because the latter is without the restrictions and self-restrictions that come with imposed notions of space and time in the “gedeutete Welt.” Unaware of linear time, it “does not suffer from the distraction of future decay or hope” (Komar, 147): it never leaves the present. The animal as a perceiving self does not feel that it is distinct from its environment. It is the embodiment of the Absolute, and Rilke had celebrated elsewhere “the soul which rests quietly in the animal and reaches safety only in Angels” (*Letters on Life*, 96).

The opening lines contain a matrix of words, “Anlitz,” “sieht,” and “Augen,” that relate to perception and to the place of the perceiving self in the world. The latter looks out into that greater expanse of the material world, the “Open” (“Offene”), a space “where the fullness of . . . experience still remains alive, still disordered and unarranged” (Rilke, quoted in Baer, 183). As Blanchot observes, it is “existence itself in its demandingness, or the excessive, limitless intimacy of this demand” (138). In the Open, we do not decide between “proximity and distance, but assume both and reunite them as one reality” (*Letters on Life*, 5). The Open is “the great whole of all that is unbounded”; it “admits” (Heidegger 106 and 107), and as a concept it takes its place in this Elegy, as Stahl notes, with other formulations of the expansive such as the “Freie,” the “Reine,” and the “Unüberwachte” (37).

The animal lacks self-consciousness and can look out unhindered into the greater expanse; we, however, are condemned to introspection, to a “permanent compulsion to self-reflection” (Engel, 128). Our eyes are “umgekehrt,” the latter being a back formation from “umkehren” meaning “to turn around” or “to reverse” and must look “not into the realm of simple being, but either into the object or back into himself” (Guardini, 218). These eyes “encircle it on every side, like traps / set around its outward path to freedom” (“ganz um sie gestellt / als Fallen rings um ihren freien Ausgang”), the repeated preposition “um” acting as a motif of enclosure and the “g” alliteration suggesting a fixed structure, something that is static and lacking flexibility. We are prevented from seeing “what is out there” (“was draußen ist”), the italicized word ‘is’ referring to “the underlying reality of ‘deep Being,’ where all things become one” (Guardini, 218).

“What truly / exists out there, we know only through the gaze / of the animal” (“Was draußen *ist*, wir wissens aus des Tiers / Antlitz allein”). As Rilke wrote elsewhere, “each time we cast our view towards distances that have not yet been touched, we transform not only the present moment and the one following but also alter the past within us, weave it into the pattern of our existence” (*Letters on Life*, 7). Like the animal, the child too possesses the innate capacity to reach this sphere but does not do so: “for even the young child / we twist it around and compel it to see / the already formed, not the Open that is so / deep in the face of the animal” (“Denn schon das frühe Kind / wenden wir um und zwingens, daß es rückwärts / Gestaltung sehe, nicht das Offne, das / im Tiergesicht so tief ist”). Rilke is using the first-person plural pronoun here in two different ways. The “wir” of the former line cannot possibly be the latter “wir”: one executes an act of sympathy; the other represses that sympathy. The former “wir” belongs to the lyrical subject, who is in continual development in the *Elegies*; the latter is a demotic plural, a collective social subject perhaps, whose exact identity and provenance Rilke never makes clear.

The theme is the distortion of childhood by this “wir,” a theme that Rilke had broached in the third and fourth *Elegies*. What the child sees when it looks back or looks within is “Gestaltung.” Rilke had already used this term in *Elegy 3* to describe the controlling “love” of the mother, and in this passage it is also intended to describe an imposition. “Gestaltung” has a broad semantic ambit, which includes “arrangement,” “design,” “presentation,” “shaping,” and it is this last meaning that Rilke seems to be employing here. Even at an early stage, the child’s cognitive capacities are being shaped to prevent it from experiencing in an Open fashion what it sees before it.

