Refiguring Death: The Poetics of Transience in the Work of Rainer Maria Rilke

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Abstract

My thesis explores the role of the work of art in Rilke’s poetry in forging a unity between life and death which paradoxically upholds their difference. I turn to the neglected area of the relationship between death and writing, identifying language – specifically the language of poetry – as the place of relation to the difference and otherness of death. Using examples from the Neue Gedichte, and with reference to the later work, I show that the Rilkean ‘death of one’s own’ is a death created in the language of poetic figure or ‘Bild’, language that opens a recessive space, loosening the rigidity of received language which, driven by its phobia of death’s otherness, suppresses and homogenises it.

I demonstrate that the ‘Other’ of the Rilkean death is encountered in the construction of the poetic figure, an excess of language beyond physical, metaphysical, logical and psychological determination. It is in this sense that the Rilkean concept of the ‘death of one’s own’ – the poetological significance of which has not yet been fully elucidated – is a self-made, written death. I argue that in Rilke’s work, death becomes one’s own if poetry can write a space for it, a language which is precisely not one’s own. Rilke’s creation of the language of death is the gestation of the imaginai death of his own in the poetic language of anonymity and excess.

Crucial to this study is the poetological aspect of the frequently employed term, ‘das Schwere’. I suggest that it refers to the difficulty inherent in the orientation towards the difference of death and the parallel difficulty of the transformation into the different reality of art which does not yield a systematic reading. I carry out extensive examinations of the requiem poems of 1908 in which the difficulty of the transformation of death into poetic figure appears most clearly as the axis on which the orientation towards death as extremity, impersonality and otherness takes place.
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List of Abbreviations

Literary works by Rilke

**KA**

**SW**

**SB**
Das Stunden-Buch, SW I, 249-366

**BB**
Das Buch der Bilder, 2 parts, SW I, 367-478

**NG**
Neue Gedichte, 2 parts, SW I, 479-642

**Requiem F**
Requiem für eine Freundin, SW I, 645-56

**Requiem K**
Requiem für Wolf Graf von Kalckreuth, SW I, 657-64

**DE**
Die Duineser Elegien, SW I, 683-726

**SO**
Die Sonette an Orpheus, 2 parts, SW I, 727-73

**Malte**
Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge, SW VI, 709-946

Essays by Rilke

**Rodin**
Auguste Rodin, 2 parts, SW V, 135-242

**Worpswede**
Worpswede, SW V, 7-134

**Über Kunst**
Über Kunst, SW V, 426-434

**Über den jungen Dichter**
Über den jungen Dichter, SW V, 1046-55

**Landschaft**
Von der Landschaft, SW V, 516-22

**Testament**

Rilke's Letters

**Briefe 1902-06**
Rainer Maria Rilke. Briefe aus den Jahren 1902 bis 1906, ed. by Ruth Sieber-Rilke and Carl Sieber (Leipzig: Insel, 1930)

**Briefe 1906-07**
Rainer Maria Rilke. Briefe aus den Jahren 1906 bis 1907, ed. by Ruth Sieber-Rilke and Carl Sieber (Leipzig: Insel, 1930)

**Briefe 1907-14**
Rainer Maria Rilke. Briefe aus den Jahren 1907 bis 1914, ed. by Ruth Sieber-Rilke and Carl Sieber (Leipzig: Insel, 1933)

**Briefe 1914-21**
Rainer Maria Rilke. Briefe aus den Jahren 1914 bis 1921, ed. by Ruth Sieber-Rilke and Carl Sieber (Leipzig: Insel, 1938)
Muzot  
Rainer Maria Rilke. Briefe aus Muzot 1921-1926, ed. by Ruth Sieber-Rilke and Carl Sieber (Leipzig: Insel, 1937)

Briefe  
Rainer Maria Rilke. Briefe, 2 vols, ed. by Rilke-Archiv in association with Ruth Sieber-Rilke (Wiesbaden: Insel, 1950)

Cézanne  
Rainer Maria Rilke. Briefe über Cézanne, ed. by Clara Rilke (Frankfurt a. M.: Insel, 1962)

LAS  
Rainer Maria Rilke. Lou Andreas-Salomé. Briefwechsel, ed. by Ernst Pfeiffer (Frankfurt a. M.: Insel, 1975)

Merline  
Rainer Maria Rilke et Merline. Correspondance 1920-1926, ed. by Dieter Bassermann (Zürich: Max Niehans Verlag, 1954)

Sizzo  
Rainer Maria Rilke. Die Briefe an Gräfin Sizzo 1921-1926, ed. by Ingeborg Schnack (Frankfurt a. M.: Insel, 1977)

Nâdherny  
Rainer Maria Rilke. Briefe an Sidonie Nâdherny von Borutin, ed. by Bernhard Blume (Frankfurt a. M.: Insel, 1973)

Volkart  

B.a.e.j.D.  
Briefe an einen jungen Dichter (Leipzig: Insel, 1929)

MTT  
Rainer Maria Rilke und Marie von Thurn und Taxis. Briefwechsel, 2 vols (Zürich: Niehans & Rokintansky Verlag and Insel Verlag, 1951)

Verleger  
Rainer Maria Rilke. Briefe an seinen Verleger 1906 bis 1926, 2 vols, (Wiesbaden: Insel, 1949)

Heydt  

Mitterer  

Amitié  
La Dernière Amitié de Rainer Maria Rilke, ed. by Madame Eloui Bey (Dijon: Robert Laffont, 1949)

Junghanns  
Rainer Maria Rilke. Inga Junghanns. Briefwechsel, ed. by Wolfgang Herwig (Wiesbaden: Insel, 1959)

Letters  

Berliner Tageblatt, no. 563, 29 November 1929  
'Ein Brief von Rilke', Berliner Tageblatt, no. 563, 29 November 1929
Rilke's Journals

TF
Tagebücher aus der Frühzeit, ed. by Carl Sieber and Ruth Sieber-Rilke (Frankfurt a. M.: Insel, 1973)

FTB
‘Das Florenzer Tagebuch’ (1898), TF, 13-120

STB
‘Das Schmargendorfer Tagebuch’ (1898/1899/1900), TF, 121-256

WTB
‘Das Worpsweder Tagebuch’ (1900), TF, 257-358

BTF
Rainer Maria Rilke. Briefe und Tagebücher aus der Frühzeit 1899-1902, ed. by Ruth Sieber-Rilke and Carl Sieber (Leipzig: Insel, 1933)

Other

Paula


Space


Contingency


Additional Notes

I include the first relevant line number in references to Rilke’s long poems only. This line number is given either in brackets on its own, or after a colon as part of a longer, bracketed reference. In my chapters on Requiem für eine Freundin and Requiem für Wolf Graf von Kalckreuth I cite page numbers at the beginning of the chapters and I cite only line numbers after that.

To simplify my usage of the many different collections of Rilke’s letters, I sought references in every case first of all in the six-volume series of Briefe, edited by Ruth Sieber-Rilke and Carl Sieber between 1930 and 1938. If the letter was not available there, I sought it in Briefe I or II from the 1950 collection. Finally, if I could not find it there, I turned to the specific correspondences with individuals.

I refer throughout the thesis to primary and secondary literature in brackets in the main text. Critics are referenced using name and date. Writers and philosophers are referenced using name and title of work. The purpose of this is to ensure that primary works are immediately recognisable.
Introduction

This thesis will bring out the constructedness of the Rilkean death, its figuring within language in the aspiration to achieve a good death by achieving good poetry. From the early poetry through the Neue Gedichte, focusing on Requiem für eine Freundin and Requiem für Wolf Graf von Kalckreuth, and with reference to the Duineser Elegien and the Sonette an Orpheus, I will trace Rilke’s quest for a language of poetic figure (or ‘Bild’) which will stand apart from the limited scope of conventional language, exceeding the constrictedness of vocabularies which hold their speaker in the familiar world. Poetry, as the language which both articulates and generates the imagination and the unreal, is the mode in which the mortal human can begin her relation with death and absence as unreal, impersonal entities. Crucial to this argument is death as a poetics, and not just as a theme, of Rilke’s work. A comparison could be drawn with love poetry as a performative function of love, as a language which does not only try to describe, but tries engender love in the act of writing it. Rilke’s work has a parallel tendency to address itself to death not as a given, but as a phenomenon which has yet to be created. Although I restrict close analysis to the Neue Gedichte and the requiem poems, I do refer substantially to the later work. My focusing on the middle period of Rilke’s work is intended to follow closely, and bring out, the development of the poetics of ‘der eigene Tod’. Blanchot says that in Rilke’s early poetry the ‘death of one’s own’ is personal and in the later poetry death becomes the death of no-one (see ‘Rose, oh reiner Widerspruch’, 1925, SW II, p. 185) and is therefore not an ‘eigener Tod’ (Space, p. 149). I will argue that ‘der eigene Tod’ transmutes into an impersonal death which belongs to individuals in precisely that impersonality, and that it already has its traces in the earlier and middle poetry. It loses its name after this middle period but is, I believe, projected into the internalisation of the visible world performed in the praising of transience in the later work. The ‘death of one’s own’ is a death which is created within the individual in the language of poetry, and throughout Rilke’s work it is expressed in metaphors of birth and pregnancy.

Rilke writes on the borders of both traditional and modern elegy, refusing to replicate the transfigurations of death into a consolatory art which have come down to him from the past, but still preserving the sense that language can be used to fashion an authentic and meaningful relation to death, which offers in itself the possibility of knowing the infinite within transient life. In contrast to the kind of elegy in which
language apparently disciplines and masters death, Rilke uses language to probe death as that which is outside language, looking forward to the gaps and breaches which structure modern elegy (this culminates in a very modern relegation of the signifier from an instrument of totalisation to a function of relativity in *Requiem für Wolf Graf von Kalckreuth*: 'Wer spricht von Siegen? Überstehn ist alles', *SW I*, p. 664: 156). Anticipating modern elegists’ refusal of the psychoanalytic ideal of therapeutic art, in which mourning compensates for the lost object (see Sigmund Freud, ‘Trauer und Melancholie’, *Psychologie des Unbewussten*, pp. 197-9), Rilke’s poetics of death is focused on extremity, exhaustion, and the sheer difficulty of the transformation of grief, as determining factors in the confrontation with death. The Rilke who has left behind his early poetry never again employs nostalgia or facile consolation in his writing. But the possibility of the transformation of death never recedes in Rilke’s work, never becomes the embittered, ironic mourning of the modern poets who operate from within an essential scepticism with regard to the ability of poetry to transform and heal (see Ramazani, 1994, pp. 1-31). Rilke stands between customary forms of mourning and the exploding of forms brought on by the technological, mechanised, bureaucratic and largely agnostic or atheistic modern age. In his poetics of difficulty Rilke offers a self-conscious art of mourning which anticipates the poetological concerns of modern elegists, summarised by Ramazani: ‘every elegy is an elegy for elegy – a poem that mourns the diminished efficacy and legitimacy of poetic mourning’ (1994, p. 8).

This thesis will take into account de Man’s statement that ‘even the best interpretations of Rilke seem to have remained, by and large, on the level of paraphrase, a paraphrase that is often subtle and careful but that does not question the convergence of the meaning with the linguistic devices used to convey it’ (1979, p. 25), concerning itself with the poet’s struggle to get death and death’s different space of signification into language – death as ‘Other’ is articulated and integrated in the creation of a language of poetic figure which is truly poetic, as Rilke believes it, in the sense that it has outgrown the personal and the confessional as well as the rational. This is a language which exceeds both reflex emotions and the inherited vocabularies which dominate the discourse of death, going beyond the known terrain of words and entering a linguistic space which Rilke proffers as the nearest the human can get to the sublime. In the emancipated condition of art there can be a communion with all that is not ourselves, for art (and specifically poetry, the language of metaphor and image) takes the subject out of her immediate environment, experience and habits of interpretation. Crucial to Rilke’s poetics of death is the journey outside the limited, familiar, pre-
described linguistic world (‘gedeutete[n] Welt’, DE 1, SW I, p. 685: 13). It is the accession to the space outside which begins the internalisation of new, different, impersonal language, language which comes out of the realm of death – the anonymous and the as yet unformed and unsignified. As a poet of the imagination, Rilke’s struggle throughout his work is to make death wholly in the language of poetic figure which exceeds entrenched signification to the extent that it becomes the site of otherness and of the individual’s death within herself.

I will trace the path of the dead in Rilke’s work not just in their transition from the real to the unreal, but also in the nature of this unreal space of art as it practises the articulation of death in a language which harbours within it the impossibility of that articulation, the incommensurable space of death. The Rilkean elegy is, or tries to be, in itself a speaking of death, an integration of the unspeakable and the unrepresentable – the absent – into language. It employs metaphors and images which set out to replace analytical and pre-existent vocabularies, striving to become a language which can encounter the blind spot which is death. In this sense Rilke imaginatively preserves the loss, difference and deadness of the dead, countering the traditional tendency of elegy to save and monumentalise their presence. It is this relation to loss which is modern, and yet the ancient belief in art as a mode of redemption still remains.

In this preoccupation with absence, Rilke also anticipates modern theorists. Derrida’s theory of the ‘death of one’s own’, that we construct our uniqueness in the acceptance of the reality of death (The Gift of Death), has an affinity with Rilke’s ‘der eigene Tod’ which has been identified by the critics as a principle restricted to the early and middle periods, but I will argue that it continues and develops into the later poetry, losing its name but retaining the authentic relation to death which was conceived for it in the Stundenbuch. Rilke also anticipates Derrida in the idea that death is that which does not speak and which cannot be written, which attests to discontinuity, and intervenes only in the gaps and spaces between words, and that writing therefore risks an encounter with death in that it moves between words in metaphors (Writing and Difference). Another obvious connection is Heidegger’s interpretation of poetry as speaking for the unknown and the unexpected, listening for the ‘rift’ in the stability of our being, the terrifying, indescribable sites where death enters (‘Wozu Dichter’, Holzwege, pp. 269-75. See also the rest of this essay on Rilke’s poetry, ‘Wozu Dichter’, Holzwege, pp. 269-320). In his exploration of the poetry of death in Paul Celan, Landy says:
Rilke's poetry works within the possibility of the unimagined, within the spaces and absences which are unaccommodated by pre-existing constructs of meaning and identity. The effort to speak into the void of death is expressed in metaphors of pain and suffering in Rilke's poetry. The modern consciousness, as it is defined in Rilke's work, translates into an engagement with the difficulty of the artistic transformation. Art is still proffered as the mode in which humans can be united with, and reconciled to, their death, but, particularly in the requiem poems, the confrontation with absence, which is central to the realisation of this ideal, comes to the fore as the struggle that it is. De Man recognises the role of poetic effort in Rilke's poetry of death, arguing that Rilke's 'acute awareness of the alienated and factitious character of human reality' is never suppressed or suspended in his poetry, rather the transience of the human is named, and therefore '[t]he promise that the work contains is [...] anything but facile. But this makes it all the more convincing' (1979, p. 23). It is this difficulty with death which anticipates the modern form of elegy.

Rilke's language of death, then, is not the conventional substitution of traditional elegy, but a language which is orientated towards an absent centre, a language which speaks and praises its lack of referent, the absolute and unspeakable difference which completes human being. This, I believe, spans his oeuvre, from the Stundenbuch with its ambition for a 'death of one's own' (an imaginitive attitude countering the repression of mortality), through the Neue Gedichte (in each poem's translation of the physical world into the metaphorical figuration of transcendent space), the requiem poems of 1908 (in their determination that the dead should enter the imagination of the living via the difficulty of the transformation of life into poetic figure or 'Bild'), to the Duineser Elegien and the Sonette an Orpheus, which are Rilke's poetry at its most comfortable with death's paradoxicality, internalising, as they do, absence and the vast otherness of the cosmos.

In spite of my concurrence with the reading of Rilke's development as one of a progression from a language so determined that it transforms itself into a graspable thing, fixing, or immobilising, things in their visible aspect (see Rilke's recognition of the expressivity of external phenomena which already possess the intensity of their
‘innere[n] Äquivalente’, to Ellen Delp, 27.10.1915, Briefe 1914-21, p. 80), to internalisation and invisibilisation in ‘Weltinnenraum’ (see the poem ‘Es winkt zu Fühling fast aus allen Dingen’, 1914, SW II, pp. 92-3, and ‘Nirgends, Geliebte, wird Welt sein, als innen’, DE 7, SW I, p. 711: 50), anticipated in the contrast between ‘Werk des Gesichts’ and ‘Herzwerk’ in ‘Wendung’ (1914, SW II, pp. 82-4), I will argue that the search for death as a search for, and creation of, other spaces within oneself in the encounter with what is outside the edges of the self, is a search which goes right through Rilke’s work and is, essentially, a work which is orientated towards both the internal and the external simultaneously. In the work of death, the poetic ‘I’ approaches the unrecognisable otherness of non-being as a dimension which exceeds the self in its distance and external difference, yet leads back to the imagination and inner space of a differently constituted self. The poetic ‘I’ defamiliarises death, pushing it out beyond existing vocabularies into an imaginative position outside normal human reach, but sustains an internal relation to it by living within the paradox that death as exterior is a recognition, and therefore an internalisation, of death.

Throughout Rilke’s poetry, therefore, the internal space of the imagination is excessive and outside the scope of the subject. Even the strong visual content of the Neue Gedichte often beckons the reader towards an invisible centre (e.g. ‘Der Panther’, NG I, SW I, p. 505, ‘Die Fensterrose’, NG I, SW I, p. 501, ‘Schwarze Katze’, NG II, SW I, p. 595), the point where the ‘things’ are absorbed into the imagination, and the point which anticipates the absent, other space of death (figured, for instance, in ‘Morgue’, NG I, SW I, p. 503, and ‘Leichen-Wäsche’, NG II, SW I, pp. 588-9, and the inward-turn they perform). ‘Der eigene Tod’ of the Stundenbuch calls for the gestation of a death from within – an intimate relation with death as that which enters from the outside – and the requiem poems seek a balance between the action of internalisation and the movement towards the strange outsidedness of death for both their addresses and their author. The ‘Raum’ accorded to the poetic works of art, the Neue Gedichte, in Rilke’s emulation of Rodin’s expropriated, sculptural spaces, also anticipates the absorption of other and ‘open’ space in the Duineser Elegien and the Sonette an Orpheus. I will also argue that the creation ex negativo, out of unadulterated, inner space (‘Raum lassen’, SO II, 4, SW I, p. 753), which creates an alternative, interior, poetic or imaginative landscape in the later work, is already there in the Neue Gedichte and the requiem poems in the ambition for an aesthetic space which can express and invite the external spaciousness and inappropriability of death. Crucially, the contrast between these internal and external spaces is constituted in language, for these spaces form around,
and move with, the changing scope and reach of words. Poetry is the meeting point of internal and external space, in that it is a language which can evoke what is exterior to language.