The social structuration of consciousness has given rise to an awareness of time that is specifically human, and which is typically formed around the narrative of a past, present, and future, in which the present often never happens because it is lost in a transition between memory and anticipation. In particular, we are haunted by one event that we know will take place in the future. The animal encounters the death of other animals, but it does not see these deaths as part of a sequence in which it is involved. It is “Free from / death. We alone see that; the free animal / has its death long behind it and before / it God, and when it moves, it moves / within eternity, just as fountains happen” (“Frei vom Tod. / *Ihn* sehen wir allein; das freie Tier / hat seinen Untergang stets

hinter sich / und vor sich Gott, und wenn es geht, so gehts / in Ewigkeit, so wie die Brunnen gehen"). Because the animal has no sense of the future, it is "free from death" ("frei von Tod"), and "frei" is repeated in the text to foreground the link between creative perception and the freedom of selfhood. The death that the animals are free from is the human anticipation of death: animals already have their "Untergang" ("decease" or "decline") behind them. As Rilke noted elsewhere, "animals pass patiently from one realm to the other," whereas for us death is "experienced and yet it is not experienceable; in its reality, it is continually growing beyond us, and hence we do not quite admit it. Offending and outstripping the meaning of life from its inception, death has been exiled, driven out so that it will not continually disrupt us" (*Letters on Life*, 167).

The animal lives in the eternal here and now, just as the water in a fountain does: "when it moves, it moves / within eternity, just as fountains happen" ("wenn es geht, so gehts / in Ewigkeit, so wie die Brunnen gehen"). The fountain is an important symbol, appearing in Elegies 6, 7, and 9, water representing the flow of life, continuity, the eternal return, the "constant cycle of physical incarnation into form" (Komar, 143), "the pure felicity of descending, the joy of the fall" (Blanchot, 145). The audacious repetition of the verb "gehen" is intended to create the effect of a life that knows and needs no progress, but which moves around the circle of the present, just as the fountains continue to give up the same water in a continual process of self-regeneration. The animal lives in perpetual time, a state reflected in the text by the consistent use of verbs in the present tense. As Engel notes, "the animal exists in time, but in such a way that it is identical with each moment and with its continuing flowing sequence" (125). This simple absorption in timeless nature is, however, withheld from us: "We never, not even for a single day, do we ever have pure / space before us, where flowers bloom eternally. / Always it is World, and never Nowhere without No: / that unsupervised purity that one breathes and / knows eternally but does not covet" ("Wir haben nie, nicht einen einzigen Tag, / den reinen Raum vor uns, in den die Blumen / unendlich aufgehen. Immer ist es Welt / und niemals Nirgends ohne Nicht: das Reine, / Unüberwachte, das man atmet und / unendlich *weiß* und nicht begehrt").

The passage involves further terms of placement in a language that is notably discursive, as if we are being presented with a scenario that requires no explanation. Once again, the third person "wir" is the

author of an absolute statement on what true knowledge is, a knowing that is emphasized in the text through italics. Assertive spatial and temporal motifs dominate, and they are supported by apodictic statements that tell us that, ultimately, we live on the wrong side of responsive experience, shut out from the eternal rise of nature and its purity and space, a purity that flowers enjoy in their timeless flow into eternity. Unsupervised, we might reach true knowledge of ourselves and the world, but when supervised, and this may be an internal as well as an external mechanism, we reach nothing; as the anaphoric use of "nicht" suggests, we are locked into the negative and for us "always is it World."