I have chosen to look at the two requiem poems in depth because I do not feel they have been fully addressed by the critics, who tend to refer to these poems briefly, quoting their weightier lines ('Denn irgendwo ist eine alte Feindschaft/zwischen dem Leben und der großen Arbeit', Requiem F, SW I, pp. 655-6: 267, and 'Wer spricht von Siegen? Überstehn ist alles', Requiem K, SW I, p. 664: 156), or focusing on the theme of love without possession in Requiem für eine Freundin. The most in-depth studies of the requiem poems I have found are Götte (1996), Catling (1986), Schäfer (1996), Torgersen (1998) and Kruse (1949). Por (1998) is the only critic who looks at the two poems in relation to one another and, in his deconstructive reading, stresses the centrality to them of poetic articulation. The requiem poems bring out most strongly, I believe, the concern to balance the internalisation and the expropriation of death through the poetics of difficulty – i.e. in these poems the difficulty of death is expressed in the difficulty of artistic (poetic) production. In response to Por’s article, which emphasises the falling apart of the requiem poems as works of art, I will look at the possibility that they may have begun to find a new language within the threat of this breach, within the fragility of the boundary between art and real life.

I have chosen this topic because Rilke criticism has so far not overtly addressed the contingency of the ‘death of one’s own’ on language. Many critics have identified the centrality of death in the Rilkean philosophy of ‘Dasein’, but as yet there has been no study which has proposed that death is refigured in Rilke’s work as a poetic enterprise. Nolte declares, ‘Rilke war ein Sänger des Todes’ (1934, p. 24) but does not address the issue of the language of death as he does in his section on Hofmannsthal (the fourth part of this section is called ‘Der Tod als Quelle der Inspiration und als Führer zur Vollendung im Reich der Kunst. (Das Verhältnis von Tod und Dichter)’ (pp. 77-84). In his section on Rilke he concentrates on death as a personal and ethical principle. Konrad’s study is promising at first, when he claims: ‘das Todesmotiv ist für Rilke kein Motiv neben anderen, sondern der Schlüssel des Lebens selber, des gelebten wie des gedichteten’ (1947, p.196). He stresses the relevance of ‘the work’ and ‘the achievement’ of death, but he calls this ‘die ganze Schwere des zu leistenden Lebens eines Lebens als Leiden’ (p. 198), a work of living rather than a work of writing. He argues that the ‘Dichtertod’ is constituted in the poet’s poetic construction of things, in the poet’s anonymous ‘dying into the things’ (p. 193), and this anticipates the subject-
object relation which my thesis will argue is formed in language, and, more specifically, in language which articulates difference without defining it and therefore reducing its difference. Rehm recognises that in Rilke's work death is not given ('Gabe') but made ('Aufgabe und Prüfstein'), yet he never says that the unity of life and death must be composed or written, rather he returns to the metaphysical plane to elucidate the achieved death in the achieved life (1950, p. 180). Graff recognises the relation between the artist and the achieved, birthed death, but does not locate this relation in the artist's quest for a language of the new and the 'Other': 'It is necessary that birth be given again to a vigorous death, a death which man is prepared to recognize as his, and which every artist is called upon to presage and foreshadow' (1960, p. 231). Sill comes very close to saying that the 'der eigene Tod' is one's own death constructed in poetry. He speaks of 'Sterbekunst' and 'Handwerk des Lebens' (1999, pp. 144-5), but does not relate these to a poetry of death. Indeed, like many critics, he writes vaguely of 'der eigene Tod' and its realisation as a 'Meisterstück' in the process of living (pp. 144-5). I will argue that the condition of living to which Rilke turns in Requiem für Wolf Graf von Kalckreuth is the lived work of writing:

\[
\text{ein Tod von guter Arbeit} \\
\text{vertieft gebildet, jener eigene Tod,} \\
\text{der uns so nötig hat, weil wir ihn leben,} \\
\text{und dem wir nirgends näher sind als hier. (SW I, p. 662: 116)}
\]

Death here is 'Arbeit'. I do not believe it is enough to merely identify the desired unity of life and death as whole, completed 'Being' ('Dasein') in Rilke's poetry. Crucial to this unity is the transformative role of song ('Gesang ist Dasein', SO I, 3, SW I, p. 732) and 'praise' ('Preise dem Engel die Welt', DE 9, SW I, p. 719: 53), and critics have recognised this, although they have not yet adequately elucidated the function of 'Arbeit', the nature of the poetic work which is transformation. This work, I will argue, is not the description or reproduction of a pre-existing condition of death, but the evocation of death's otherness and difference within the material of language itself, within poetic figures which stand apart from ordinary language in a 'different' space of signification. Critics have also tended to focus on the function of song and praise, and the alternative to mourning they offer, in the Duineser Elegien and the Sonette an Orpheus. 'Song' may not be a dominant term in the requiem poems, but in choosing to comment in detail on these poems rather than the later work, it is my intention to bring
out the evolving presence of song in the poetic figures of the work of Rilke’s middle period.
1. Death as the Summation of Life

Peace, peace! He is not dead, he doth not sleep –
He hath awakened from the dream of life –
"Tis we, who lost in stormy visions, keep
With phantoms an unprofitable strife,
And in mad trance, strike with our spirit's knife
Invulnerable nothings. – We decay
Like corpses in a charnel; fear and grief
Convulse us and consume us day by day
And cold hopes swarm like worms within our living clay.

Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'Adonais. An Elegy on the Death of John Keats'

Introduction

This chapter will examine Rilke’s response to the climate of psychological repression which both pathologised and anaesthetised death in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Freud summarised attitudes towards death before the First World War thus: ‘Wir haben die unverkennbare Tendenz gezeigt, den Tod beiseite zu schieben, ihn aus dem Leben zu eliminieren. Wir haben versucht, ihn totzuschweigen’ (Zeitgemässes über Krieg und Tod, p. 49). And in 1899 Joseph Jacobs coined the slogan ‘The Dying of Death’ to characterise the mood of the fin de siècle, writing: ‘Perhaps the most distinctive note of the modern spirit is the practical disappearance of the thought of death as an influence directly bearing upon practical life. [...] Death has lost its terrors, and is often regarded as the last and best friend. [...] The fear of death is being replaced by the joy of life [...] Death is disappearing from our thoughts. [...] The hurry-scurry of modern life leaves one no time to meditate among the tombs’ (Jacobs, pp. 264-5). Throughout Rilke’s work, both pre- and post-war, there is an attempt to reanimate and reintegrate death in the condition of absence and otherness it proposes. This celebration of transience contradicts the Christian impulse to postpone the attainment of higher being in the anticipation of a more permanent condition after death. The transiently lived life in the Rilkean sense lives death within life as a unity of human and non-human, of the known world and the cosmic unknown. This convergence is authentic being (‘Sein”), being which is all it can be in a single and mortal instant, inclusive of all that is other than itself, and enriched with the incommensurable.

1 See Ramazani for a summary of the decline in mourning as externalised grief in America and Britain over the turn of the century (1994, pp. 10-23). For the denial of death in Western culture see Ariès (1982) and Dollimore (1998, pp. 119-27).
integration of death is therefore the integration of the different and the difficult, a process predicated on suffering, and the Rilkean "death of one's own" is not just personal in the Heideggerean sense (won back from 'das Man' and the convenient collectivisation represented by institutions), rather it is an individual's difficult and painful communion with the otherness outside herself, her own imminent absence. 'Integration' does not mean assimilation, appropriation or a subsuming of meaning, rather it implies a paradoxical encounter with the 'Other' which integrates through expropriation, i.e. which holds death's alterity in tension and thereby gleans, or internalises, something of death's non-internalisable condition.

1.1 Integrating the Difference of Death

Shelley's elegy depicts life lunging out at an imaginary adversary, engaged in a futile conflict with its own terrors. Death is a condition of the 'mad trance', the schismatic mind which fiercely guards its own fictions against the intrusion of the 'Other', unable to reconcile itself with the fact of its mortality. Humanity's revolt against its own extinction is a hysterical rupturing of the natural unity of life and death, and this dividedness manifests itself in Shelley's poem as the corruptive worms of a living death. The one who has entered into this unity has got beyond the fanatical enclosures of life's paranoia and this new, accepting relationship with death is one of 'peace' and authenticity. The final line of Requiem für Wolf Graf von Kalckreuth asks for a non-combative relationship with death, a relationship which does not thrash the 'spirit's knife' in an attempt to vanquish the enemy: 'Wer spricht von Siegen? Überstehn ist alles' (SW I, p. 664: 156). The Requiem asks that death be lived through and integrated.\(^2\) I use the term 'integration' in this thesis not as an ethics of consolation, a rational, psychic totalisation, which would simplify the encounter with death sought in Rilke's poetry, but to indicate a gesturing towards relation with death in the fact of its hostility to relation and integration. Such 'integration' contrasts the absolute exclusion waged in Shelley's elegy. The terms 'integration' and 'internalisation', therefore, paradoxically retain this sense of 'non-integration' and 'non-internalisation' throughout the thesis.

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\(^2\) In a letter to Mimi Romanelli Rilke speaks of the need to 'survive' the presence of death within life, for to learn how to die is to learn how to live: 'Il y a de la mort dans la vie et cela m'êtonne qu'on prétende l'ignorer: la mort, dont nous éprouvons l'imputoyable présence dans chaque changement auquel nous survivons parce qu'il faut apprendre à mourir: voilà toute la vie' (Briefe I, 8.12.1907, p. 229).
The boundary between life and death is traced right through Rilke’s work as a human defence against the unknown. In the *Tenth Elegy* death does loom oppositionally over the living who choose intoxication to distract themselves from it:

.... Oh aber gleich darüber hinaus, hinter der letzten Planke, beklebt mit Plakaten des “Todlos“, jenes bitteren Biers, das den Trinkenden süß scheint, wenn sie immer dazu frische Zerstreungen kaum… (SW I, p. 722: 34)

In a letter to Lotte Hepner Rilke writes of the human determination to define life against death as that which can be managed and which offers security, familiarity and identity:


He argues that humans have repressed, alienated and demonised death because they can never experience it in reality and it eludes their grasp. In their desire to distance death they mis-measure its relation to the essence of their lives:

Sehen Sie, und so ging es nicht anders mit dem Tod. Erlebt, und doch, in seiner Wirklichkeit, uns nicht erlebbar, uns immerfort überwissend und doch von uns nie recht zuzugeben, den Sinn des Lebens kränkend und überholend von Anfang an, wurde auch er, damit er uns im Finden dieses Sinnes nicht beständig unterbräche, ausgewiesen, hinausverdrängt, er, der uns wahrscheinlich so nahe ist, daß wir die Entfernung zu ihm und der inneren Lebensmitte in uns gar nicht feststellen können, es würde ein Äußeres, täglich Ferngehalteneres, das irgendwo im Leeren lauerte, um, in bösartiger Auswahl, den und jenen anzufallen -: (8.11.1915, *Briefe 1914-21*, pp. 88-9)

In the same letter Rilke asks how it is possible to have an existence if one is unable to accept death:

Rilke perpetually asks the reader to dismantle the boundary between life and death, e.g. ‘das Leben gegen den Tod hin offen zu halten’ (to Nanny von Escher 22.12.1923, Muzot, pp. 230-1). The First Elegy describes this openness:

Aber Lebendige machen
alle den Fehler, daß sie zu stark unterscheiden.
Engel (sagt man) wüßten oft nicht, ob sie unter
Lebenden gehen oder Toten. Die ewige Strömung
reißt durch beide Bereiche alle Alter
immer mit sich und übertönt sie in beiden. (SW I, p. 688: 80)

The living must learn to recognise life and death as a unity in order to perceive what eternity is. An openness to death is a dismantling of the shutters we put up to it, an exceeding of self-imposed limitation, a gesture towards the infinite where there are no bounds. In the Eighth Elegy the wild animal represents an infinite state of being in which death is already integral and does not stand in front of, or outside, life as obstacle and contradiction:

[...] 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. (SW I, p. 714: 10)


In Rilke’s work death is the estranged part of the human which must not be trivialised or familiarised but reintegrated in its difference and otherness. First of all death must be re-exposed in its apparently cruel negation of life:

Ich werf es allen modernen Religionen vor, daß sie ihren Gläubigen Tröstungen und Beschönigungen des Todes geliefert haben, statt ihnen Mittel ins Gemüt zu geben, sich mit ihm zu vertragen und zu verständigen. Mit ihm, mit seiner volligen, unmaskierten Grausamkeit: diese Grausamkeit

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3 Graff writes: ‘After all the fallacies of the currently construed life have failed, two unmistakable realities remain: the intangible expanse of death and the visible earth in all its transitory appearance. Neither must be reasoned away or dreamt out of existence’ (1956, p. 253).
But Rilke deeply believes that it is possible to arrive at a reconciliation with death precisely through the acceptance of its cruelty. He continues:

*sie* [die Grausamkeit] rührt schon wieder an das Extrem einer Milde, die so groß, so rein und so vollkommen *klar* ist (aller Trost ist trübe!), wie wir nie, auch nicht im süßsten Frühlingstag, Mildigkeit geahnt haben. (6.1.1923, *Sizzo*, p. 53)

The effort of the living to live in the imminence of their death must be one which visits the absolute negation of death and discovers within this the possibility of affirmation and peace. At the extremity of fear and suffering is spiritual – but not theological – redemption. It is by coming to know the negation of death that the paradox of its non-negation is confirmed:

Das Wort “Tod” *ohne* Negation zu lesen; wie der Mond, so hat gewiß das Leben eine uns dauernd abgewendete Seite, die *nicht* sein Gegen-Teil ist, sondern seine Ergänzung zur Vollkommenheit, zur Vollzähligkeit, zu der wirlichen heilen und vollen Sphäre und Kugel des *Seins*. […] Ich will nicht sagen, daß man den Tod *lieben* soll; aber man soll das Leben so großmütig, so ohne Rechnen und Auswählen lieben, daß man unwillkürlich, ihn (des Lebens abgekehrte Hälft), immerfort mit einzieht […] Nur weil wir den Tod ausschließen in einer plötzlichen Besinnung, ist er mehr und mehr zum Fremden geworden und, da wir ihn im Fremden hielten, ein Feindliches. (6.1.1923, *Sizzo*, pp. 53-54)

In this letter there is no expectation that the living will ever comprehend death. What is proposed instead is the integration of the foreignness of death, an integration which alleviates its hostility. Death is presented as the side of existence which is turned away from us but is the key to our completion because it introduces the nameless and the strange into our rationalised experience. The integration of death is the arrival at an attitude of living which does not partition experience into the included and the excluded. It is a gesture which reaches beyond the customary and calculated

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5 See also: ‘Der Tod ist die uns abgekehrte, von uns unbeschienene Seite des Lebens: wir müssen versuchen, das größere Bewußtsein unseres Daseins zu leisten, das in beiden unabgegrenzten Bereichen zu Hause ist, aus beiden unerschöpflich genährt.’ (13.11.1925, *Muzot*, pp. 371-2)

6 Rilke announces in the following the interplay of life and death which includes the ordinarily excluded, for one ‘lives everything’ if one loves the questions and the ellipses which death throws up. Life is
interpretations which keep meaning stable. Death is the incomprehensible core which motivates the imagination, and it is imagination which is the seat of the human in Rilke’s work. The *First Elegy* asks whether we are complete without the riddle of the dead:

> Aber wir, die so große Geheimnisse brauchen, denen aus Trauer so oft seliger Fortschritt entspringt - : können wir sein ohne sie? (SW I, p. 688: 88)^7

In a letter to Paula Modersohn-Becker Rilke describes ‘alles Fremde’ as an expression for the inner life (‘Ausdruck für Inneres’, 17.3.1907, *Briefe 1906-7*, p. 228), and this thesis will explore Rilke’s poetics of integration and inclusion with regard to the outsidedness and otherness of death in the work of his early and middle periods, whilst still accepting his increased preoccupation with this internalisation in his later work.

The Rilkean consciousness tries to recover the ineffable in nature and death. The early poem from the *Stundenbuch*, ‘Ich liebe meines Wesens Dunkelstunden’, explores the irrational, inverted space of existence in the intimacy with the earth and death:

> Ich liebe meines Wesens Dunkelstunden, in welchen meine Sinne sich vertiefen; in ihnen hab ich, wie in alten Briefen, mein täglich Leben schon gelebt gefunden und wie Legende weit und überwunden.


The comparison with a tree, which gestures in opposing directions – towards heaven and earth – suggests an infinitely more expansive and intense life (‘zu einem zweiten

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zeitlos breiten Leben') than the life to which the poetic 'I' is accustomed ('mein täglich Leben'). The tree is 'reif und rauschend' in the visible world, but this life is drawn out of its root-connection to the dark, subterranean space of the grave, the deeper, secondary life which is death. This other-sidedness of the immediate and ordinary balances the human bias towards illumination, comprehension and life on the surface of the earth. Rilke uses the image of the tree again in the letter to Lotte Hepner to convey the simultaneity and balance of life and death:

[...] blüht ein Baum, so blüht so gut der Tod in ihm wie das Leben, und der Acker ist voller Tod, der aus seinem liegenden Gesicht einen reichen Ausdruck des Lebens treibt, und die Tiere gehen geduldig von einem [zum] anderen – und überall um uns ist der Tod noch zu haus, und aus den Ritzen der Dinge sieht er uns zu, und ein rostiger Nagel, der irgendwo aus einer Planke steht, tut Tag und Nacht nichts als sich freuen über ihn. (8.11.15, Briefe 1914-21, p. 90)

It is nature which provides the images of the unity of life and death in which humans can glimpse their inadequacy and dividedness. The tree blooms with death, embodying that completedness of which Rilke speaks in the same letter.9

'Schlussstück', the last poem of the Buch der Bilder, rhymes life and death in their mutual divergence, balancing the positive and the negative mood in just a few lines.

Der Tod ist groß.
Wir sind die Seinen
lachenden Munds.
Wenn wir uns mitten im Leben meinen,
wagt er zu weinen
mitten in uns. (SW I, p. 477)

The large, laughing mouth of death expands into the centre of life ('mitten im Leben') which coincides again with the centre of death. Each decentering is a centering upon both life and death, and the expansion of the laughter grows into a contraction of weeping moving in towards the mutual centre within the living and dying being. The line-lengths sketch these movements in the stretch of the fourth line followed by a receding which meets the middle at the end of the poem, and the end rhymes and the

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8 Erlebnis experiences an inverted world: 'er sei auf die andere Seite der Natur geraten' (SW VI, 1036-1042, p. 1038). The next chapter will turn towards the poetics of inversion in Rilke's work.
9 See Graff on the Rilkean immanence of death within life which is opposed to the Christian model of death as life's transcendent future (1956, p. 233).
resurfacing of ‘mitten’ ensure an echoing across lines. The progression from ‘wir’ to
‘uns’ converges the active and the passive mood whilst laughter and weeping hold the
centre of the poem in place. Melancholy is consonant with both joyful and mocking
laughter in this poem, and death is both the end and the centre of the human life.  
Life and death achieve a unison in this poem which does not override their differences.

The poem ‘Todes-Erfahrung’ portrays humans who have disassociated
themselves from death as frightened, inauthentic puppets of themselves:

Wir wissen nichts von diesem Hingehn, das
dem Tod zu zeigen, den ein Maskenmund

tragischer Klage wunderlich entstellt.
Noch ist die Welt voll Rollen, die wir spielen.
Solang wir sorgen, ob wir auch gefielen,
spielt auch der Tod, obwohl er nicht gefällt.

Doch als du gingst, da brach in diese Bühne
ein Streifen Wirklichkeit durch jenen Spalt
durch den du hingingst; Grün wirklicher Grüne,
wirklicher Sonnenschein; wirklicher Wald.

Wir spielen weiter. Bang und schwer Erlerntes
hersagend und Gebärden dann und wann
aufhebend; aber dein von uns entferntes,
aus unserem Stück entrücktes Dasein kann

uns manchmal überkommen, wie ein Wissen
von jener Wirklichkeit sich niedersenkend,
so daß wir eine Weile hingerissen
das Leben spielen, nicht an Beifall denkend. (NG I, SW I, p. 518-9)

The players are no longer unified with their gestures, projecting roles which do not fit
them and seeking affirmation of their existence in the audience’s appreciation. Central
to this self-deception is the distortion of death in an emotional response which is biased
towards life. The death of a friend introduces reality, ‘Wirklichkeit’, into this charade,
an authenticity represented as the beauty of nature invading the stage. It is a shaft of
otherness entering the claustrophobic world of these life-players, a breath of death
which completes them in themselves so that they may play life in its fullness instead of
vacuously for an audience.

\[^{10}\text{For an interpretation of this poem see Andre Hochuli (1947).}\]
‘Der Tod’ depicts humans in their absolute alienation from death, balancing death precariously on the back of the hand in a teacup which has tried to civilise it and inscribe it with redemptive language:


Das hat der Trinker, den der Trank betrifft, bei einem fernen Frühstück ab-gelesen.

Was sind denn das für Wesen, die man zuletzt wegschrecken muß mit Gift?

Blieben sie denn sonst? Sind sie denn hier vernarrt in dieses Essen voller Hindernis?
Man muß ihnen die harte Gegenwart ausnehmen, wie ein künstliches Gebiß.
Dann lallen sie. Gelall, Gelall ....

O Sternenfall, von einer Brücke einmal eingesehen -:
Dich nicht vergessen. Stehn! (1915, SW I, pp. 103-4)

The cup is a precarious piece of artifice in itself, its handle repaired and its print faded, and it is perhaps to be read in conjunction with the image of the false teeth. The cup and the teeth are man-made, fallible props which keep humans from an estranged and estranging experience. In the letter to Lotte Hepner Rilke writes of religion’s deformation and sanitisation of death, employing the image of the broken cup with the Christian message again: ‘diese häßliche Tasse mit dem abgebrochenen Henkel und der sinnlosen Aufschrift “Glaube, Liebe, Hoffnung“, aus der einer Bitternis des unverdünnten Todes zu trinken gezwungen war’ (8.11.1915, Briefe 1914-21, p. 93). The cup decorates death and detracts from its status as ‘pure death’ (8.11.1915, Briefe 1914-21, p. 93), as an unpalatable negation of life, and the false teeth similarly deny the imminent degeneration of life into an inarticulate abyss. The ‘bluish decoction’ and the slurred speech are the repulsive, ‘other’ side of the human – death – which remains a threat throughout its futile suppression. The poem depicts the horror of the unintegrated
difference of death, the blue deposit suggesting the unhealthy separation of death from life. In the letter to Lotte Hepner Rilke writes of Tolstoy:

Sein enormes Naturerleben (ich weiß kaum einen Menschen, der so leidenschaftlich in die Natur eingelassen war) setzte ihn erstaunlich in den Stand, aus dem Ganzen heraus zu denken und zu schreiben, aus einem Lebensgefühl, das vom feinverteiltesten Tode so durchdrungen war, daß er überall mit enthalten schien, als ein eigentümliches Gewürz in dem starken Geschmack des Lebens. (8.11.1915, Briefe 1914–21, pp. 92–93)

Here he posits that death which is soluble in, and therefore simultaneous with, life is actually a fertilisation and an infinite expansion of life. The precipitation at the bottom of the cup is an undiluted and therefore unbearably bad medicine, a death not properly accepted into life. The final lines of the poem offer an alternative attitude, envisaging the death of stars as beauty and fulfilment.

The exclusion of death from life is presented as a modern phenomenon in Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge:


In Malte’s early twentieth-century Paris the dying do not participate in their death. Death is institutionalised, passive (‘Jetzt wird […] gestorben’) and mechanically mass-produced, replicating the impersonal operations of capitalist-industrial society. Death is reproduced and received, couched in the language of medical-scientific abstraction

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11 See Eom (1988, pp. 63–6), Konrad (1947, p. 203), Graff (1956, p. 235), and Engel and Fülleborn (KA II, p. 540), for interpretations of this poem. Graff links the dilution of death within life to Orpheus’s dispersion across, and omnipresence within the two realms, and to the Sonnet I, 5: ‘Seine Metamorphose/in dem und dem’ (SO I, 5, SW I, p. 733) (Graff, p. 234). See also SO I, 6 where Orpheus minglesthe features of the dead into the visible world (SO I, 6, SW I, p. 734).
which defines it empirically as the disease which causes it, excluding any other interpretation.\textsuperscript{12} Death has been evacuated from the personal sphere and the individual can feel only indifference towards it.\textsuperscript{13} Malte contrasts this death with the great, uproarious, authentic death of his grandfather, Kammerherr Brigge, concluding:

Das war nicht der Tod irgendeines Wassersüchtigen, das war der böse, fürstliche Tod, den der Kammerherr sein ganzes Leben lang in sich getragen und aus sich genährht hatte. Alles Übermaß an Stolz, Willen und Herrenkraft, das er selbst in seinen ruhigen Tagen nicht hatte verbrauchen können, war in seinen Tod eingegangen, in den Tod, der nun auf Ulsgaard saß und vergeudete.

Wie hätte der Kammerherr Brigge den angesehen, der von ihm verlangt hätte, er solle einen anderen Tod sterben, als diesen. Er starb seinen schweren Tod. (p. 720)\textsuperscript{14}

Brigge’s death is ‘schwer’ – demanding, insomniac and deeply suffering – and it is precisely this pain and disquiet which is offered as the natural completion of life. ‘Der eigene Tod’ is the individual assent to and expression of all this repulsiveness, a personal articulation of the otherness which dwells inside and completes oneself. ‘Schwer’ is the effort to die this death in all its extravagant individuality, to summon and concentrate the whole of oneself in order to die a death that is one’s own.\textsuperscript{15} It is the

\textsuperscript{12} As a letter from Rilke’s doctor reports, on his deathbed Rilke did not want to hear what his disease (a form of leukemia) was called, preferring to regard it as peculiar to himself, and accepting his condition rather ‘as an inevitable mystery, which ought not to be analysed too closely’: ‘Il acceptait sa maladie plutôt comme une mystère inévitable qu’il ne fallait pas trop vouloir analyser’ (Letter to Marie von Thurn und Taxis from Dr. Theodor Haemmerli, 25.2.1927, \textit{MTT} II, p. 956).

\textsuperscript{13} Biggs offers the cool, indifferent doctors who come to perforate Malte’s dead father’s heart as an example of human repression of death, but draws attention to one of them, ‘ein rasch und sachlich arbeitender Herr’, whose atavistic uneasiness with death surfaces: ‘Nur an seiner linken Schläfe hatten sich ein paar Haare aufgestellt aus irgendeinem alten Instinkt’ (Malte, p. 855) (1967, pp. 349-350).

\textsuperscript{14} The refusal to call Brigge in death a victim of dropsy parallels Rilke’s refusal to hear the name of his fatal illness. Brigge dying ‘seinen schweren Tod’ is a reference to Jens Peter Jacobsen’s novel, \textit{Niels Lyhne}. Rilke took the notion of the individual death from the Danish writer whom he greatly admired. \textit{Niels Lyhne} was central to Rilke’s understanding of himself. He identified with the character of Niels who rejects God and is heroic in his determination to be free of all simplifying, philosophical structures and to die the death which follows from his chosen life. The novel ends: ‘And at last he died the death – the difficult death’ (p. 284). The ‘death of one’s own’ is constituted in its difficulty.

\textsuperscript{15} Malte writes of children: ‘sie nahmen sich zusammen und starben das, was sie schon waren, und das, was sie geworden wären’ (p. 721). Rilke offers here a unique and paradoxical point of view in which children die the lives they would have lived and therefore die completed rather than deficient in life. The shortness of life is compensated for by dying an authentic death, the summation of a life. The “death of one’s own” makes its first appearance in the \textit{Stundenbuch}: ‘O Herr, gieb jedem seinen eigenen Tod/Das Sterben, das aus jenem Leben geht/darin er Liebe hat, Sinn und Not’ (SW I, p. 347).

Rilke’s ‘Weiße Fürstin’ expresses how a bad death is a life which is not deeply given to life and a death which does not have the assent of the living:

\begin{itemize}
  \item Wenn jemand stirbt, das nicht allein ist Tod.
  \item Tod ist, wenn einer lebt und es nicht weiß.
  \item Tod ist, wenn einer gar nicht sterben kann.
  \item Vieles ist Tod; man kann es nicht begraben (SW I, p. 225: 667)
\end{itemize}
effort to take the burden of death upon oneself, while the common, banal death of the disengaged individual remains undemanding (‘Ihr Tod ist natürlich banal’, p. 714). Brigge’s death is charged with the strenuousness (‘Anstrengung’) which is avoided in mass, anonymous, medically defined death. This is indeed a death which is ‘gut ausgeführt’ (‘Bei so enormer Produktion ist der einzelne Tod nicht so gut ausgeführt’, p. 713), asserting the self in every part of it and countering the evaporation of the self lamented in the Second Elegy:

Wie Tau von dem Frühgras
hebt sich das Unsre von uns, wie die Hitze von einem heißen Gericht. (SW I, p. 690: 25)

‘Der eigene Tod’ is the retention, or the creation, of what is ‘ours’ in death. Later I will argue that the effort to die the summation of one’s life in Rilke’s poetry is the effort of writing.

1.2 The Fruit of the ‘Death of one’s Own’

Brigge’s authentic death is born out of him organically, as an authentic expression of his inner self, and Graff argues that this rebirthing stands in contrast to the artificial ways in which humans normally relate to death:

We have become so accustomed to embellishing death with trivial make-up that civilization has turned the undertaker’s parlor into a beauty shop […] It is necessary that birth be given again to a vigorous death, a death which man is prepared to recognize as his, and which every artist is called upon to presage and forshadow. (1956, p. 231)

Graff is referring to the Fifth Elegy in which Madame Lamort embodies the prettifying of death, the cosmetic illusion of living presence where the genuine colour of death is ‘unwahr gefärbt’ (SW I, p. 705: 95). In Malte Rilke portrays the birthing of one’s own death in the imagery of fruition:16

Früher wußte man (oder vielleicht man ahnte es), daß man den Tod in sich hatte wie die Frucht den Kern. Die Kinder hatten einen kleinen in sich und die Erwachsenen einen großen. Die Frauen hatten ihn im Schoß und die

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16 Graff describes how Rilke understands death as an organic part of life (1956, p. 230).
Männer in der Brust. Den hatte man, und das gab einem eine eigentümliche Würde und einen stillen Stolz. (p. 71)

The organic, authentic death, integrated and gestated throughout life, is the fruit of death, the dignity of the undivided human being, contrasting with the degradation of the technological, consumerist death in modern day Paris. The life pregnant with death is an image of paradoxical simultaneity:

Und was gab das den Frauen für eine wehmütige Schönheit, wenn sie schwanger waren und standen, und in ihrem großen Leib, auf welchem die schmalen Hände unwillkürlich liegen blieben, waren zwei Früchte: ein Kind und ein Tod. (p. 715)

Death as the fruit of life is a death which is not estranged from, but embedded in, individual selves. The trees of life and death in ‘Ich liebe meines Wesens Dunkelstunden’ and in the letter to Lotte Hepner (‘blüht ein Baum, so blüht so gut der Tod in ihm wie das Leben’, 8.11.1915, *Briefe 1914-21*, p. 90) convey the natural equanimity of life and death in the organic world which the fruit of the ‘eigener Tod’ attempts to encompass. The *Stunden-Buch* proffers the death-fruit as the synthesis of life and death:

Denn wir sind nur die Schale und das Blatt.  
Der große Tod, den jeder in sich hat,  
Das ist die Frucht, um die sich alles dreht. (*SW* I, p. 347)

asking that it might be ripened rather than repressed within us:

Dort ist der Tod. Nicht jener, dessen Grüße  
sie in der Kindheit wundersam gestreift, -  
der kleine Tod, wie man ihn dort begreift;  
 ihr eigener hängt grün und ohne Süße  
wie eine Frucht in ihnen, die nicht reift. (*SW* I, p. 347)\(^{17}\)

\(^{17}\) When Franz Xaver Kappus writes to Rilke for advice about fits of melancholy Rilke insists that all illnesses must be confronted, not repressed for they ‘treten […] nur zurück und brechen nach einer kleinen Pause um so furchtbarer aus; und sammeln sich an im Innern und sind Leben, ein ungelebtes, verschmähtes, verlorenes Leben, an dem man sterben kann’ (12.8.1904, *B.a.J.D.*, p. 43). The non-repression of illness and negativity in life is considered by Rilke to be a way of avoiding a stillborn life and a stillborn death.  
This stanza is preceded by images of the senselessness of human activity in the modern world which erodes personal validity and predestines individuals to an anonymous death institutionalised in hospitals. This kind of death is an impoverishment (‘klein’, Malte, p. 20) of the ‘great’ death which greets humans in childhood when they are wholly themselves (‘der große Tod’, ‘Denn wir sind nur die Schale’, SB, SW I, p. 347). It is an unpalatable death, as stunted and deficient as the life it came from.

The following poem from the Stundenbuch makes explicit that non-integrated, impersonal death can only ever be regressive and never productive:

Herr: Wir sind ärmer denn die armen Tiere,  
die ihres Todes enden, wenn auch blind,  
weil wir noch alle ungestorben sind.  
Den gieb uns, der die Wissenschaft gewinnt,  
das Leben aufzubinden in Spaliere,  
um welche zeitiger der Mai beginnt.  

Denn dieses macht das Leben fremd und schwer,  
dass es nicht unser Tod ist; einer der  
uns endlich nimmt, nur weil wir keinen reifen.  
Drum geht ein Sturm, uns alle abzustreifen.

Wir stehn in deinem Garten Jahr und Jahr  
und sind die Bäume, süßen Tod zu tragen;  
aber wir altern in den Erntetagen,  
und so wie Frauen, welche du geschlagen,  
sind wir verschlossen, schlecht und unfmchtbar.

Oder ist meine Hoffahrt ungerecht:  
sind Bäume besser? Sind wir nur Geschlecht  
und Schooß von Frauen, welche viel gewahren? –  
Wir haben mit der Ewigkeit gehurt,  
und wenn das Kreißbett da ist, so gebären  
wir unseres Todes tete Fehlguburt;  
den krummen, kummmervollen Embryo,  
der sich (als ob ihn Schreckliches erschreckte)  
die Augenkeime mit den Händen deckte  
und dem schon auf der ausgebauten Stirne  
die Angst von allem steht, was er nicht litt, -  
und alle schliessen so wie eine Dirne  
in Kindbettkrämpfen und am Kaiserschnitt. (SW I, p. 348-9)

The last stanza offers miscarriage as an image of the repression of death. The foetal fruit is contorted and cowering in the terror of death, the fear of ‘was er nicht litt’, what

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18 Rilke’s vision of a ‘great’ or an authentic death is linked to that of an authentic life. The two must be in relation if either are to be whole: ‘Wer den Tod recht versteht und feiert, der macht auch das Leben groß’ (22.11.1900, WTB, p. 358).
has not been integrated into existence. This fruit is ‘ungestorben’, i.e. it has not let itself be swollen with the pain and suffering, the negative, annihilating side of its existence and therefore it does not die as its whole self. Brigge’s ‘difficult death’ is the difficulty of dying in reconciliation with death, the difficulty of dying the whole of oneself, and this whole can only be whole if death is died in the strangeness that it is. This unripe fruit has not assented to the other side of life, the difficulty of the unknown. It has not dared to take its hands away from its eyes (‘der sich [...] die Augenkeime mit den Händen deckte’) and allow its vision to grow towards death.

The *Sixth Elegy* characterises the fruit of the fig tree as given to death, and juxtaposes the fruit with the hero, whose full heart and life is his dedication to risk and impermanence, and the young dead (‘frühe Hinüberbestimmten’, SW I, p. 706: 16):

Feigenbaum, seit wie lange schon ists mir bedeutend,  
wie du die Blüte beinhah ganz überschlägst  
und hinein in die zeitig entschlossene Frucht,  
ungerühmt, drängst dein reines Geheimnis.  
Wie der Fontäne Rohr treibt dein gebogenes Gezweig  
abwärts den Saft und hinan: und er springt aus dem Schlaf,  
fast nicht erwachend, ins Glück seiner süßesten Leistung.  
Sieh: wie der Gott in den Schwän.

......Wir aber verweilen,  
ach, uns rühmt es zu blühn, und ins verspätete Innre unserer endlichen Frucht gehn wir verraten hinein.  
Wenigen steigt so stark der Andrang des Handelns,  
daß sie schon anstehen und glühn in der Fülle des Herzens,  
wen die Verführung zum Blühn wie gelinderte Nachtluft ihnen die Jugend des Munds, ihnen die Lider berührt:  
Helden vielleicht und den frühe Hinüberbestimmten,  
denen der gärtnende Tod anders die Adern verbiegt.  
Diese stürzen dahin: dem eigenen Lächeln  
sind sie voran, wie das Rossegespann in den milden muldigen Bildern von Karnak dem siegenden König.