The reading eye is halted here by what seems to be a paradox: for this version of the "World" no longer represents an expansive dimension but, on the contrary, is something that restricts and narrows vision because it emerges out of purely pragmatic interest and a striving ("begehrt") for the same, and hence its formation in the upper-case as "World." As with "shaping" ("Gestaltung") earlier in the text, "Welt" is a place of functionality, where all is governed by defining notions of space and time. For us, the "never nowhere without no" ("a paradoxical negation for something that is basically unsayable," Llewellyn, 140) does not exist, that realm of the disinterested that is absolute, without definition or demarcation, a place of pure nothingness, where the "Unüberwachte" dwells. "Unüberwachte" is a typical Rilkean construction, a personification of an abstract noun formed from a verb, in this case "überwachen" ("to monitor" or "to supervise") and is here given its contrary form, translated elsewhere as "unsuperintended" (by Leishman and Spender) or "unsurveyed" (by Crucefix). It is an "un-" word, but this is not simply the negation of a positive, as if we are being encouraged to accept an absence of meaning, but a concept in its own right. The "Unüberwachte" is not something that we consciously seek or covert; it is a "pure" contact with the world that animals enjoy. We, however, are always subject to scrutiny by others or, in a self-consciously analytical way, by ourselves through "Überwachen," a form of control that is manifest in the "über-" component of the word.

Like animals, small children too can free themselves from "Überwachen": "A child / might lose itself quietly in this, and is / stirred" ("Als Kind / verliert sich eins im Stilln an dies und wird / gerüttelt"). The child loses itself "quietly in this" (the superiority of silence to sound is a theme further developed in *Elegy 10*), where it fuses itself with the simple material world of everyday things, "a holy joyfulness,

a blessed humility, a readiness to be all things" (*Rodin*, 43). And as Rilke had observed elsewhere, "what is more being than precisely this heart, where the world alternates between becoming 'object' and 'self', inside and opposite, longing and fusion" (quoted in Baer, 13). The short phrase, "an dies," employs a demonstrative pronoun, an indefinite determiner reflecting the non-definable, unsayable reality that is being evoked and to which the child gives itself over "im Stilln," a neologistic formation created out of the noun "Stille" ("silence") and lexically close to the verb "stillen," "to calm" or "to pacify." The child surrenders itself to this stillness and "is shaken" ("wird gerüttelt"), which is one of a number of terms, such as "schrecken," "rauschen," and "entzücken," used in the *Elegies* both to describe the unsettling impact of the mystery of the world on individual consciousness and to communicate the displacement of the self in experiencing the world.

The ultimate stillness is found in death: "Or someone dies and is this" ("Oder jener stirbt und *ists*"). Rilke uses a conjugation of "sein" to express an ontology of selfhood (in this case, a final one). The text is an audaciously stark formulation, and its starkness is emphasized through italics. It is possible that what is being described is the anticipation rather than the fact of death, although the convergence of anticipation and reality belong to Rilke's philosophy of death. So much is implied by the concluding line and its reference to the nearness of death: "For, close to death, we no longer see death, / but look out beyond it, perhaps / with the greater gaze of the animal" ("Denn nah am Tod sieht man den Tod nicht mehr / und starrt *hinaus*, vielleicht mit großem Tierblick"). The literal and metaphorical meaning of "seeing" is combined. As so often in the *Elegies*, metaphors are kept close to facticity, so that they inform the material world rather than point beyond it. When coming close to death, the dying one is no longer preoccupied with the gross event of death but "starrt hinaus." It is a highly condensed phrase. "Starren" is yet a further "looking" verb, suggesting a mental absorption in the object. "Hinaus" has been translated as "look out" (Crucefix), "stares beyond" (Mitchell), and "ahead" (Leishman and Spender) at death, all of which suggest that we finally reach that simple breadth of vision, the totality of vision, that only animals know, looking through the world to the eternal beyond.

As in the Second Elegy, lovers are brought to book for their failure to grasp the potential of loving. In contrast to the animal, their outward gaze always encounters the other, not as a presence but as an obstacle:

“Lovers, if the other one were not there blocking the view, / often come near to this, and marvel . . . / Almost, as if by mistake, it opens itself to them, / behind each other, . . . But neither can / move past the other, and it becomes world again” (“Liebende, wäre nicht der andre, der / die Sicht verstellt, sind nah daran und staunen. . . / Wie aus Versehn ist ihnen aufgetan / hinter dem andern. . . Aber über ihn / kommt keiner fort, und wieder wird ihm Welt”). Rilke had once written: “people are so terribly apart from each other, and people in love are often at the furthest distance. They throw all that is their own to the other person who fails to catch it, and it ends up in a pile somewhere between them and finally keeps them from seeing and approaching one another” (*Letters on Life*, 201). So too here: the lovers, perhaps in their carnal loving, come close to that expansive engagement with the world that the animal enjoys, but their fixation on the self prevents this because they are solely concerned with the particular lover rather than the absolute of love, and they must return again to the World. As in the earlier Elegies, the theme of sight also informs this stanza. The lovers are condemned to the interpreted world of restricted vision, their myopia captured in the syntax of these lines, which reflects their impeded and frustrated sight. Rilke’s language is studiously prosaic, the initial calculating conditional-subjunctive is followed by adverbs and prepositions of place and placement (“nah,” “hinter,” “über”), which define the movement or non-movement of the lovers in their relationship to one another, and which tie them (and us) to a perspective of non-attainment, a state reflected in the double use of the ellipsis, suggesting irresolution and failure of contact.

The lovers impede one another’s perception of Openness, and we too, caught within over-interpreted modes of perception, also fail to see it: it becomes “World” again, that external facticity of habit, the mode of the already defined. We are “Continually turned to face Creation, we only see / the free realm as a mirror image, darkened / by us” (“Der Schöpfung immer zugewendet, sehn / wir nur auf ihr die Spiegelung des Frein, / von uns verdunkelt”). “Frein” is a compact, suggestive word meaning “open space,” and Rilke had already used it to denote spatial and conceptual liberation in Elegy 7. Not only can we now only see this “free space” (as Reid translates it) as a mirror image, as something that is mediated, rather than unmediated, by something else, but by our very presence we have obscured it.

The animal can, however, see clearly: it can see beyond us and through us: “Or when some animal, mutely and serenely, / looks

through us” (“Oder daß ein Tier, / ein stummes, aufschaut, ruhig durch uns durch”). The animal possesses no voice, no motion of body or mind; just in-sight. We, however, lack this in-sight: we are positioned, or position ourselves, in the world in such a way that we do not see what the world might contain or not contain: “This is what fate means: / to be opposite nothing more than that / and always opposite” (“Dieses heißt Schicksal: gegenüber sein und nichts als das und immer gegenüber”). The tone is apodictic, assertive even, and the monumental syntax underscores the blank finality of our plight: the unchangeability of our fate because, as Reid’s translation reads, “this is what destiny means.” Rilke emphasizes its depressing inevitability in the monumental grammar of the lines, which begin and end with the same word, producing the effect of sterile monotony, and which center upon an “opposite,” a position that frames negativity (“nichts”) and empty repetition (“und immer”). We are never to escape the subject-object division, but must continually remain in a position of opposition, never with the other: with the object world or with other people or, perhaps, with ourselves. As Heidegger summarizes, “man stands over and against the world” (108).

The second stanza is the most discursive. It begins with the assertive conditional “wäre,” which introduces a concept that runs throughout the *Elegies* but one that is not always explicitly formulated: consciousness (“Bewußtheit”). It opens: “Should that proud animal, coming to meet us from a different direction / possess our type of consciousness—, / it would wrench us around in its sway” (“Wäre Bewußtheit unsrer Art in dem / sicheren Tier, das uns entgegenzieht / in anderer Richtung—, riß es uns herum / mit seinem Wandel”). The opening lines are dominated by tropes of space and placement, which are on the surface not mental but physical and situational but which, nevertheless, define consciousness and identity. In contrast to the rigid comportment of the human, the animal combines movement and stasis, the latter being not a sterile lack of motion but the capacity of the animal to feel its place firmly fixed in nature. It is this ability to combine these states that accounts for its experiential expansiveness and depth of vision. As Rilke wrote elsewhere, “the animal is in the world” (quoted in Heidegger, 108).

This stanza, which is structured around simple functional terms such as “doch” and “und,” continues with verbs of movement (“entgegenzieht”) and substantives of change (“Wandel”) and concludes with a single sentence centered on the repetition of two key terms, “Blick” and “Alles”: “For it feels Being as eternal, / untouched and has no eye

for / its own condition, is pure, as is its gaze beyond. / And where we see the future, it sees everything, / and itself in everything, cured forever” (“Doch sein Sein ist ihm / unendlich, ungefaßt und ohne Blick / auf seinen Zustand, rein, so wie sein Ausblick. / Und wo wir Zukunft sehn, dort sieht es Alles / und sich in Allem und geheilt für immer”).

In what is a study in miniature of creative epistemology, where perception transcends temporal restriction, the animal’s Being is defined in terms of the expansive nature of its gaze, in lines where all the negatives, the “un-” prefix, and the adverb, “ohne,” are positives. The “Bewußtheit” of the preceding lines, which is the negative knowledge of self-consciousness, is now replaced by true knowledge, which is centered on sight and vision. “Sein” has been translated as “existence” (by Crucefix) and “life” (by Mitchell), meanings that the word certainly contains; but neither fully communicates the existential connotations of “Sein,” which are retained through the simple “Being.” The animal’s gaze is described as “ungefaßt.” This is a new coinage whose root is “fassen,” “to grab” or “to seize” something, either literally with one’s hands, or figuratively in a cognitive way, which is how the word is being used here. “Ungefaßt,” therefore, is something that has not been “taken” or “grasped,” in other words, has resisted the impositions of classification. The “Ungefaßt” does not comprehend the world in conceptual terms: it is “ohne Blick,” without self-scrutiny or conscious focus. Rilke’s thematic material is formed through language that is largely commonplace, as in a plethora of everyday adverbs and conjunctions such as “doch,” “und,” “so wie,” and “dort.” This is a characteristic rhetorical ploy in the *Elegies*, where material of a symbolic-literary configuration is given the shape of apodictic-universalizing import by being framed within a discourse that seems routine and self-evident, the simple “dort” functioning as a metaphysical place or, rather, a physical place that possesses a transcendental import. It is perhaps in such passages that Rilke comes closest to what many regard as his “philosophy,” but this is not a philosophy of consequential argument but one of a figuration that often resists clear interpretation.

The animal’s gaze is “unendlich,” literally “eternal”; but “boundless” (as it appears in Ranson and Sutherland’s translation) and “inexhaustible” (in Crucefix’s) are more graphic. The animal knows no distinction between the past, present, and future, whereas we “see” the future and thus lose the immediate moment in our concern for what will or will not happen. The animal can retain this pristine (“rein”) quality of

selfhood because it lacks self-consciousness, “has no eye for / its own condition” (“ohne Blick / auf seinen Zustand”). “Blick” is the crucial term here, representing yet a further “seeing” trope in the *Elegies*. “Blick” can mean “regard” (as Crucefix translates the term), which combines the visual connotations of the German word with the English synonym “concern.” It is, however, the latter sense that now prevails in contemporary English, the French origins of the word, “regarder,” “to see,” being largely forgotten. The stanza culminates with lines that circle around further tropes of “seeing” (“Ausblick,” “sieht”). These appeared earlier in the stanza but now, for once, repetition is not an indication of sterility but the confirmation of the animal’s secure presence in the world. In the words of Blanchot, “the animal is where it looks, and its look does not reflect it, nor does it reflect the thing, but opens the animal onto the thing” (135).