Wunderlich nah ist der Held doch den jungen Toten. Dauern ficht ihn nicht an. Sein Aufgang ist Dasein; beständig nimmt er sich fort und tritt ins veränderte Sternbild seiner steten Gefahr. Dort fanden ihn wenige. Aber,  
das uns finster verschweigt, das plötzlich begeisterte Schicksal singt ihn hinein in den Sturm seiner aufrauschenden Welt.  
Hör ich doch keinen wie ihn. Auf einmal durchgeht mich mit der strömenden Luft sein verdunkelter Ton. (SW I, p. 706: 1)

The fig tree, with its sexual associations becomes an image of the virile hero ejaculating in his sleep (the tree’s sap ‘springt aus dem Schlaf’), and the tree’s ‘süßeste Leistung’, its fruit, is both the product and process of organic fertility and the hero’s procreative
orgasm. The tree and the hero represent a transformative power which is imaged in Zeus’s transformation into a physically beautiful, sexually instinctive swan (‘wie der Gott in den Schwan’). The tree, the hero and the god are driven by unconscious urges (‘der Andrang des Handelns’), involuntary intensities such as the erotic dream, which are the will to transform and be transformed and which are contrasted with human self-reflexivity, fear of intensity (‘Wir aber verweilen, ach uns rühmt es zu blühn’) and repression of physical sensation. Humans would prefer to remain in a less vivid state of blossoming, one which is not committed to transformation, and this is linked to their fear of death. The fruit and the orgasm, the peaks of fertility, represent also the immanence of decline and death (the fruit is given to temporality: ‘die zeitig entschlossene Frucht’). But humans prefer to postpone this maturity, this radiant physical ripeness (‘daß sie schon anstehn und glühn in der Fülle des Herzens’), believing that they can somehow deny and stall their transience. The hero and the tree are connected by their organic instinct, and as images of nature they are attuned to and infinitely inspired by death. The hero’s rise (‘Sein Aufgang’) and luminosity suggests a sunrise which always becomes a sunset. His rise is his true existence (‘Sein Aufgang ist Dasein’) because it harbours within it his acceptance of his impermanence (‘Dauern/ficht ihn nicht an’), hence the hero’s relationship with danger (‘seiner steten Gefahr’). The young dead are characterised by the same urgency as the hero. They plunge (‘Diese stürzen dahin’) in delighted anticipation (dem eigenen Lächeln/sind sie voran’) towards their death, and it is this energy which earns them the title ‘the youthful dead’. Death in the tree, the hero and the young dead is entered into with all the vigour and fecundity of youth. The young dead have not yet reached the adult state of consciousness which divides mind and body and represses death. The fruit of their death is ripe and glowing, the infinitely rich and intense fruit of the heart (‘Fülle des Herzens’), whereas the ponderous, late mortal produces an untransformed, infertile,
reductive fruit: 'und ins verspätete Innre/unserer endlichen Frucht gehn wir verraten hinein'.

The Sonette an Orpheus abound with the fruits of death. Fruit is the embodiment of both life and death ('Voller Apfel, Birne und Banane, Stachelbeere... Alles dieses spricht/Tod und Leben in den Mund', SO I, 13, SW I, p. 739) and the dead in the earth nourish its fruits (SO I, 14, SW I, pp. 739-40). Fruit is born of, and returns to, the earth, reactivating life. 'Schwer' becomes central to the return to the earth and expresses the heaviness of the earth in its melancholic contingency on death:

Füchtet euch nicht zu leiden, die Schwere,
gebt sie zurück an der Erde Gewicht;
schwer sind die Berge, schwer sind die Meere. (SO I, 4, SW I, p. 733)

The psychic weight and burden of death, then, is identified with the gravitational pull towards the realm of the dead, the soil of life's renewal and the possibility of equilibrium. The Tenth Elegy ends on this attraction to the fertile earth and death:

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

Und wir, die an steigendes Glück
denken, empfänden die Rührung,
die uns beinahe bestürzt,
wenng ein Glückliches fällt. (SW I, p. 726: 108)

As the catkins fall to their death in the earth and the rain falls on the soil it is spring and there is the joyful promise of plant growth. In the later poem, 'Odette R...', life similarly climaxes in suffering and transformation:

Tränen, die innigsten, steigen!

O wenn ein Leben

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24 The milky sap of the fig tree has cross-cultural associations with fertility and immortality. In north Africa the fig is the symbol of fertility imparted by the dead (Chevalier and Gheerbrant (1996), pp. 377-8). The Sixth Elegy's nocturnal emission may be drawing on this symbolism.


26 In a letter Rilke writes of the impenetrable secret of the earth's connectedness to a greater whole: 'O daß der Mensch dieses Geheimnis, dessen die Erde voll ist bis in ihre kleinsten Dinge, demütiger empfinde und ernster trüge, ertrüge und fühle, wie schrecklich schwer es ist, statt es leicht zu nehmen' (16.7.1903, Bra.ej.D, pp. 24-5).
völlig stieg und aus Wolken des eigenen Herzleids
niederfällt: so nennen wir Tod diesen Regen.

Aber fühlbarer wird darüber, uns Armen, das dunkle -,
köstlicher wird, uns Reichen, darüber das seltsame Erdreich. (1922, SW II, p. 251)²⁷

The soil of the individual is enriched by death and suffering, made stranger and more fertile, and this organic imagery of 'der eigene Tod' recurs in the first draft of the ending of Malte:

Wenn Gott ist, so ist alles getan und wir sind triste, überzählige Überlebende, für die es gleichgültig ist, mit welcher Scheinhandlung sie sich hinbringen. Sahen wirs nicht? Hat nicht jener große Todesfürchtige, da er immer geiziger einging auf einen seienden und gemeinsamen Gott, das gesegnete Erdreich seiner Natur zerstört? (p. 967)²⁸

The word ‘Gott’ could be replaced by ‘Tod’ here, for if the individual does not create and mature death individually a weak, common ('gemeinsam') death in the barren ground of the soul is the meagre product. The Rilkean impetus is to bring forth one’s own death and one’s own God outside conventional narratives of life and death. The heaviness of death, its 'Schwersein' on human consciousness, is also depicted in organic imagery in the Tenth Elegy as 'unser winterwähriges Laub, unser dunkelles Sinngrün' (SW I, p. 721: 13). Humanity is accused of anticipating the cessation of suffering ('Wir, Vergeuder der Schmerzen./Wie wir sie absehn voraus, in die traurige Dauer,/ob sie nicht enden vielleicht' (SW I, p. 721: 10), of wasting the opportunity to transform death by welcoming it as 'Stelle, Siedelung, Lager, Boden, Wohnort' (SW I, p. 721: 15), by taking up residence within it (here the uterine image is turned around, and we take refuge within death rather than death occupying a place within us, but this in-dwelling ranges across the whole spectrum of innerness, allowing for the paradox that death is in us if we are in it).

Orpheus, as the mediator between life and death, gestates the fruit of death: 'Alles wird Weinberg, alles wird Traube,/in seinemfühlenden Süden gereift' (SO I, 7, SW I, p. 735). He proffers fruit across the boundary:

²⁷ See Biggs who argues that physical death for Rilke is a process of dissolution by which humans are freed from the earth by becoming part of it (1967, p. 348, footnote 7).
²⁸ Graff identifies that in Rilke's work God and death do not pre-exist the living, rather they are made in the minds of the living: 'the ripening of death as Rilke understands it is just as conscious-unconscious as the ripening of God. It is the result of an inner transformation which strengthens life, not of morose reflection which saps energy and robs life of its fullness' (1956, p. 233).
Er ist einer der bleibenden Boten,
Der noch weit in die Türe der Toten
Schalen mit rühmlichen Früchten hält. (SO I, 7, SW I, p. 735)

A ripe fruit would testify to an inner relationship to both life and death within individuals. Himmel points out another image of inadequate death-fruit emerging from inauthentic life in the Fifth Elegy, contrasting the ‘Scheinfrucht/[...] der Unlust’ (SW I, pp. 701-2: 23) of the acrobats, ‘glänzend mit dünnster/Oberfläche’ (SW I, p. 702: 25) with the ‘Schale’ of genuine fruit (1975, p. 129). 29 The underdeveloped fruit has settled for the mere suggestion of skin as the acrobats give only a superficial performance. Their art forms part of the sham, ornamental world of ‘Madame Lamort’ (90) and they might be compared to the actors in ‘Todes-Erfahrung’ who perform in a world of semblances. Hartman offers a further exploration of the meaning of fruit, saying that while, ‘the fate pursued by the acrobats is man-willed and artificial, the fate of the rest of creation is a compliance, secret, immanent, inevitable, to Nature’s purpose and fertility’ (1954, p. 80). Hartman brings out here ‘den eigenen Tod’’s assent to life’s natural inclination towards death as an inclination also towards new birth. He argues that the acrobats try to fuse themselves ‘into a human design that would mimic the automatic and immanent fertility of the natural world’ in vain for they traverse only three seasons, omitting winter, the season in which life is renewed, and therefore produce unripe fruit, not ‘pure physical fruit’ (pp. 79-80). Madame Lamort produces ‘die billigen/Winterhüte des Schicksals’ (DE 5, SW I, p. 705: 95), not giving the full weight to winter, and the poetic voice asks ‘Wo, o wo ist der Ort [...] wo die Gewichte noch schwer sind’ (DE 5, SW I, p. 704: 76). This elegy is a lament for the authentic, ripe heavi ness (‘Schwere’) of death.

1.3 The Burden of Death’s Difference

Rilke often writes of his own attempts to live in the constant presence of ‘das Schwere’:

> In der Militär-Schule sah ich es zuerst ein; später im Infanteristen-Rock. Und nun wieder: wie doch jeder Kreatur gewissermassen nur jenes Schwere widerfährt, das auf der Ebene ihrer Kräfte liegt, wenn auch diese dann oft bei weitem übersteigend.

29 See also: ‘Schafft die Verwandtschaft/mit der reinen, sich weigernden Schale’ (SO I, 15, SW I, p. 740: 12).
Wir aber, die wir in dem unfaßlichen Durchschnittspunkt so vieler verschiedener und einander widersprechenden Umwelten stehen, kommen in die Lage, plötzlich von einem Schweren überfalen zu sein, das mit unserem Können und seiner Übung in keiner Weise zusammenhängt: einem fremden Schweren.

[…]

Humans are conscious of something which seems to threaten them with its complexity (they stand confused at the crossroads of 'so vieler verschiedener und einander widersprechenden Umwelten'). It is a consciousness of their own limitations and simplifications in the presence of so much that is unknown about existence. It is the pressure of strangeness and unlimitedness on human faculties of understanding (the 'Verwirrung im unabgegrenzten, nach allen Seiten neugierigen Menschlichen').

Rilke is determined to expose himself to the everything ('alles') of the unlimited, and the verb 'begegnen', which appears at the end of the first quotation, marks this meeting. 'Das Schwere' is the pain and excess of 'everything' on the human, a pressing against the contours of received, preconceived ideas which resist the confusing experience of strangeness and newness. Rilke writes to Gräfin Sizzo of the bewildering conflation of polar opposites: 'Alle die scheinbaren Gegenteile, die irgendwo, in einem Punkte zusammenkommen, die an einer Stelle die Hymne ihrer Hochzeit singen – und diese Stelle ist – vor der Hand – unser Herz!' (6.1.1923, Sizzo, p. 32).

30 Wallace Stevens writes of 'The human end in the spirit's greatest reach/The extreme of the known in the presence of the extreme/Of the unknown' ('To an Old Philosopher in Rome', Collected Works, p. 508).
31 About the freedom of the animal as opposed to the human the Eighth Elegy says:

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. (SW I, p. 715: 38)

And Rilke writes to a young girl of the burden of the life within the 'Alles', an 'everything' which implores the human to live life in its greatest intensity - its summation: 'Jungen Menschen mochte ich immer nur dieses eine sagen [...] – daß wir uns an das Schwere halten müssen; das ist unser Teil. Wir müssen so tief ins Leben hinein gehen, daß es auf uns liegt und Last ist; nicht Lust soll um uns sein, sondern Leben' (20.11.1904, Briefe I, p. 106).
The unity of life and death is a convoluted and incomprehensible phenomenon, and ‘schwer’ refers to this difficult paradox, but this unity must be conceived within the human, within the ‘heart’. Rilke is conscious of the interpenetration of internal and external space. Otherness is the sense of what is beyond the human but the human becomes aware of otherness from within humanity’s limitation, for the limit evokes its opposite. The living are complete if they can push themselves to bear the weight of death’s extremity:

Man sollte nicht fürchten, daß unsere Kraft nicht hinreichte, irgend eine, und sei es die nächste und sei es die schrecklichste, Todeserfahrung zu ertragen; der Tod ist nicht über unsere Kraft, er ist der Maßstrich am Rande des Gefäßes: wir sind voll, so oft wir ihn erreichen -, und Voll-sein heißt (für uns) Schwer-sein ... das ist Alles. (6.1.1923, Sizzo, p. 54)

Rilke’s prayer that this burden of the Other may be personalised (‘im Eigenen’) as ‘mein Schwere’, as personal, authentic hardship, is a prayer for the internalisation of all that difference and for the self-recognition and self-completion which issues from contact with otherness. It is only in the confrontation with what is most difficult, most alien and most annihilating that the poet Rilke can authentically experience himself. The self must willingly surrender the contours to which it is accustomed and enter into its ‘Untergang’, and the dynamic at the beginning of the First Elegy is precisely this combination of terror and seduction:


The angel here represents the enormous beauty of the incomprehensible Other which is only just bearable, and Rilke rearticulates the determination not to retreat before ‘das Schwere’ as a commitment to the whole of life in all its contradictory aspects:

[...] daß das Schwere, indem wir es tragen, das Leichte ist (weil wir im Grunde Riesenkräfte haben), daß aber das Leichte tragen zu wollen eine Veruntreueung ist, ein Sich-Dem-Leben-Entziehen, ein Ausweichen vor ihm. (To Clara, 9.7.1904, Briefe 1902-06, p. 195)
The poet’s task is to take on difficulty, not settle for the facile, for there is creative potential in that which is intricate and not easily said: ‘Alle Erleichterungen, wie eindringlich sie sein mögen, wirken nicht bis dorthin, wo das Schwere sich freut, schwer zu sein’ (Über den jungen Dichter, p. 1055). I will discuss this creative, linguistic aspect of ‘das Schwere’ in the coming chapters.

In the quotations above Rilke does not define ‘das Schwere’, so the language of death and destruction may be metaphorical, but in Malte he also writes of confrontation with actual death in a similar vein, and it is difficult to keep the two apart:


Here there is a conflation of that which is threateningly outside of the human and that which is authentically its own. The notion of ‘Eigentum’ occurs in the ‘mein Schweres’ of ‘ich glaube, daß ich, schon als Kind, nie um etwas anderes gebetet habe, als um mein Schweres’. The destructive, alien perspective is death itself, alien because, as Malte comes to realise, the natural human tendency is to put it outside of oneself rather to recognise it as an integral part of one’s identity and strength. Self-realisation is a journey to the outermost extremes of thinking and a reaching out to the

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33 Graff agrees that the Rilkean artist lures death ‘into the intimacy of his own being’ but regards this as the artist’s immunisation of death’s ‘otherness and strangeness’ (1956, p. 228). My argument is that this otherness is not diminished in the Rilkean transformation, rather that it is accepted as otherness.

34 In a letter to Sidonie Nádherný Rilke refers to: ‘mein Schweres […] das sich nicht zum Leichtern beirren läßt’. (3.11.1908, Nádherný, p. 90)

35 Rilke stresses again elsewhere that it takes an enormous effort to be authentically oneself, to fetch out and confront the strange material of the self, saying that people engage with their existence ‘(mit Hilfe von Konventionen) alles nach dem Leichten hin gelöst und nach des Leichten leichtesten Seite; es ist aber klar, daß wir uns an das Schwere halten müssen; alles Lebendige hält sich daran, alles in der Natur wächst und wehrt sich nach seiner Art und ist ein Eigenes aus sich heraus … Einsamkeit ist schwer, daß es schwer ist, muß uns ein Grund sein, es zu tun’ (quoted in Nolte, 1934, p. 36).
self's most precious, exiled spaces. Human beings have banished heaven (the infinite) and death because they are outsized, undefined and too difficult, but they can overcome dread if they undergo a trial of strength. Individuals must expend their maximum energy in confrontation with worlds which exceed and oppress them. Rilke’s Duino angel embodies the excessive inconceivability of death, death which should not be understood as extinction but as the affliction of an intensity (‘Schwere’) which can never be matched in the superficial treatment of death:

Nur vom Tode her (wenn man ihn nicht als ein Abgestorbenensein gelten läßt, sondern ihn vermutet als die uns durchaus übertreffende Intensität), nur vom Tode her, mein ich, läßt sich der Liebe gerecht werden. (To Lisa Heise 19.1.1920, Briefe II, p. 169)

Malte’s attempt to fetch in through his ‘Todesfurcht’ that which appears to negate identity is therefore, paradoxically, an attempt to recover it. Malte describes human repression of the horrors of existence as a conformism which denies the expansiveness of the human heart:

Die Existenz des Entsetzlichen in jedem Bestandteil der Luft. Du atmest es ein mit Durchsichtigem; in dir aber schlägt es sich nieder, wird hart, nimmt spitze, geometrische Formen an zwischen den Organen; denn alles, was sich an Qual und Grauen begeben hat auf den Richtplätzen [...] alles das ist von einer zählen Unvergänglichkeit, alles das besteht auf sich und hängt, eifersüchtig auf alles Seiende, an seiner schrecklichen Wirklichkeit. Die

36 Another of these is sexuality, and Rilke writes of the repression of the physical in Christian teaching in Der Brief des jungen Arbeisters, saying that sex has been marginalised whereas it should be celebrated as the human being’s link to eternity (SW VI, 1111-27, pp. 1124-5). Rilke locates the modern individual’s estrangement from existence and the earth in her estrangement from death and sexuality (see also 16.7.1903, Br.a.e.j.D, p. 24, where Rilke rearticulates this). The assertion that sex is ‘das Geheimnis meines eigenen Lebens’ evokes the “death of one’s own” in the First Elegy where the dead are the necessary secret ‘Geheimnisse’ of the living: ‘Wir, die so große Geheimnisse brauchen, [...] könntent wir sein ohne sie?’ (SW I, p. 688: 88).

37 See Buddeberg (1954, p. 192), and Peters (1960, p. 15), on the Rilkean transformation in which fear becomes a strength. The Fifth Elegy expresses this principle of consumption of strength as increase in strength in a mathematical paradox:

Und plötzlich in diesem mühsamen Nirgends, plötzlich

die unsägliche Stelle, wo sich das reine Zuwenig

unbegreiflich verwandelt -, umspringt

in jenes leere Zuviel.

Wo die vielseitige Rechnung

zahlenlos aufgeht. (SW I, p. 704: 82)

Menschen möchten vieles davon vergessen dürfen […]. Und sie wachen auf und keuchen und lassen einer Kerze Schein sich auflösen in der Finsternis und trinken, wie gezuckertes Wasser, die halbhelle Beruhigung. […] Besser vielleicht, du wärst in der Dunkelheit geblieben und dein unabgegrenztes Herz hätte versucht, all des Ununterscheidbaren schweres Herz zu sein. […] daß auch das Unerhörte binnen werden muß und sich beschränken den Verhältnissen nach. […] Dort hebt es sich, dort übersteigt es dich […] Dein Herz treibt dich aus dir hinaus […] und dein bisschen obere Härte und Anpassung ist ohne Sinn. (pp. 776-7)

The horrors of reality solidify in human consciousness and paralyse the will. People try to forget their fear of death, deluding themselves that there is no darker side to their existence. Malte suspects that to allow the heart to be burdened (‘schweres Herz’) with darkness is actually to expose oneself to the authentic centre of existence, to mortality, the unthinkable (‘Unerhörte’) and the inextricably paradoxical (‘das Ununterscheidbare’). This mortality is a force which seems too strong to be borne, but from which, if permitted, strength can be gained, the strength and release of the expansive consciousness (‘unabgegrenztes Herz’), the strength to tolerate more than before.40

1.4 The Inspiration of the Outside

In the First Elegy the burden of death is its strangeness, the challenge it issues to human dependency on the customary, the predictable, the intact:

Freilich ist es seltsam, die Erde nicht mehr zu bewohnen, kaum erlernte Gebräuche nicht mehr zu üben, Rosen, und andern eigens versprechenden Dingen nicht die Bedeutung menschlicher Zukunft zu geben; das, was man war in unendlich ängstlichen Händen, nicht mehr zu sein, und selbst den eigenen Namen wegzulassen wie ein zerbrochenes Spielzeug. Seltsam, die Wünsche nicht weiterzuwünschen. Seltsam, alles, was sich bezog, so lose im Raume flattern zu sehen. Und das Totsein ist mühsam und voller Nachholn, daß man allmählich ein wenig

39 Blanchot agrees that Rilke’s poetry offers ‘our promptness at disappearing, our aptitude for perishing, our fragility, our exhaustion, our gift for death’ (1982, p. 140).
40 The lack of this strength is lamented in Requiem für Wolf Graf von Kalckreuth: ‘Was hast du nicht gewartet, daß die Schwere/ganz unerträglich wird: da schlägt sie um/und ist so schwer, weil sie so echt ist’ (SW I, p. 660: 31). See the letter to Lotte Hepner for Rilke’s comments on Tolstoy’s fear of death and the potential strength in this fear which could have become his freedom (8.11.1915, Briefe 1914-21, pp. 92-3).
Death is ‘mühsam’, laborious and difficult, because it is uncanny. It breaks continuity ('Seltsam, die Wünsche nicht weiterzuwünschen'), relation and groundedness and yet it is this disconnectedness ('Seltsam, alles, was sich bezog, so lose im Raume/flattern zu sehen') which touches the eternal. The Ninth Elegy discovers ‘das Ganze’ in precisely this breakage and undoing, for this is an experience of mortality itself as completion.

‘Überzähliges Dasein’ (SW I, p. 720: 79) is located in ‘dieses Schwindende’, SW I, p. 717: 12), in the ‘ein Mal gewesen zu sein’ (SW I, p. 717: 16) of the transient life, for it is life’s capacity to be past tense which is its authentic, complete ‘Sein’. The pain and oppression (‘Also die Schmerzen. Also vor allem das Schwersein,’ SW I, p. 718: 25) of the finity of human life are what lift it ‘in den andern Bezug’ (SW I, p. 717: 22), into the completedness of an existence which comprises both life and death. The mortal human is one of the ‘von Hingang/lebenden Dinge’ (SW I, p. 719: 63), given to the earth and its seasons whose ‘heiliger Einfall/ist der vertrauliche Tod’ (SW I, p. 720: 76). The Ninth Elegy discovers holiness and the infinite in what is intensely present temporally and spatially on the earth (‘ein Mal:/irdisch gewesen zu sein’, SW I, p. 717: 26) and does not continue beyond it. This elegy is a celebration of life saturated with death. Life which

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41 If death’s true reality is not simply what from the outside we call quitting life – if death is something other than its worldly reality, and if it eludes us, turning always away – then this movement makes us sense not only its discretion and its essential intimacy but also its profound unreality: death as abyss, not that which founds but the absence and the loss of all foundation’ (Blanchot, 1982, p. 154).

42 In a letter Rilke explains the transformation of transient earthly things in The Duino Elegies. It is not a Christian transformation towards a transcendent world in a beyond which has never known death, but an insubstantiation of the visible, tangible and transient into a purely ‘earthly consciousness’: ‘in einem rein irdischen, tief irdischen, selig irdischen Bewußtsein. [...] Die Natur, die Dinge unseres Umgangs und Gebrauchs, sind Vorläufigkeiten und Hinfälligkeiten; aber sie sind, solang wir hier sind, unser Besitz und unsere Freundschaft, Mitwisser unserer Not und Froheit’ (to Witold von Hulewicz, 13.11.1925, Musot, p. 373). The earthly consciousness is the transience and suffering within us and within the things of the earth which should be celebrated. See also: ‘Ein Armer muß man sein bis ins zehnte Glied. [...] Aber man muß, über sie hinaus, die Wurzeln fühlen und die Erde selbst. Man muß jeden Augenblick die Hand auf die Erde legen können wie der erste Mensch’ (20.10.1907, Cézanne, p. 40). This discourse of the ‘Erde’ is focused on ‘Sein’ or ‘Dasein’: ‘Aber wie sehr ist, was uns begegnet, aus einem Stück, in welcher Verwandtschaft steht eines zum anderen, hat sich geboren und wächst heran und wird erzogen zu sich selbst, und wir haben Gründe nur dazustehen, aber schlicht, aber inständig wie die Erde da ist, den Jahreszeiten zustimmend, hell und dunkel und ganz im Raum, nicht verlangend, in anderem aufzurufen als in dem Netz von Einflüssen und Kräften, in dem die Sterne sicher fühlen’ (19.10.1907, Cézanne, p. 35). In a letter from Spain Rilke writes of his experience of the ‘earth’ in the gaze of an animal, an experience which elaborates into a cosmic communion: ‘[die Hündin] hob ihre von Sorge und Innerlichkeit vergrößerten Augen auf und begehrte meinen Blick, - und in dem ihren war wahrhaftig alles, was über den Einzelnen hinausgeht, ich weiß nicht wohin, in die Zukunft oder ins Unbegreifliche; es löste sich so, daß sie ein Stück Zucker von meinem Kaffee abbekam, aber nebenbei, o so nebenbei, wir lasen gewissermaßen zusammen, die Handling war an sich nicht als Geben und Annehmen, aber der Sinn und der Ernst und unsere Verständigung war grenzenlos. Das kann doch nur auf Erden geschehen, es ist auf alle Fälle gut, hier willig durchzugehen zu sein, wenn auch unsicher, wenn auch schuldig, wenn auch ganz und gar nicht heldenhaft, - man wird am Ende wunderbar auf göttliche
34

absorbs rather than represses its immanent transience, its terminal essence, achieves superabundant, intensive being. It is a living contradiction, a locus in which past, present and future are simultaneous and mutually reinforcing: ‘Weder Kindheit noch Zukunft/werden weniger’ (SW I, p. 720: 78). Existence in the Ninth Elegy is richer for its suffusion with both presence and absence, and the infinite is located in any mortal moment which immeasurably spans these poles. Rilke writes of possible fullness within the transient instant:

Wir brauchen die Ewigkeit, denn nur sie gibt unseren Gesten Raum; und doch wissen wir uns in enger Endlichkeit. Wir müssen also innerhalb dieser Schranken eine Unendlichkeit schaffen, da wir an die Grenzenlosigkeit nicht mehr glauben. (FTB, p. 62)

He goes on: ‘Seid nur einen Tag unmodem, dann werdet ihr sehen, wieviel Ewigkeit ihr in euch habt’ (FTB, p. 67). In a letter he writes of death’s demand that we exhaust every part of life:

Das Hiersein als eine Seite des Seins überhaupt zu verstehen und leidenschaftlich zu erschöpfen, das wäre die Anforderung des Todes an uns, während das Leben, wo man es nur wahrhat, an jeder Stelle das ganze Leben ist. (To Ilse Erdmann, 9.10.1915, Briehe II, p. 47)

Elsewhere he writes of the intense being made possible in transience: ‘Die Vergänglichkeit stürzt überall in ein tiefes Sein’ (to Witold von Hulewicz, 13.11.1925, Muzot, p. 373).

The unity of existence as articulated in the singular moment of mortal presence is the embeddedness of death in life, for each instant of life faces both ways – into life and death (recalling the ‘abgewendete Seite’ of the moon, 6.1.1923, Sizzo, p. 53). In Sonnet II, 3 mirrors are described as ‘Zwischenräume der Zeit’ (SW I, p. 752) and Rilke locates


43 For a description of the Rilkean eternal moment as a moment of the full consciousness of transience see Krumme (1988, p. 161). The Seventh Elegy also imagines an immeasurable existence within time:


44 Rilke argues that Christian thinking has centred human consciousness on postponement so that the dead are pushed to the periphery and authentic human existence becomes an estranged vision of the future rather than an experience of dwelling on the earth in the present (6.1.1923, Briehe an Gröf en Sizzo, pp. 49-51). Rilke may have been inspired in this by the conversation between Niels and Dr. Hjerrild in Jacobsen’s Niels Lyhne, when Niels speaks of the intensity of the atheist life on the earth and the possibility of an individual death (pp. 160-1).
death ‘in den Zwischenräumen’ of life (to Regina Ullmann 2.11.1914, Muzot, p. 394). Himmel explores this double-sidedness of existence in the motif of the mirror which offers an unreal, different space, an access to the other side (1975, p. 104). Here is cited the possibility of excess experience, of contact with the other side of existence, the side which is turned away from the familiar, and I read Rilke’s poetry as the intimation of otherness from right within the mortal fabric of life.

Rilke parts the curtain which screens real space and time in a letter to Balthus, the son of Baladine Klossowska, inviting him to slip through the confines of time and take possession of his leap year birthday (29.2.1921, Briefe II, pp. 222-3). It is an invitation to make an imaginative journey into an infinite space now, contradicting the Christian narrative which places eternity after death and which claims that eternity is a real possibility in a literal sense. The reality of Rilke’s infinite is in the real effects it has upon the living imagination. In the letter to Balthus cited above, imaginary space exists as a ‘cleft’ in reality (‘le “Crac”’, ‘cette fente secrète et nocturne’), embedded as a possibility within it, different to, and making a breach in, the tangible and the literal. Death is this timeless possibility of imagination in Rilke’s poetry, a turning towards the bounds of interpreted reality in order to destabilise them. Death offers an ultimate contradiction, and a life which faces this contradiction is a life permeated with death, infinite in its realisation of paradox.

The barriers to an infinite thinking are broken in the turning towards death and darkness. The Rilkean night is often an image of death, imagination and otherness. Day distorts the world with visibility whereas at night contours vanish in the darkness, the world becomes less finite and bounded, and humans can merge with this bodyless space. The following poem enacts the movement towards unification with night and the dark earth, the representatives of death, which is grounded in the human’s assent to difference:

Nacht. Oh du in Tiefe gelöstes
Gesicht an meinem Gesicht.
Du, meines staunenden Anschauns großtes
Übergewicht.

Nacht, in meinem Blicke erschauernd,
aber in sich so fest;
unerschöpfliche Schöpfung, dauernd
über dem Erdenrest;

voll von jungen Gestirnen, die Feuer
aus der Flucht ihres Saums
schleudern ins lautlose Abenteuer
des Zwischenraums:

wie, durch dein bloßes Dasein, erscheine ich,
Übertrefferin, klein -;
doch, mit der dunklen Erde einig,
wag ich es, in dir zu sein. (1924, SW II, pp. 178-9)

Night here is felt to be ineffably dispersed ('Oh du in Tiefe gelöstes/Gesicht') and too burdensome ('Übergewicht'; 'Übertrefferin') to bear. The poetic 'I' fears dissolution as this night, strangely solid ('in sich so fest') in its elusiveness, bears down upon its physical contours ('Gesicht an meinem Gesicht'), but is drawn towards its undisclosed expansiveness ('ins lautlose Abenteuer') and the strangeness of its space ('Zwischenraum'). It is a seduction into lovemaking through the caress of a cheek, and the poetic 'I' dares to step beyond its contours, losing its self-reflexivity and entering into the pure being ('bloßes Dasein') of that which knows no limitation and is a paradoxical 'unerschöpfliche Schöpfung', an ever-becoming creation. It is an experience of completion within the unfinished and the ungrasped, completion and expansion of known, interpretable life in the unknowability of death, an overcoming of the division between consciousness and nature.

The poetic 'I' seeks relation with darkness ('mit der dunklen Erde einig'), and the Fourth Elegy declares 'Wir sind nicht einig' (SW I, p. 697: 2), identifying this dividedness as the bias towards life and the aversion to life's other, darker season – death: 'O Bäume des Lebens, o wann winterlich?' (SW I, p. 697: 1). Rather than repel the threatening otherness the poem 'Nacht. Oh du in Tiefe gelöstes' invokes it in its hymnic addressing of the night. Yet the invocation of dissolution is paradoxically what intensifies existence, what gives it 'Kraft'. The poetic 'I' dares to regard itself as still capable of completion, dares to pass beyond the false, man-made boundaries of selfhood and covet a place as a mere part within a whole. The poem celebrates existence as 'Sein' within something else: 'in dir zu sein.' Dissolution of the self is a decentering of the self, an entering into relation with the non-self. Dissolution expands rather than contracts, bestowing on the self the potential of a becoming which it did not have when it was intact. 'Der eigene Tod', then, is the self becoming whole in its integration of the other side of its existence – its death. The difficulty of this unification

45 This unification with the Other is erotic, and Rilke writes of copulation as the fusion of consciousness to timelessness in a letter to Franz Xaver Kappus (Br.a.e.j.D., 16.7.1903, pp. 23-5). In this letter, many years before he explored the consent to death in 'Nacht. Oh du in Tiefe gelöstes', he identifies the erotic burden which asks the sexes to learn communion in the confrontation and sufferance of their contradictions.
is conveyed in the poetic ‘I’’s risk-taking in daring to abandon its stable and familiar structures, and the First Elegy also evokes the difficulty of this transgression of boundary in the imagery of the face:

$$O \text{und die Nacht, die Nacht, wenn der Wind voller Weltraum}
uns am Angesicht zehrt -, wem bliebe sie nicht, die ersehnte,
sanft enttäuschende, welche dem einzelnen Herzen
mühsam bevorsteht. (SW I, p. 685: 18)$$

As the wind erodes the face, beginning the destruction of the human, it brings to that face the challenging expanse of universal space. This wind of the night is both threatening and compelling, promising tranquillity and permanence after the hardship (‘mühsam’) of dissolution.46

The poetic ‘I’ in ‘Nacht. Oh du in Tiefe gelöstes’ crosses the boundary towards merger with death, towards a being within death and away from opposition to it. The Eighth Elegy describes the difficulty of this merger for humans who see boundaries and feel separation at every turn:

$$Wir haben nie, nicht einen einzigen Tag,
den reinen Raum vor uns, in den die Blumen
unendlich aufgehörn. Immer ist es Welt
und niemals Nirgends ohne Nicht: das Reine,
Unüberwachte, das man atmet und
unendlich weiß und nicht begehrt. Als Kind
verliert sich eins im Stilln an dies und wird
gerüttelt. Oder jener stirbt und ists.
Denn nah am Tod sieht man den Tod nicht mehr
und startt hinaus, vielleicht mit großem Tierblick. [...]
Dieses heißt Schicksal: gegenüber sein
und nichts als das und immer gegenüber. (SW I, p. 714: 14)$$

There are a number of interchangeable terms in this elegy which refer to what is on either side of the boundary. ‘Welt’, ‘Schicksal’ and ‘Gegenübersein’ appear in the quoted lines, and ‘Gestaltung’ and ‘Zukunft’ elsewhere. None of these are sufficient on their own to convey human limitation, but their mutual impact suggests the human being paralysed within her rigid, analytical, teleological frames of consciousness, unable to partake fully in her existence. The terms used for freedom and timelessness

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46 Another instance of such transition into a less regulated space is Rilke’s experience at Duino, recorded in Erlebnis (SW VI, pp. 1036-42). The experience is one of the interpenetration of internal and external space.
are 'der reine Raum', 'Nirgends ohne Nicht', 'das Reine' and 'das Unüberwachte' in the quoted lines and 'das Offene' (2), 'draußen' (5), 'Ewigkeit' (13), 'das Freie' (30) and 'das Sein' (38) elsewhere. The conscious-unconscious dualism is foregrounded, particularly in opposition between 'Welt' and 'das Unüberwachte', where 'world' is the projection of order and thought and the space of unity with death is unpatrolled by consciousness, offering an unimpeded, integrated, fulfilled and no longer demanding ('und nicht begehrt'), experience represented by breathing and knowing. As consciousness approaches the edge of its boundaries, as it draws closer to death, it begins to acquire a gaze which looks beyond, outside ('hinaus') ingrained preconceptions and sees death no longer as an obstruction and a retardation. Consciousness begins to seek its complementary side – unconsciousness, unlimitedness and communion with death. It is within grief and mortality that the human can become more, can integrate with the unknown and approach the universal 'Raum':

Hier, an dem weinenden schon,
an dem endenden Antlitz,
*um sich greifend*, beginnt der hin-
reißende Weltraum. (‘Überfließende Himmel verschwendeter Sterne’, 1913, *SW* II, p. 54)

Here lament generates an interface between individual and universe, and the extremity of the facial surface in the relation between self and cosmos is evoked again in 'Wir stehn und stemmen uns an unsre Grenzen/und reißen ein Unkenntliches herein' ('O Leben Leben, wunderliche Zeit, 1913/14, *SW*II, p. 411).

'Nacht. Oh du in Tiefe gelöstes' is a poem about relation to wholeness which Rilke elsewhere terms 'der Bezug' ('statt des Besitzes erlernet man den Bezug', Letter to Ilse Jahr 22.2.1923, *Muzot*, p. 196) and Sonnet I, 12 describes this relation thus:

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67 Rilke wrote in his will that he wanted no priestly intervention at his deathbed because this would inhibit his movement towards 'the open': 'to the movement of my soul, toward the open, any spiritual intermediary would be offensive and repugnant' (the only trace of this will I can find is in an English translation, *Letters* II, p. 450). His will reflects the *Eighth Elegy*'s longing for an authentic, non-ideological, unobstructed death which can be called 'Sein' (*SW* I, p. 715: 38).


49 Blanchot, quoting from the *Eighth Elegy*, comments that 'to see only death', is thus the error of a limited life and of a poorly converted consciousness. Death is that very concern to delimit which we introduce into being; it is the result and perhaps the means of the bad transmutation by which we make of all things objects – tightly closed, well-finished realities imbued with our preoccupation with the finish. Freedom must be liberation from death, the approach toward the point where death becomes transparent' (1982, p. 146). See also 'Narziss': 'Denn wie ich mich in meinem Blick verliere/ich könnte denken, daß ich tödlich sei' (1913, *SW* II, p. 57). The looking outwards and away from the self and its attachments, its habituated definitions, is the making of death within oneself.
Heil dem Geist, der uns verbinden mag;
denn wir leben wahrhaft in Figuren.

[…] 

Ohne unsern wahren Platz zu kennen,
handeln wir aus wirklichem Bezug.
Die Antennen fühlen die Antennen,
und die leere Ferne trug…

Reine Spannung. O Musik der Kräfte!

 […] 

Selbst wenn sich der Bauer sorgt und handelt,
wo die Saat im Sommer sich verwandelt,
reicht er niemals hin. Die Erde schenkt. (SW I, p. 738)

‘Der Bezug’ is human consciousness’s awareness that it may not force existence into preconceived, rational categories if existence is ever to yield its otherness. The farmer will never know what organic transformation is. The First Elegy offers more images of ‘Bezug’:

Wirf aus den Armen die Leere
zu den Räumen hinzu, die wir atmen; vielleicht, daß die Vögel
die erweiterte Luft fühlen mit innigerm Flug. (SW I, pp. 685-6: 23)

The reader is invited to participate in an exchange of spaces between internal and external worlds, and birdflight becomes the image of this simultaneity of spaces where each expands and enhances the other (‘die erweiterte Luft’). The human is invited to be part of the universe instead of opposite it. Rilke’s poetic, relational consciousness stands on the threshold of itself and seeks its Other.