Human memory problematizes the unselfconscious integrity of the animal, which has now taken the dubious step of attempting to be human by looking within: “And yet there lies in the warm and alert animal / weight and concern for a great melancholy. / For it too remains subject to a something / that often overwhelms us—memory, / as if what we are pressing toward / had once been nearer, more precious and our contact / with it eternally tender.” (“Und doch ist in dem wachsam warmen Tier / Gewicht und Sorge einer großen Schwermut. / Denn ihm auch haftet immer an, was uns / oft überwältigt,—die Erinnerung als sei / schon einmal das, wonach man drängt, / näher gewesen, treuer und sein Anschluß / unendlich zärtlich”). The animal has fallen victim to one of the cognitive vices of humankind: the vice of memory. After the future comes dominance by the past. Indeed, the animal now seems to have become the human animal, its pressing warmth degenerating into a weighty melancholia, and Rilke sketches out its sorry plight with heavy metrical emphasis and banal adverbs such as “und doch,” “schon einmal,” “als sei,” and “oft.” A new argument is being elaborated, introduced by “und doch,” which is “the turning-point of the poem, a hinge at its centre, joining praise for the animal to lament for it” (Llewellyn, 146). “Wachsam” means both “alert” and, perhaps slightly archaically, “wakeful”; “Schwermut” is “sadness” or having a “sad heart,” although “melancholy” has a greater resonance. The melancholy animal is, like us, displaced from its true home: “There everything was breath; / but here it is distance. After the first homeland, / the second is dubious and windswept” (“Hier ist alles Abstand, / und dort wars Atem. Nach der

ersten Heimat / ist ihm die zweite zwitterig und windig"). We, like the warm animal, have left our first home, to find a second that is "zwitterig" ("ambivalent" in Ranson and Sutherland's translation, or "uncertain" in Crucefix's). The "hier" is the human world of "Abstand," "a state that is the precondition of 'gegenüber sein'" (Stahl, 37). The latter is the product of distance and constraint created by memory (the short lines lending a bleak abrupt quality to the sentiments), whereas "dort" in the animal world is "Atem": a breathing out into Openness.

We move from the "Tier" back to the "Kreatur." While the animal looks outward, its gaze embracing the plenitude of the world, the tiny creatures of the world (the human race writ small, perhaps), seek to remain in the safe cave of the womb: "Oh, tiny creatures in their bliss, / who forever remain in the womb that / bore them to completion. O the happiness of the midge / that still leaps within, even on / its wedding day. For the womb is all" ("O Seligkeit der *kleinen* Kreatur, / die immer *bleibt* im Schooße, der sie austrug; / o Glück der Mücke, die noch *innen* hüpft, / selbst wenn sie Hochzeit hat: denn Schooß ist Alles").

In the womb, the place where the midge disports itself, animal life is beyond consciousness; it simply remains what it is: in the place of consciousness comes organic self-realization. Birds, however, are caught between two states of being: the inside of the Open and the outside of the world: "And look at the half certainty of the bird, / which knows both from their source, / as if it were the soul of an Etruscan, / that of a dead man, who has been received by space / but with his reclining figure as a lid" ("und sieh die halbe Sicherheit des Vogels, / der beinah beides weiß aus seinem Ursprung, / als wär er eine Seele der Etrusker, / aus einem Toten, den ein Raum empfang, / doch mit der ruhenden Figur als Deckel"). Rilke uses spatial ontology to move from the natural to the cultural, likening a bird to the soul of an Etruscan, in lines that are syntactically complex and semantically ambivalent. A "Tote" appears, introducing a death motif to contrast possibly with the earlier womb motif. Are the Etruscan and the dead man one and the same? They look like they are in apposition, but it is unclear. And is it the dead man or the soul that has been received into the space? And what exactly is being covered by the "resting" (in Leishman and Spender's translation) or "reclining" (in Crucefix's) figure on the "Deckel," an artifact, a sarcophagus that looks forward to the porcelain figure later in the text? Certain readings resolve matters by making the Etruscan, the dead man, and the resting figure, the effigy of the corpse within the sarcophagus,

a single subject; others leave the matter open and retain the mystery of one of Rilke's most enigmatic funereal images. The central figures seem to occupy a twilight world between the living and the dead, as encapsulated in the ambiguous term "resting" ("ruhend"), which has both positive and negative—because it suggests death—connotations. Guardini offers a characteristically strong reading of this passage: "the Etruscans used to lay the body or ashes of a dead person in a sarcophagus and also portrayed him on the lid outside, so that he was, in a sense, both on the 'lid' and 'within a space' at the same time. So the liberated soul must have felt that it was leaving behind both the protection of the closed coffin and the exposed figure lying on top" (232). Systems of representation elide into spatial configurations of the living and the dead, precisely the elision that Rilke brings to culmination in his concluding tenth Elegy.

The stanza ends with an anonymous "Eins," which must leave the comfort of the womb and traverse the night, as a fractured self: "And how distraught is the one that / has to fly and leave the womb. As if / terrified of its own self, it zigzags through the air, / just like a crack going through a cup. / Just so does the trace of a bat / tear through the porcelain of an evening" ("Und wie bestürzt ist eins, das fliegen muß / und stammt aus einem Schooß. Wie vor sich selbst / erschreckt, durchzuckts die Luft, wie wenn ein Sprung / durch eine Tasse geht. So reißt die Spur / der Fledermaus durchs Porzellan des Abends"). The imagery combines the cultural, the cup, with the animal, the bat, "its apparent flightiness and erratic motion intended for us and our uncertain place in the world" (Lough, 425). As such, it contrasts with the upward flight of the bird in the seventh Elegy, which flies in a vertical rather than bat-like horizontal direction as befits its flight to transcendence. Rilke introduces in the briefest of ways with "die Spur" ("trace" or "mark"), one of the major themes of the *Elegies*: the theme of writing and the aesthetic construction of the world, a theme that has already appeared through tropes such as "Zeichnung" ("sketch") in the fourth Elegy and "Aufschrift" ("inscription") in the fifth. On both occasions, Rilke poses the world as text, as something that requires definition and interpretation; not the interpretation imposed from without, as in the "gedeutete Welt" of Elegy 1, but one that comes from within: from the sentient subject.

The fourth stanza is the shortest: a succinct statement on the deficiencies of a human subject who confronts the world to impose order

upon it, and fails: “But we: spectators, forever and everywhere, / turned to everything but never beyond. / This fills us totally. We put it in order. It falls apart. / We put it in order again, and fall apart ourselves” (“Und wir: Zuschauer, immer, überall, / dem allen zugewandt und nie hinaus! / Uns überfüllt. Wir ordnen. Es zerfällt. / Wir ordnen wieder und zerfallen selbst”). In a characteristically Rilkean narrative of reversal, where entirely new material comes out of nowhere, we are given a comic tableau worthy of vaudeville farce. The short, pithy, and assertive structure of the sentences and shorter lines serve to highlight the redundancy of human action. It begins: “Und wir: Zuschauer.” Watching and being watched is a major theme in the *Elegies*, appearing in the third and the fifth. Both activities can be productive modes of engaging with the world, but here they are neither, because we are “zugewandt,” “turned to everything but never beyond,” positioned merely to view but never to push our sight fully into the object: we visually register it rather than, in the Rilkean sense of the word, *see* it. As Blanchot comments, “when we look in front of us, we do not see what is behind. When we are here, it is on the condition that we renounce elsewhere. The limit retains us, contains, us, thrusts us back toward what we are, turns us back toward ourselves, away from the Other, makes us averted beings” (134). The active creative “Sicht” that had earlier been extolled in the animals has now become a passive gaze, a form of debilitating self-consciousness (or perhaps it is no consciousness at all). We participate in life but that participation is ineffectual: “We put it in order. It falls apart. / We put it in order again, and fall apart ourselves.” The syntax is repetitive and mechanical: it is a tragi-comic process (a tableau of existential slapstick: “Waiting for Godot” *avant la lettre*), where order and disorder routinely change place, and where the totality of the material world is reduced to a simple “es” but, even then, it is given in its abbreviated form and tagged inconspicuously on to the rear section of a verb, almost as an afterthought. “Fall apart” (“Zerfallen”) generates the focus here. The “zer-” prefix is a demonstrative prefix of dissolution. “Zerfallen” has been translated as “collapses” (Leishman and Spender) and “breaks down” (Mitchell); but “falls apart” or “falls to pieces” capture more accurately the sense of a movement away from a center.