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50 ‘Der Mensch wagt sich, gerade indem er auf die Eigenmächtigkeit verzichtet und sich ganz in den reinen Bezug hineininstellt’ (Bollnow, 1951, p. 85). In keeping with the prayerful poetry of the Stundenbuch, ‘Du mußt nicht bangen’ addresses the unknown force of creation as ‘God’ (SW I, p. 359). The poem celebrates God’s inappropriability and prays that the equanimity between human subject and the otherness outside the subject might prevail so that the human may always have a sense of God. Rilke’s God is not the Catholic God he was taught to worship but the divinity Rilke found in all that could not be possessed, controlled or defined. See Hill who, in his discussion of transcendence in Blanchot’s writings, compares Blanchot’s refusal of the name of God with Emmanuel Levinas’s Judaism which proceeds from a non-theological, non-ontological understanding of God (1997, pp. 173-175). This is useful for a study of Rilke’s orientation towards death and otherness, for in Rilke’s work the Other is evoked only in its disappearance beyond the limits of expression (the terms ‘das Offene’, ‘der Raum’ and ‘Draußensein’ recur).

51 Füelborn marks the collapsing of the boundary between the human interior and the universal outside as the abolishing of the principle of ‘Besitz’ in favour of that of ‘Bezug’. He argues that human consciousness is decentred in Rilke’s poetry, being no longer the axis of creation, and this overcomes opposition and establishes relation (1995, p. 265).
'Der Schwan' is a poem about a threshold. The swan seems to clamber down the second stanza into the water:

Diese Mühsal, durch noch Ungetanes
schwer und wie gebunden hinzugehn,
gleicht dem ungeschaffnen Gang des Schwanes.

Und das Sterben, dieses Nichtmehrfassen
jenes Grunds, auf dem wir täglich stehn,
seinem ängstlichen Sich-Niederlassen - :

in die Wasser, die ihn sanft empfangen
und die sich, wie glücklich und vergangen,
unter ihm zurückziehen. Flut um Flut;
während er unendlich still und sicher
immer mündiger und königlicher
und gelassener zu ziehn geruht. (NG I, SW I, p.510)

Dying is compared to the swan's anxious venturing into a new terrain, a different element. The swan experiences the transition as a movement away from all that is familiar, all which has solidity and comprehensible definition and is described as 'Grund', and 'täglich'. Dying is also this journey away from what is known, habitual and understood. With death ahead humans fear the loss of their secure, familiar world, and this is to conceive of death as loss, lack and absence. But the swan's experience of stepping beyond the borders of the known world becomes one of gain rather than lack. There is peace and stability on the water, and the swan seems to have found its natural element, for it moves with confidence, ease and grace. The first stanza reminds us that the swan's movements within the realm in which it felt at home were clumsy, and this awkwardness is compared to life, but the poem also offers a deeper exploration of this incompetence. Life's difficulty is located in its 'Ungetanes', and this could mean either that negative condition in which the human mind is perpetually burdened with a sense that tasks have not yet been completed, or that humans are held back by their fear of doing different things, entering into new situations. If the latter, then life, not death, is lack, for it is insufficiency of experience. Life is 'schwer' and 'wie gebunden' because it is shackled to routine and habituated structures, unable to confront the possibility of difference, unable to imagine beyond its own limits, unbalanced and imprisoned. As soon as the swan thrusts itself over the feared boundary, as soon as the mortal being comes to the threshold and witnesses the other side, such partiality which makes life heavy and afraid is transformed. Death is offered to the reader as a completion of life rather than its undoing.
In that new thinking or experience is accomplished, the ‘Ungetanes’ becomes ‘getan’, perhaps recalling Faust’s ‘Das Unbeschreibliche/Hier ist’s getan’ (Faust II, v, 6. 12108) and the idea of accomplishing the indescribable is important here. What the swan accomplishes is the entry into death through the ‘Nichtmehrfassen/jenes Grunds’, not only the relinquishing of physical but also of cognitive ground. The swan no longer has a footing in the physical world, and neither can it rationally grasp (‘Nichtmehrfassen’) its new environment. The poem itself introduces the theme of language, and I would like to pursue this briefly here and then take the question of language into the next chapter. The poem states that the swan is ‘mündiger’ in the water. It finds its voice, i.e. it finds a language it did not possess before, by leaving behind the language of ‘fassen’, the language which tames difference, rendering it describable and intelligible. The water represents a differently structured element of language, a language which does not adhere to conventions of exposition and definition, and the swan’s entry into the water symbolises how language becomes more expressive if it is not structured around accuracy and order but speaks instead the indescribability of things. The swan represents the achievement of ‘das Unbeschreibliche’ in language. The Fourth Elegy also speaks this reconciliation with difference and death in the language of difference and death – the indescribable:

Aber dies: den Tod,
den ganzen Tod, noch vor dem Leben so
sanft zu enthalten und nicht bös zu sein, ist unbeschreiblich (SW I, p. 700: 82).52

52 Calvedt implies that language is the material in which death is conceived and expressed by arguing that it is the artistic in which death comes to light. He says that in Rilke’s work normal consciousness is merely ‘die Spitze einer Pyramide’ whose large foundation includes death and the artistic process of getting outside the conventional parameters of perception (2001, p. 134).
2. The Written Work of Death

(In writing we wrestle with a part of death just as we wrestle with only part of the dark.
So writing means to confront death in its fleeting Totality, but to measure ourselves, each time, against only one of its instants.
A trial beyond our strength, which leads us to write Against the writing of death and to be ourselves written by it.)

Edmond Jabès, The Book of Resemblances

Introduction

This chapter will turn to the individual’s communion with otherness as a discourse of, and with, death. The Rilkean integration of death takes place in the creation of a poetic language which can gesture towards, or write towards, what it is beyond the normal human capacity to write. It is a striving beyond conventional boundaries of speech. I will introduce Rorty’s new vocabularies and metaphors which strive beyond dead metaphors, and argue that Rilke rewrites death against its old narratives, rewriting the dead metaphors of death. But metaphor and refiguration are also tropes of death in themselves. They enact change and transformation, perpetually translating out of secure definitions and into other possibilities, entering uncharted spaces of difference, for which death is the most compelling metaphor. The metaphorical transformations of the Neue Gedichte move ‘things’ out of conventional associations and erect them in an aesthetic world which resists familiar vocabularies. Things integrate otherness in this way, enacting a transition from the real world into a more potent, refigured reality in the unreal world. Things go outside the unknown and enter the unknown. I will look at Rilke’s interest in Rodin’s sculptures as ‘things-in-themselves’ which discover their other side – the side which is turned away from human appropriation. I will argue that in the presence of such art Rilke sees the possibility of a language for difference and the opaque, inhuman nature of death. This language is that of ‘poetic figure’, an invented artefact which exists outside real structures and rationalising language, approaching the excessiveness of absence and otherness. I will characterise the poetic figure in Rilke’s work as the inscription of the imagination as it eludes the limited language of the rational and conventional and sustains the paradox of death within life. I will go on to identify Rilke’s expression of the imagination in metaphors of the body as opposed to
mental categories, and argue that this bodiliness is also a feature of the 'thing-in-itself' which does not yield to rationalising, regulating, appropriative language. Central to this chapter, therefore, is the thesis that the 'death of one's own' is a written death, composed language which goes beyond the limitations of ordinary speech and explores different spaces of signification.

2.1 Rewriting the Real

The closing lines of the Fourth Elegy state the indescribability of the assent to, and absorption of, death from within the child’s life:

Aber dies: den Tod,  
den ganzen Tod, noch vor dem Leben so  
sanft zu enthalten und nicht bös zu sein,  
ist unbeschreiblich. (SW I, pp. 699-700: 79)

This chapter will turn to the question of what 'das Schwere', the difficulty of death, has to do with language. Rilke believed that life had to be held open to death, and this aspect of Rilke’s thinking has been the subject of much scholarship, but this thesis will explore the role of poetry in this process, responding to de Man’s criticism of the general assumption in Rilke scholarship that language is not implicated in the ontological alienation Rilke evokes, that language ‘is the unmediated expression of an unhappy consciousness that it does not cause’, and that ‘language is entirely ancillary in its relation to a fundamental experience (the pain and the pathos of being) which it merely reflects’ (1979, p. 26). I will show that Rilke seeks to encounter the death-event as the unsayable limit of rational speech.

I will turn to the Neue Gedichte first in my attempt to elucidate a Rilkean poetics of language as the construction of world and experience. The project of the Neue Gedichte is the re-seeing and rewriting of a world which has lost the Christian God and has begun the process of its own objectification. Poetry must create a space in which objects degraded and commodified by industrial society can resonate with meaning again. The poems in Rilke’s Neue Gedichte try to restore a wonder to the world which is religious in an imaginative rather than a theological sense. The imagination introduces a dimension beyond the literal. The language of literalism claims to articulate or reproduce a reality which exists independently of language, an objective reality which is waiting to be known and said. It assumes language is a medium which discovers and discloses truth. Rorty, the philosopher of language, observes: ‘The world does not speak. Only we do. The world can, once we have programmed ourselves with language,
cause us to hold beliefs. But it cannot propose a language for us to speak’ (Contingency, p. 6). And the corollary is:

Truth cannot be out there - cannot exist independently of the human mind - because sentences cannot exist, or be out there. The world is out there, but descriptions of the world are not. Only descriptions of the world can be true or false. The world on its own, unaided by the describing activities of human beings - cannot. (p. 5)

Rorty is emphasising that truth is a linguistic construct. He goes on to say, ‘truth is made rather than found’ (p. 7). What is true about this claim is that languages are made rather than found, and that truth is a property of linguistic entities, of sentences (p. 7). Rorty appropriates the Nietzschean understanding of truth as a ‘[e]in bewegliches Heer von Metaphern, Anthropomorphismen, kurz eine Summe von menschlichen Relationen [...] die Wahrheiten sind Illusionen, von denen man vergessen hat, daß sie welche sind’ (‘Über Wahrheit und Lüge im außermoralischen Sinn’, p. 314) whereby metaphors can only be compared with one another and not with facts that exist outside language (p. 20). The Platonic ideal of atemporal truth is ousted and what replaces it is a registering of the difference between old, inherited linguistic usages and newly created metaphorical usages. Rorty writes that we should think of the literal-metaphorical distinction ‘as the distinction between old language and new language rather than in terms of a distinction between words which latch on to the world and those which do not’ (p. 28).^1 Hearing the voices of de Man and Rorty in the context of Rilke highlights the language-centred poetics which this thesis is concerned to explore.

Central to this philosophy is the reluctance to replicate what has already been said. Poetry is validated in its breaking free from familiar vocabularies, as Rorty argues: ‘To fail as a poet [...] is to accept somebody else’s description of oneself, to execute a previously prepared program, to write, at most, elegant variations on previously written poems’ (p. 28). Poetry makes explicit in metaphor that the human striving for truth is not revelation but creation. It is language at its most innovative, always looking to describe self and world differently so that no interpretation of these may take hold and grow stale through repetition. Conventional, habitual language is metaphor which has been so overused that it has become literalised. Dead metaphor is a seizure, unable to make any new distinction, a description taken as literal and the only way of telling the

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^1 Of Rilke’s poetry de Man writes: ‘In conformity with a paradox that is inherent in all literature, the poetry gains a maximum of convincing power at the very moment that it abdicates any claim to truth’ (1979, p. 50).
story of the self in the world. New metaphors supplant old, literalised metaphors, offering themselves as one perspective which has been made and will need to be remade, a poetics expressed succinctly in the First Elegy: ‘Denn Bleiben ist nirgends’ (SW I, p. 687: 53). Metaphor does not reveal or mediate an inner essence. Metaphor makes, it practices artifice, it creates a new, imaginative space. It transforms rather than replicates reality (metamorphosis), breaking the rules of existing language games and resisting the exhaustiveness of paraphrase. Rorty says that when a poet creates a new description a tool is made for doing something which could not have been envisaged previously (p. 13). De Man’s analysis of ‘Am Rande der Nacht’, a poem from the Buch der Bilder (SW I, pp. 400-1) seems to be in line with Rorty’s theory. He points out the increased centrality of language in Rilke’s work after the Stundenbuch, arguing that the image of the violin in communion with the cosmos in the poem does not represent ‘a hidden unity that exists in the nature of things and of entities’, a confrontation between man and nature, but rather the metaphorical figuration enacted within language and establishing this relation within a formal or linguistic space (1979, pp. 33-8). He also argues that the poems of Das Buch vom mönchischen Leben in the Stundenbuch search for God within the language that they create:

The “God” that the poems circumscribe by a multitude of metaphors and changing stances corresponds to the ease that the poet has achieved in his techniques of rhyme and assonance. [...] The metaphors connote in fact a formal potential of the signifier. The referent of the poem is an attribute of their language, in itself devoid of semantic depth; the meaning of the poems

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2 ‘Man weiß, wie schlecht man die Dinge sieht, unter denen man lebt, und daß oft erst einer kommen muß von fern, um uns zu sagen was uns umgiebt’ (Landschaft, p. 521). Rilke is saying here that the poet must write the world differently. See also ‘Ich fürchte mich so vor der Menschen Wort’ (1897, SW I, pp. 194-5) which attacks the false clarity of literal language and the presumptuousness of definitions which shut down imaginative possibilities and fence off the invisible and the infinite (which Rilke calls ‘Gott’, but is to be distinguished from the Christian God). The poem asks that humans refrain from crowding and throttling the things of the world in their determination to say them, suggesting instead that the things be given their own space in which to sing. This interval of listening is the poetic space in which the human subject feels the world come alive.


4 Wallace Stevens (Adagia, Opus Posthumous, 157-180) writes: ‘Poetry is a renovation of experience’ (p. 177), ‘Originality is an escape from repetition’ (p. 177) and ‘Reality is a cliché from which we escape by metaphor’ (p. 179).

5 The literary theorist Paul Ricoeur also makes the distinction between literal or mimetic description and metaphor, whereby it is in metaphor that humans can begin to imagine difference: ‘The effacement of the ostensive and descriptive reference liberates a power of reference to aspects of our being in the world which cannot be said in a direct, descriptive way, but only alluded to, thanks to the referential values of metaphoric and, in general, symbolic expression’ (Ricoeur, 1991, p. 331).
is the conquest of the technical skills which they illustrate by their acoustic success (1979, p. 31).

De Man’s argument here is that Rilke’s poetry does not convey the reader towards an external, omnipresent divinity. Instead, Rilke’s poems ‘are successes of language and rhetoric’, ‘totalizations’ which ‘are the outcome of poetic skills directed towards the rhetorical potentialities of the signifier’ (de Man, 1979, p. 45). De Man deconstructs Rilke’s deep belief here that poetry is not mere verbal play in which there is nothing outside of language. Rilke does consciously create a poetic universe, but I will try to show that he is profoundly concerned that this poetry should have a real impact on the imagination. Whereas de Man insists that Rilke’s poetry is not messianic (p. 45), I want to argue that the infinite, imaginative potential Rilke tries to create in language is the component of his God. He may not seek the infinite outside language, but it is still a real search for the infinite. His poetry is orientated towards what can be created on the edges of language, on the verge of the inexpressible, and experienced in an imaginative reality. Rilke’s poetry would not work if it did not create the powerful sense that its articulations are ontological, are creating a world and, within the concerns of this thesis, creating death.

Poetry is self-creation rather than self-discovery: ‘To creates one’s mind is to create one’s own language, rather than to let the length of one’s mind be set by the language other human beings have left behind’ (Contingency, p. 27). I would like to recall here the discussion of ‘der eigene Tod’ in my introduction and argue that the Rilkean individual creates her death in creating her own language of death. Blanchot urges: ‘To sustain, to fashion our nothingness – such is the task. We must be the figurers and poets of our death’ (Space, p. 126). Rorty connects death and language when he remarks that Nietzsche hoped humans would realise that Plato’s ‘true world’ was just a fable, and ‘would seek consolation, at the moment of death, not in having transcended the animal condition but in being that peculiar sort of dying animal who, by describing himself in his own terms, had created himself’ (p. 27). That Rilke is primarily engaged in a quest to make language produce a world and a death is borne out again by de Man, who argues that it is not Rilke’s thematic material which constitute his

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6 Bate, in his discussion of Hölderlin’s ‘dichterisch, wohnet der Mensch auf dieser Erde’ (‘In lieblicher Blüte’, Friedrich Hölderlin, Sämmtliche Gedichte I, p. 463) writes: ‘This contradictory apprehension brings us directly to the central paradox of poetry. Poetry is merely language. Yet poetry is not merely language because when we allow it to act upon us it seems able to conjure up conditions such as dwelling and alienation in their very essence, not just in their linguistic particulars’ (2000, p. 260).

7 Rilke was also inspired in this philosophy of self-creation by Jacobsen’s Niels Lyhne (pp. 267-8).
imagination, rather the possibilities of poetic figuration within language, specifically the
metaphorical turns of chiasmus, or reversal and reflection, which take human
experience from the real to the unreal and explore the dimensions of language available
to the human imagination ('Yet the true interest [...] does not stem from these thematic
statements, but rather from the intricacy and the wealth of movements triggered by the
original chiasmus', 1979, p. 43). He goes on to argue that the thematic material is
designed in the performance of the tropes or 'rhetorical agitation': 'The crossing of
categories of reality and of specular reflection articulates a sequence of similarly
structured reversals: reversal of agent and instrument, of ascent and descent, of inside
and outside, of loss and recuperation, death and life, time and sound, sound and silence'
(p. 43). I am arguing that Rilke seeks the shape of his universe in the movements and
contours of his language, and I will go on to make the case that the Rilkean poet creates
a space for his theme, death, within poetry, writing transcendence as reconciliation with,
and achievement of, death into the poem by writing death differently. Rilke uses
language not for the purposes of logical demonstration but for saying something new,
incessantly pushing into the space of the previously undescribed, the space of otherness,
but without, as I will show, claiming, assimilating or instrumentalising that space,
without neutralising its alterity and obscurity. 'Der eigene Tod' is one's own not
because it is 'ownable' but because it exceeds the existing languages for interpreting
death, creating an individual, unreproducible articulation. It is not a death which is
individual in the sense of 'personal', for it is precisely within this death that the self's
person encounters 'other' possibilities of language and therefore language which is
'other' to the language of person. The Rortyan theory can be applied to Rilke's poetry
to demonstrate how language sets up makeshift worlds which are the imaginative reality
in which we live, and how redescription and refiguration alter the boundaries of that
reality, gesturing towards, yet never mastering or integrating, possible other realities.

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8 Blanchot argues that authenticity takes place in language, and I take from this that the Rilkean death is
constructed in poetry: 'Language founds human experience and the universe. The nature and dignity of
language are expressed both by man, who reveals himself in dialogue in which he discovers the event that
is his foundation, and by the world, putting itself into words in an act that is its deep origin. The error
would be to think of language as an instrument whereby man acts or manifests himself in the world; in
reality it is language that positions man, by guaranteeing the existence of the world and his existence
within it' ('Mallarmé and the Art of the Novel', The Blanchot Reader, p. 45). In a letter to Regina
Ullmann Rilke writes of the existential relationship he has to his art, claiming that it connects him to a
wholeness of being which he then 'breathes': 'die tiefe Unterbrochenheit meines Daseins und meiner
Arbeit doch noch zu überbrücken, um wieder aus dem Ganzen zu wirken und zu atmen' (15.12.1920,
Briefe 1914-20, p. 360). As Schank puts it: 'Für den Künstler Rilke war Wirklichkeit in erster Linie
Rilke’s *First Elegy* cries out to the angelic order in an attempt to break out of the received language which casts human experience in the world inadequately:

und die findigen Tiere merken es schon,  
daß wir nicht sehr verläßlich zu Haus sind  
in der gedeuteten Welt. (SW I, p. 685: 12)

The *Duineser Elegien*, like the *Neue Gedichte* before them, transform, refigure and remake the world in metaphor and simile, operating from within a generative instability of definition. They offer a figurative reality which replaces the conventional interpretations of the world (the ‘gedeutete Welt’), and in this sense they are consciously language which takes the reader outside her conventional, and apparently natural, linguistic perceptions, asking her to accept that the world may be differently, more difficultly and more richly described. Poetic figure, then, sets up the world in artifice, in literary language which encloses its objects and imprints them on an imaginative space outside of the conventionally real world. ‘Die Gazelle’ is cast from the outset in artifice as an enchanted creature, created in the magic of poetry:

Verzauberte: wie kann der Einklang zweier  
erwählter Worte je den Reim erreichen,  
der in dir kommt und geht, wie auf ein Zeichen.  
Aus deiner Stime steigen Laub und Leier,  
und alles Deine geht schon im Vergleich  
durch Liebeslieder, deren Worte, weich  
wie Rosenblätter, dem, der nicht mehr liest,  
sich auf die Augen legen, die er schließt:

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9 The *Neue Gedichte* offer many examples of objects opening out beyond their conventional definitions. It is the play of simile and metaphor which introduce ambivalence into physical entities. Judith Ryan argues that the analogies of the *Neue Gedichte* go beyond subjective tendencies and ‘deuten auf ewig Gültiges hin’, enacting an ‘Übergang ins Unendliche’ (1972, p. 41). For further discussions on transformation in Rilke’s poetry see: Allemann (1961, pp. 185-93), Buddeberg (1954, p. 423, and *passim*), Bollnow (1951, pp. 133-40), Cox (1979), Eckel (1994, pp. 131-5), Jakob Steiner (1962, pp. 163-8, and *passim*).

10 The programme of ‘sachliches Sagen’ in the *Neue Gedichte* is poetry’s attempt to relieve things of their human-related significations and imposed symbolism, and grant them their self-repleteness, their ‘Dasein’, by employing a non-selective, non-prescriptive language: ‘Du erinnerst sicher ... aus den Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids, die Stelle, die von Baudelaire handelt und von seinem Gedicht: ‘Das Aas’. Ich mupte daran denken, dap ohne dieses Gedicht die ganze Entwicklung zum sachlichen Sagen, die wir jetzt in Cézanne zu erkennen glauben, nicht hätte anheben können; erst mupte es da sein in seiner Unerbittlichkeit. Erst mupte das künstlerische Anschauen sich so weit iüberwunden haben, auch im Schrecklichen und scheinbar nur Widerwartigen das Seiende zu sehen, das, mit allem anderen Seienden, gill. Sowenig eine Auswahl zugelassen ist, ebensowenig ist eine Abwendung von irgendwelcher Existenz dem Schaffenden erlaubt: ein einziges Ablehnen irgendwann, drängt ihn aus dem Zustande der Gnade, macht ihn ganz und gar sündig’ (19.10.1907, *Cézanne*, p. 34). Rilke also uses the term ‘sachlich’ in the following letters to Clara: 23.10.1907 (*Cézanne*, p. 45) and 18.10.1907 (*Cézanne*, p. 36).
The first quatrain announces its own inferiority to the gazelle as a poetic construct, fearing that it cannot rival the rhyme and poetry which saturate the body of the animal. The gazelle is praised for the ease with which it passes over into the imagination, into sign ('Zeichen') and simile ('Vergleich'). Its movement has instantly translated into lyrics which reconstruct it in dream, and its gesture of listening suspense holds it in a persistent – perhaps permanent – turn towards a different world of possibility and image (conveyed in the projection of the forest lake onto the bather’s face, which might also be the embedding of the lake in her ‘sight’ or ‘gaze’, considering the alternative meanings of ‘Gesicht’ in German). The real gazelle has been remade in the enchanted, poetic figure of the sonnet which rhymes internally and externally, creating a language which delights in itself and the impression it leaves on the mind.\(^1\) The sonnet form in the *Neue Gedichte* is used to mark out a purely linguistically transformative space which seals its objects in metaphor. Going one step further and creating out of nothing rather than out of real material, Rilke turns to a fictional creature in ‘Das Einhorn’, inscribing his creation with the signature of the poetic figure:

\[
\text{Doch seine Blicke, die kein Ding begrenzte,}
\text{warfen sich Bilder in den Raum}
\text{und schlossen einen blauen Sagenkreis. (NG I, SW I, p. 507)}
\]

The poem presents the incredible and impossible through the invention of images, and seals it in the ‘blue circle of saying’, or the ‘saga’ or ‘legend’ which constitute the fiction or figment, the alternative, poetic world, as both an interior and an expropriated, emancipated, aesthetic space. Rilke’s ambition for ‘Bilder’ (and ‘Figur’, which is related to, and possibly identical with, ‘Bilder’, and which I discuss later) in his work is that the different mode of being created in ‘Bild’ – in poetry – might become part of poet and reader, sustained, or internalised, in the poetic imagination.

Each of the *Neue Gedichte* unfurls poetically an indeterminate, intangible, unutterable density of being within the set outline of an object, a wondrousness within

\(^1\) See Uyttersprot (1962) and Wellbery (1983) for interpretations of this poem.
the common presence of a familiar thing. Rilke contemplates this poetic transformation and establishes that it is a surpassing, or a near-surpassing, a drawing towards the extremities of an understanding which is already in place: ‘Es ist das Furchtbare in der Kunst, daß sie, je weiter man in ihr kommt, desto mehr zum Äußersten, fast Unmöglichen verpflichtet’ (to Lou Andreas-Salomé, 28.12.1911, Briefe 1914-21, p. 151).\textsuperscript{12} This is an aesthetic which charts the limits of experience and thought, unmaking and remaking the inner-outer imaginal boundary, moving towards the otherness which straddles the external and the internal worlds. Rilke employs here the language of extremity for an art which compulsively pushes for new metaphor and perspective by pressing towards the impossible. This impossible is whatever exceeds definition, whatever has not yet been made in language, and it is therefore indescribable.\textsuperscript{13} This art is transgressive of ordinary boundaries (the unicorn’s gaze is not held or fixed by any object: ‘die kein Ding begrenzte’). It is the expression of excess, of the infinite within the singular and concentrated, and it is within such inexhaustible intensivity that Rilke seeks authentic experience. The \textit{Neue Gedichte} see the world without preconception, inviting in the possibility of the immeasurable which Rilke calls ‘das Ganze’.\textsuperscript{14}

As argued in the previous chapter, in Rilke’s work the living are connected to death through the imagination, and in the \textit{Neue Gedichte} the remaking of the world takes place in a renewing gaze which is turned outwards away from subjective and rational confines. The orientation towards relation over possession is realised in a gaze which holds subject and object in equilibrium:

\textit{Das Anschauen ist eine so wunderbare Sache, von der wir noch so wenig wissen; wir sind mit ihm ganz nach außen gekehrt, aber gerade wenn wirs am meisten sind, scheinen in uns Dinge vor sich zu gehen, die auf das Unbeobachtetsein sehnsüchtig gewartet haben, und während sie sich, intakt und seltsam anonym, in uns vollziehen, ohne uns, - wächst in dem Gegenstand draußen ihre Bedeutung heran, ein überzeugender, starker, - ihr

\textsuperscript{12} Hill, in his discussion of Blanchot’s \textit{Death Sentence}, reinforces this idea that literature evokes the limits of language: ‘What is true here of dying is also true for writing; and the only antidote to the limitations of language proves to be the limitless exposure to those limits’ (1997, p. 151).

\textsuperscript{13} Hill discusses the sense of limitlessness evoked in the conscious limitations of language (1997, pp. 94-102). He writes: ‘If literature here proves transgressive of philosophical discourse, it is not because it can more, but rather because it can less; not because it confronts the law of representation from a position of greater authority, but because it turns aside from representation in order to affirm the other law – the law of the other beyond all law – that interrupts all representation’ (p. 102).

\textsuperscript{14} ,Ich gehe nicht aus “großen Dingen und Gedanken” fort, sondern ebendorthin, wo alles, auch das Unscheinbare, auch das Häßliche, auch das, wovon man sich anderswo einfach abwendet, mich wie Großes, wie Ewiges mit unbeschreiblichen Anforderungen anspricht; dorthin wo der Künstler, der seiner Natur nach in vielen Dingen des Lebens immer Zuschauer sein wird, auch in dieser Eigenschaft, das ganze Leben d.h. die ganze Welt an sich erfährt, als ob es mit allen seinen Möglichkeiten mitten durch ihn durchginge’ (to Karl von der Heydt, 21.2.1907, \textit{Heydt}, p. 114).
einzig möglicher Name, in dem wir das Geschehnis in unserem Innern selig und ehrerbietig erkennen, ohne selbst daran heranzureichen, es nur ganz leise, ganz von fern, unter dem Zeichen eines eben noch fremden und schon im nächsten Augenblick aufs neue entfremdeten Dinges begreifend. (To Clara, 8.3.1907, Briefe 1906-07, p. 214)

The gaze into otherness is a withdrawal of overt consciousness from language, and poetry is written 'without us', without the conventions of language which humans, in their limitation, impose. Such poetry preserves the estrangement and difference of the object – what writes ‘without us’ is poetry, the language which has discovered other possibilities in the relegation of rational and conventional applications of meaning.\textsuperscript{15} Rilke argues here that meaning grows in the interpenetration of internal and external space. The poem 'Durch den sich Vögel werfen' describes the making of an object – a tree – in the poetic space of a subjectivity which assents to the inappropriable otherness of the external tree:

Raum greift aus uns und übersetzt die Dinge: 
daß dir das Dasein eines Baums gelinge, 
Wirf Innenraum um ihn, aus jenem Raum, 
der in dir west. Umgieb ihn mit Verhaltung. 
Er grenzt sich nicht. Erst in der Eingestaltung 
in dein Verzichten wird er wirklich Baum. (1924, SW II, p. 168)

\textsuperscript{15} In his essay 'Von der Landschaft' Rilke describes an art which has found the perspective of otherness, which is able to give back the landscape in its independence of the human gaze: 'Diese Landschaft ist nicht eines Eindrucks Bild, nicht eines Menschen Meinung über die ruhenden Dinge; sie ist Natur die entstand, Welt die wurde und dem Menschen so fremd wie der niebetretene Wald einer unentdeckten Insel. Und Landschaft so zu schauen als ein Fernes und Fremdes, als ein Entlegenes und Liebloses, das sich ganz in sich vollzieht, war notwendig, wenn sie je einer selbstständigen Kunst Mittel und Anlaß sein sollte; denn sie mußte fern sein und sehr anders als wir, um ein erlösendes Gleichnis werden zu können unserem Schicksal. Fast feindlich mußte sie sein in erhabener Gleichgültigkeit, um unserem Dasein eine neue Deutung zu geben mit ihren Dingen. [...] Man weiß, wie schlecht man die Dinge sieht, unter denen man lebt, und daß oft erst einer kommt muß von fern, um uns zu sagen, was uns umgibt. Und so mußte man auch die Dinge von sich fortführen, damit man später fähig wäre, sich ihnen in gerechter und ruhiger Weise, mit weniger Vertraulichkeit und in ehrfürchtigem Abstand zu nähren. Denn man begann die Natur erst zu begreifen, als man sie nichtmehr begriff; als man fühlte, daß sie das Andere war, das Teilnahmslose, das keine Sinne hat uns aufzunehmen, da war man erst aus ihr herausgetreten, einsam, aus einer einsamen Welt. Und das mußte man, um an ihr Künstler zu sein; man durfte sie nichtmehr stofflich empfinden auf die Bedeutung hin, die sie für uns besaß, sondern gegenständlich als eine große vorhandene Wirklichkeit' (pp. 520-1). This is the Rilkean programme of getting outside the 'interpreted world'. The artist must seek the 'redeeming allegory' which can be set against the 'Schicksal', the fatedness of life and language. Wallace Stevens quotes Christian Zervos writing on Picasso: 'Poetry has come forward with all that it has of the acute, the enigmatical, the strange sense which sees in life not only an image of reality but which conceives of life as a mystery that wraps us round everywhere' ('The Irrational Element in Poetry', Opus Posthumous, 216-29, p. 226).
The tree is constructed ‘into the subject’s renunciation’ (‘Eingestaltung in dein Verzichten’), becoming more by being enhanced in the detachment it maintains from the subject. Bachelard writes on this poem:

Poets will help us to discover within ourselves such joy in looking that sometimes, in the presence of a perfectly familiar object, we experience an extension of our intimate space. [...] the tree, like every genuine living thing, is taken in its being that ‘knows no bounds.’ Its limits are mere accidents. Against the accident of limits, the tree needs you to give it your super-abundant images, nurtured in your intimate space, in “this space that has been in you.” Then, together, the tree and its dreamer, take their places, grow tall. [...] Rilke wrote: “These trees are magnificent, but even more magnificent is the sublime and moving space between them, as though with their growth it too increased.” The two kinds of space, intimate space and exterior space, keep encouraging each other as it were, in their growth. (1964, pp. 199-201)

Bachelard celebrates here the intimacy of distance, the dynamic complementarity of interior and exterior space, in Rilke’s work.

In the Neue Gedichte the vitality of the world comes forth in the relinquishment of preconceptions and the expansion of imaginative space. The gaze at the centre of the Neue Gedichte is figured in the poetic language of renewal which conflates the internal and the external world, anticipating the dynamic of world-internalisation in Rilke’s later work:

Durch alle Wesen reicht der eine Raum:
Weltinnenraum. Die Vögel fliegen still
durch uns hindurch. O, der ich wachsen will,
ich seh hinaus, und in mir wachst der Baum. (‘Es winkt zu Fühlung fast aus allen Dingen’, 1914, SW II, p. 93)

In ‘Archaischer Torso Apollos’, which prefaces the second volume of the Neue Gedichte, this renewing gaze awakens a reciprocal gaze in an inanimate, amputated, castrated object:

Wir kannten nicht sein unerhörtes Haupt,
darin die Augenäpfel reiften. Aber
sein Torso glüht noch wie ein Kandelaber,
in dem sein Schauen, nur zurückgeschraubt,

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See Buddeberg on the object receiving life in its communion with the subject and the subject’s passage through the object into a world beyond herself. This is the human being’s being in the world (1954, p. 70 and p. 84).
sich hält und glänzt. Sonst könnte nicht der Bug
der Brust dich blenden, und im leisen Drehen
der Lenden könnte nicht ein Lächeln gehen
zu jener Mitte, die die Zeugung trug.

Sonst stünde dieser Stein entstellt und kurz
unter der Schultern durchsichtigem Sturz
und flimmerte nicht so wie Raubtierfelle;

und bräche nicht aus allen seinen Rändern
aus wie ein Stern: denn da ist keine Stelle,
die dich nicht sieht. Du muß dein Leben ändern. (SW I, p. 557)

The command which issues from the refigured, rewritten torso – ‘Du mußt dein Leben ändern’ – is a command not from an identifiable source but from within the realm of art and poetry to ‘change your life’. An object has acquired the power to induce change precisely because it has been changed itself, pushed beyond its apparent limits, transformed by language. The potent, poetised object is a testimony to the power of poetry and art to trigger an alternative, imaginative reality. The imagination can perform transformational acts at will, unrestricted by external reality, pliant in its sense of boundaries. The object remade in poetry is asking the reader to transform her life by transforming the world through language, by creating new metaphor. The glowing, virile torso seems to seduce and compel the reader, representing the power which the imagination and poetic transformation can exert. The poem invites the reader to follow its example, demonstrating the inseparability of life and creative language – language breathes life into the inert, deformed stone and then turns to the reader to change her life too. This sonnet locates the pull of art at the core of existence. It is an exercise in excess for this is the only mode in which humans can confront and transcend their boundaries.

The Rilkean ambition of art is to discover the richness of an object or an event in the experience of its potency. The torso of Apollo threatens to blind (‘blenden’) its observer. It has exceeded the normal confines of experience and is now operating from within the extraordinariness and indescribability of the imagination. Both object and observer enter a new possibility of being in this poem. The demand of art in ‘Du mußt dein Leben ändern’ and the pressing on to the extreme of the nearly impossible (‘zum Äußersten, fast Unmöglichen verpflichtet’ (to Lou Andreas-Salomé, 28.12.1911, Briefe 1914-21, p. 151) is an imperative which imposes itself like the mortal imperative to die. It wrenches us out of the rigidity of our perception. It breaks and undoes us. Heather McHugh writes of the pressure of poetry: ‘The position of poetry is THAT imposition:
it requires you to face the difficulty, the unfathomability, of your life. When Rilke writes ‘You must change...’ you feel the force of that embrace. It’s merciless’ (1993, p. 2).\(^{17}\) The transformation powering the sonnet is the pull of the imagination towards difference.

2.2 Writing and Dying at the Limit

The *Neue Gedichte* demonstrate that there can be a finalised description of neither world nor death, for each of these is permanently in a process of becoming in language, the Rilkean poetic construct, pushing ‘zum Äußersten’, towards an extremity and an intensity which is beyond definition. In the previous chapter I identified the fruit as a Rilkean symbol of death ripening into being, and in this chapter I will argue that this symbol points to a ripening of death within language, within poetry which is language in process, language remaking its semantic definitions into infinite indefinition and its accompanying paradoxical intensity. The *Fourth Elegy*’s postulated, indescribable unity of life and death (‘den ganzen Tod, noch vor dem Leben so/sanft zu enthalten und nicht böß zu sein’, *SW* I, p. 700: 83) is a promotion of the unity the artist must forge between the familiar, positive and the excluded, negative sides of existence, and it is a statement of death’s resistance to a systematic vocabulary and evaluation, suggesting the possibility that death may be other than oppositional to life.\(^{18}\) The *Fourth Elegy* demands a poetry which can paradoxically intimate death to its reader in metaphor, a trope which says that death can never be fully and finally said.\(^{19}\) The rewriting of death, as opposed to the adoption of received narratives, is, as I argued in my introduction, an engaging with difficulty (‘das Schwere’), and the elegies themselves are difficult to read – they resist the feasibility of literalisation and assimilation. They form an elegaic

\(^{17}\) See Heidegger’s essay on Georg Trakl and the threshold of pain as the conjunction between inside and outside, self and difference, language and beyond-language (‘Die Sprache im Gedicht’, *Unterwegs zur Sprache*, 31-78).