Rilke now pauses to ask a question that has been waiting in the wings throughout this Elegy, a question relating to the cause of this bankruptcy of perception, of a gaze that is incapable of vision: “Who has turned us around this way, / so that we, whatever we do, have the

disposition of someone / forever departing? As if on that final ridge, where the valley / shows itself entire once again to him, / he turns around, pauses and stands still—, / this is the way that we live: forever departing” (“Wer hat uns also umgedreht, daß wir, / was wir auch tun, in jener Haltung sind / von einem, welcher fortgeht? Wie er auf / dem letzten Hügel, der ihm ganz sein Tal / noch einmal zeigt, sich wendet, anhält, weilt—, / so leben wir und nehmen immer Abschied”). The lines are magisterial, definitive: there is no subtle syntax to complicate this insight into the human condition. In their tonal severity and landscape figuration, they anticipate Elegy 10, where we arrive at what truly matters, where we breathe a clearer air, one that is exhaled not through the richness of the expressive self but through the loss of the latter made possible through the aesthetics of restraint that underscore the entire cycle of the *Elegies*. In this passage, we are told that we have been “umgedreht” (a term that is “the ultimate development of ‘umgekehrt’ and ‘rückwärts’ from the earlier part of the Elegy,” Llewellyn, 149): this is our “Haltung” (“comportment” or “disposition”). “Haltung” is a quality of selfhood that is directed at or to something, and possibly seeks to act on something, but its central seme, “hält,” takes us back to the trope of containment and self-containment of Elegy 1. We have been passively positioned by an impersonal force, an anonymous “wer,” so that we now resemble the person who is forever leaving (“fortgeht”) his true self. We have been forced to look inwards, and in doing so find that we are no longer in the world. But who or, perhaps more accurately, what is this “wer”? A “wer” appears in the opening line of the first Elegy and reappears in all subsequent Elegies except the sixth and tenth. It looks like a simple interrogative pronoun and, because of that, the interpretive eye skips over it to get to what really matters: “umdrehen.” But, through its persistence in the *Elegies*, Rilke seems to be foregrounding the “wer” as a trope, as the signifier perhaps of a domineering presence of something that cannot be named: the threatening unsayable, a shadowy but malign *deus absconditus* that is formless, shapeless: it is simply, but disturbingly, there.

In the final section of the stanza and the Elegy, a vignette is developed around a perpetual traveler, around someone standing on the ultimate or furthest ridge in a valley, from where he can view the latter in its entirety, in lines where syntax and caesuras create a sense of hesitation and deliberation. It is the final statement of the “looking” theme. His viewing looks like a positive action: perhaps the final synoptic vision

that will undo all the poor viewing that has been associated with the human, as opposed to animal, mind so far. But it is not. Instead, we are given a cryptic portrait of a man who “turns around, pauses and stands still,” which is the final broaching of the motif of the interaction between movement and stasis, before the final “Abschied.” “Abschied” is a central term in Rilke’s vocabulary, appearing in Elegies 2 and 4. Its standard meaning in German is “departure” or “leave-taking,” and it has been read as indicating a “potential for change,” and “the will to achieve inner freedom and independence” (Bollnow, 177 and 179). The word also, however, possesses undertones of resignation and world-weariness and had already been used as a synonym for death in the second Elegy. But this is a departure that does not depart: “anhält, weilt” is the final action of this anonymous man. Even when we wish to leave, we cannot. There is no ultimate resolution: just a perpetual movement to a resolution that we never reach. As the final stanza makes clear, in movement we fail; but even in remaining still, we fail.