\(^{19}\) Blanchot discusses Rilke’s ‘imaginary space’ where things are ‘transformed into that which cannot be grasped’ (*Space*, p. 141).
death-space which cannot be familiarised or paraphrased. They introduce otherness into language by creating it within language, drawing language towards the vastness of what is outside language. In his discussion of the promise of salvation in Rilke’s poetry de Man evokes the difficulty of a life lived and written in relation with death: ‘A too easily granted promise would be suspect and would not convince, but a promise of salvation that could only be deserved by endless labor and sacrifice, in suffering, renunciation, and death, is a different matter’ (1979, p. 24).

Metaphor is an articulation of death in Rilke’s poetry, for it is a trope which propels change. In refiguring the real world it interacts with the loss and the expiration of the old in the generation of new life. Allemann says, ‘Der wendende Punkt ist die Summe des Vergehens’ (1961, p. 188), marking the poetic transformation or ‘turn’ as an accumulation of transience. Blanchot says of Rilke’s assertion that the human task is to give birth to the perishable world in the invisible (‘unsere Aufgabe ist es, diese vorläufige, hinfällige Erde uns so tief, so leidend und leidenschaftlich einzuprägen, daß ihr Wesen in uns “unsichtbar” wieder aufersteht’, to Witold von Hulewicz, 13.11.1925, Muzot, p. 374):

[things] are not content to be kept as they are, as they imagine themselves to be – narrow, outworn, so many traps for life – but are transformed, lose their form, lose themselves to enter into the intimacy of their reserve, where they are preserved from themselves, untouched, intact, in the pure point of the undetermined. (Space, p. 140)

The orientation towards absence and indeterminacy is central to the metaphorical transformation. Rilke writes of the need to create a language for absence and the invisible: ‘Car comment supporter, comment sauver le visible, si ce n’est en en faisant le langage de l’absence, de l’invisible?’ (to Sophie Giauque, 26.11.1925, Briefe II, p. 490).

I will now look at some poems from the Neue Gedichte which refigure death, beginning with ‘Der Tod der Geliebten’:

Er wußte nur vom Tod was alle wissen:

20 Burke writes: ‘So far as this world of our positive experience is concerned, death can only be an idea, not something known by us as we know our bodily sensations. In fact, its ideality is probably one element that recommends it to the use of poets, whose trade is to deal exclusively in symbols ... Moreover, since no poet can write of death from an immediate experience of it, the imagining of death necessarily involves images not directly belonging to it. It lies beyond the realm of images – or at least beyond the realm of such images as the living body knows’ (1952, p. 369).
This sonnet describes a movement from life to death as a crossing over from the familiar into the unfamiliar. Contrary to the expected violent dislocation ('fortgerissen') which institutes a negative state, an absence ('daß er uns nimmt und in das Stumme stößt'), there occurs a smooth and continuous transition ('leis aus seinen Augen ausgelöst./hinüberglitt')\(^{21}\) into a palpable, sensuous place ('tastete es ab für ihre Füße'). The protagonist enters into an intimacy with death which had eluded him until he began to think differently about it, to think differently from the collective or conventional view ('Er wußte nur vom Tod, was alle wissen'), and the focus of this poem is not death itself but thinking about, and finding a language for, death. The ‘Wissen’ in the first line excludes thinking, for it considers that the facts and the truth of death are already ‘known’, and the reader might expect the poem to impart just this knowledge. But the second stanza shifts into the less rigid mode of imagination ('und als er fühlte'), setting up a different possibility for the comprehension of death which challenges the notion that we can ever possess the knowledge of death’s reality. The poem shows that death is not something which is given and defined outside thought and perception but is a strange shadow-world which provokes the individual’s subjective and imaginative faculties. A crucial aspect of the poem is its focus not on the one who dies and the direct experience of death but on the one who lives and indirectly experiences death. Again, the poem’s interest is the perception of death and not death itself. The death of the beloved provides the opportunity to think, to respond individually and independently, to

\(^{21}\) See also the First Elegy: ‘Schließlich brauchen sie uns nicht mehr, die Früheentrückten/man entwöhnt sich des Irdischen sanft, wie man den Brüsten/milde der Mutter entwächst’ (SW I, p. 688: 86).

True to the programme of the Neue Gedichte this poem asks for a rethinking and refiguring, a transformation of reality, an awareness that reality is not given, but is made in language. The lover feeling his way into the new terrain of death is an image of approaching a boundary and encountering it as ‘other’, of going beyond common linguistic structures and gaining a new perspective, an awareness of alternative ways of thinking. The common language of death (‘daβ er uns nimmt’) is replaced by a new metaphorical, ‘ausgelöst’. The lover gets outside the pre-existent language of death which suppresses relation with otherness. He familiarises himself with the unfamiliar - the dead (‘da wurden ihm die Toten so bekannt’) in the paradoxical sense that he assents to the encounter with what cannot be familiarised. The changed perception requires a changed metaphorical, and this relativity is emphasised in the use of the subjunctive: ‘als wäre er durch sie mit einem jeden/ganz nah verwandt.’ The new relationship is exploratory and metaphorical, not fixed and literal.

This thesis will try to show that Rilke’s project throughout his work is the refiguring of death based on the belief that to die differently individuals must think differently about dying. And this means writing differently about dying, for this rethinking requires the creation of new meaning within language and poetry. ‘Der Tod der Geliebten’ traces the movement from life towards death as a movement out of the conventional and literal descriptions of death and into the individual and intuitive language of the imagination, suggesting that a shift in perception is mediated through a shift in language. The conventional description of death as absence, a taking away, becomes a taking away of speech in the first lines of the poem but later the protagonist finds his own words for this new place (‘und nannte jenes Land/das gutgelegene, das immerstüβe’), rejecting the conventional language of death spoken by others (‘er lieβ die andern reden/und glaubte nicht’). He is poetically enabled in his breaking out of the convention which states that death strikes mortals dumb, demonstrating that rather than lack, death is an abundance of possibility, and a proliferation of questions, in language.

But the opening up to death within life and the opening up and movement of language is not simply a theme of this poem. The poem enacts these transitions, becoming the language which moves across boundaries. It takes itself beyond the conventional constrictions of language such as those which require that language communicate purposefully and with clarity to pass on factual information, or those which seek to confine language to the literal. The poem is the place of the movement,
change and transformation required to expand the reader’s thinking about death. It
enacts a transformation from the violent ‘fortgerissen’ to the gentle ‘leis aus seinen
Augen ausgelöst’ and ‘hinüberglitt’. This dissolving of familiar metaphorical
descriptions of death in order to enable new discourse is central to the text. The poem
becomes the site of death if death is, as I argue in my introduction, other possibilities of
meaning.

‘Der Tod der Geliebten’ demonstrates poetry’s disassembling of rigid meanings
and its introduction of new metaphors, and this thesis will try to show how the principle
of transgressing boundaries is inherent to Rilke’s understanding of both poetry and
death. Rilke’s work is perpetually an art of dying whereby death is refigured in
language, but this art in turn has at its core the principle of death, a crossing over into
otherness. Poetry takes language to the edge of itself in order to usher in the previously
inconceivable. Poetry is the place where a reader can imaginatively encounter what is
on the outside of conventional thought and language. The most extreme otherness is
death, that cessation of all thought, language and identity, but Rilke asks readers to
think death, to go to that threshold of thought and language and allow their inherited
categories and classifications to come undone. In their undoing, the polarisation of life
and death is deconstructed. In this sense Rilke seeks to know death within the
unknowing mode of art instead of within religious consolation. Rilke could not accept
the theological narrative of existence because he thought it allowed no scope for the
development of an individual language and the individual confrontation with death it
makes possible (see the letter to Ilse Blumenthal-Weiβ, 28.12.1921, Muzot, pp. 75-6).
His project is the discovery of other worlds within language, and language which
exceeds the literal creates an imaginatively liberated space outside conventionally real
lives.22 In this space death’s opposition to life becomes life’s completion, a fuller
existence. Rilke regarded the recreation of reality within language as the recreation of
reality itself. His transformation of death in the Neue Gedichte recreates reality

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22 Rilke found a kindred imagery in works of the artist Sophie Giauque, which he found had been wholly
'transposed' into the 'interior' space of art without borrowing anything from real space: 'dans un espace
tout intérieur et imaginaire sans faire aucun emprunt auprès de l’espace réel qu’imitent toutes les
peintures (et d’ailleurs aussi tous les poèmes) incapables à se créer cet espace transposé, profound et
intrinsèque [...] cette réussite rare et exquise qui consiste à placer une chose imaginaire dans un espace
approprié, c’est-à-dire tout aussi intérieur’ (to Sophie Giauque, 26.11.1925, Briege II, p. 489). Elsewhere
Rilke writes that the emancipated art-space is turned away from the everyday realm and towards a greater
existential permanence: ‘Das Publikum hat längst vergessen, daß es [das Kunstwerk] kein ihm
angebotener Gegenstand ist, sondern ein in ein imaginäres Dasein und Dauern rein hingestellter, und daß
sein Raum, eben dieser Raum seines Dauerns, nur scheinbar identisch ist mit dem Raume der öffentlichen
Bewegungen und Umsätze’ (to Robert Heinz Heygrod, 12.1.1922, Muzot, p. 98). I will return to Rilke’s
notion of ‘Dauern’.

aesthetically, adding a new dimension to the literal world. In Rilke’s work reality is always made in language, and the unity of life and death is constructed in poetic transformations.

Rilke’s poetics of death is a poetics of willed confrontation between the living, writing human being and the boundaries of her language. This journey towards otherness is a moving beyond the conventional parameters of description and into new metaphorical dimensions, breaking the seal of received language and the externally defined self. In this language world where reality is remade in language the extension of the boundaries of language is an expansion of the self towards death and otherness. Language which takes the speaker away from regular, prevalent definition and into artistic indefiniteness is language which affirms that there are perceivable dimensions outside the literal and the ordinarily nameable. Rilke’s poetry often takes death as its subject, but it also participates in that movement of death towards an outer place. In displacing and reworking the language of death Rilke is engaged in the preparation, the inscription of his own death, the movement towards his own ‘Draußensein’ which is the ideal in the unfinished final poem, begun on his deathbed:

Komm du, du letzter, den ich anerkenne,
heilloser Schmerz im leiblichen Geweb:
wie ich im Geiste brannte, sieh, ich brenne
in dir; das Holz hat lange widerstrebt,
der Flamme, die du loderst, zuzustimmen,
nun aber nähr’ ich dich und brenn in dir.
Mein hiesig Mildsein wird in deinem Grimmen
ein Grim der Hölle nicht von hier.
Ganz rein, ganz planlos frei von Zukunft stieg
ich auf des Leidens wirren Scheiterhaufen,
so sicher nirgend Künftiges zu kaufen
um dieses Herz, darin der Vorrat schwieg.
Bin ich es noch, der da unkenntlich brennt?
Erinnerungen reiß ich nicht herein.
O Leben, Leben: Draußensein.
Und ich in Lohe. Niemand, der mich kennt. (1926, SW II, p. 511)

This remarkable poem accepts and refigures physical pain and annihilation in the imagery of holocaust (burnt sacrifice), defining life as the struggle for liberation from confinement. Rilke transforms death by inviting it to transform him, internalising its destructiveness, its outsidedness, and uttering the language of this emancipation. The poetic ‘I’ gives itself to a metaphorical transformation by fire, sacrificing its personal identity to be transformed in death beyond all recognition (‘Bin ich es noch, der da
unkenntlich brennt?'; 'Niemand, der mich kennt'). As the poetic 'I' assents to fire ('der Flamme [...] zuzustimmen') and 'heilloser Schmerz' it converts the moment of death into the most intense experience of life. It reverses the relation whereby death acts upon the passive mortal, so that this mortal now declares itself the subject, the driver of death, locating itself at its centre of energy ('nun aber nähr' ich dich und brenn in dir'). The image of burning conveys the pain of annihilation as the climax of a passion for transformation and difference, for release from the fixtures of identity and memory ('Erinnerungen reiß ich nicht herein') and for the realisation of the savage, excruciating unknown ('ein Grimm der Hölle nicht von hier'). The dying subject becomes subject all the more for unknowing and undoing itself: 'O Leben, Leben: Draußensein'. Life realises itself in offering itself for burning and consumption, absorption into a state other than itself. This movement towards a condition of otherness is the dying subject's new definition of itself outside the contours of selfhood.

But the self's being within its own destruction is paradoxically the self's invitation to this destruction to be within it. Rilke writes the otherness and unrecognisability of death into himself by creating a language for death which exceeds recognition. It is a non-acquisitive language of death which does not seek to buy into

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23 Prater recounts how Rilke refused to take any drugs which would cause him to lose consciousness on his deathbed (p. 403). Rilke was determined to experience death in its fullness, determined to live it as the completion of his life. Towards the end of his illness and his life he writes of the possible integration of pain which is a way to freedom: 'Und jetzt, Lou, ich weiß nicht wie viel Höllen, du weisst wie ich den Schmerz, den physischen, den wirklich grossen in meine Ordnungen untergebracht habe, es sei denn als Ausnahme und schon wieder Rückweg ins Freibe' (13.12.1926, LAS, p. 483).


25 Rilke's image of the dying body as wood undergoing transformation by fire is one of purification (the dying 'I' steps onto the funeral pyre of suffering and is pure). Rilke seems to associate wood with a pure transformation – the burning lumps of coal in Malte produce a nauseating smoke which is paralysing rather than transforming: 'ich wurde das reine, starke Holz heizen ... und nicht diese trostlosen têtes-de-moineau, deren Dunst das Atmen so bang macht und den Kopf so wirr' (Malte, p. 753). See also 'Widmung für Max Nussbaum':

Leben und Tod: sie sind im Kerne Eins.
Weder sich befreit aus meinem eignen Stamme,
Der preßt sich selber zu dem Tropfen Weins
Und wirft sich selber in die reinste Flamme. (1922, SW II, p. 252)

26 As part of his refusal of the name of the disease which was killing him, Rilke wrote to Madame Elouï Bey of the unrecognisable voice of death. He wrote that the doctors might have a name for this suffering 'but us it teaches only three or four cries in which our voice is unrecognizable – our voice which was so trained in nuances': 'C'est cette souffrance déjà anonyme, que les médecins baptisent, mais qui, elle, se contente à nous apprendre trois ou quatre cris où notre voix ne se reconnaît point. Elle qui avait l'éducation des nuances!' (Amitié, p. 211).
the future with traditional narratives of consolation (‘so sicher nirgend Künftiges zu kaufen/um dieses Herz’). This language is marked by its unwillingness to impose design and rationality on death or assume relation and linearity (‘Ganz rein, ganz planlos frei von Zukunft’); it is language which gets outside the traditional eschatological vocabulary of death. And speech and writing become the focus of the lines: ‘so sicher nirgend Künftiges zu kaufen/um dieses Herz, darin der Vorrat schwieg’. The past tense of ‘schweigen’ indicates here that the heart has now broken its silence, and the poem is the product of this. In accepting death as separate from any inherited definitions the poetic ‘I’ clears a space for its own, individual, articulation of death. ‘Vorrat’ implies a depth of response to death in the heart, a richness which could only be fully expressed on the threshold of death, and this resource of the heart is the burning, transformational imagination, the source of writing (‘wie ich im Geiste brannte’). Poetry is made in the agony of death, for the last boundary is to be crossed (‘du letzter’), the boundary into final, imagined alienation and otherness. A poetry which says ‘Komm du’ to suffering and death is language inviting in difficulty and inscrutability as an intimate friend, language which seeks familiarity with the unfamiliar.

Rilke sees art and poetry as language which has approached the boundary or threshold of the unknown and annihilating:

Kunstdinge sind ja immer Ergebnisse des In-Gefahr-gewesen-Seins, des in einer Erfahrung Bis-ans-Ende-gegangen-Seins, bis wo kein Mensch mehr weiter kann. Je weiter man geht, desto eigener, desto persönlicher, desto einziger wird ja ein Erlebnis, und das Kunstding endlich ist die notwendige, ununterdrückbare, möglichst endgültige Aussprache dieser Einzigkeit. (To Clara, 24.6.1907, Briefe 1906-07, pp. 279-80)

This letter describes the venture into death and the boundaries of language as authentic, individual experience and articulation. (The adjective ‘eigen’ appears here, evoking ‘den eigenen Tod’ and the implications of this discussed earlier.) This venture is one of extremity and danger, and in ‘Komm du, du letzter’ Rilke reclaims death for himself by articulating its threatening difference, its status as the ‘Ende’. This articulation (‘die notwendige, ununterdrückbare, möglichst endgültige Aussprache dieser Einzigkeit’), the language of extremity, is the poetic. It goes to the edge of the known language of death (‘bis wo kein Mensch mehr weiter kann’) and approaches ‘Einzigkeit’, the awareness of death’s incomparability and resistance to representation. Only new artworks (‘Kunstdinge’), which, in being new, go beyond the principle of representation

28 Blanchot writes: ‘[…] to write a single line, one must have exhausted art, one must have exhausted one’s life in the search for art’ (Space, p. 89).
and fixity and appeal instead to the perpetual movement of the imagination, can offer a
description of the uncharted, unfixed and unfixable ground of death. Poetry is the only
language which can express death’s ‘Einzigkeit’, its non-paraphraseable singularity.
Rilke’s new metaphor for death in ‘Komm du, du letzter’, is death as an addressee, an
outsidedness which is written into life in poetry.

This encounter with terminal, physical pain (‘heilloser Schmerz im leiblichen
Gewebe’) marks the language of Rilke’s last poem. It is a poetry which is burdened
with the pain of difficult articulation, and in Rilke’s writing the pain of death is always
also the pain of writing.\(^{29}\) I would like to bring in again here the Rilkean ‘Schweres’ and
the inspiration he draws from it:

Ich meine, es müßte ein großes gewaltiges Gebet geben des einen Flehens,
es möchte jeder nur sein Schweres auf seinem Weg finden, ich will sagen
das, das zu den einmal eingesehenen und leidenschaftlich bejahten
Aufgaben seines Lebens immerhin in einer gewissen Proportionalität stünde
-: dieses dürfte dann groß, ja außerordentlich übermächtig, es dürfte sogar
tödlich sein. Denn wer, wenn er einen wahrhaften Kampf auf sich nimmt,
hat nicht auch die verschwiegenen heilige Freudigkeit, in ihm unterzugehen.
(19.2.1922, Sizzo, p. 22)

I will endeavour to show that this trial of strength is the trial of reading and writing
poetry as in the Second Elegy where song (or poetry) is directed towards angels of
death: ‘Jeder Engel ist schrecklich. Und dennoch, weh mir, ansing ich euch, fast
tödliche Vögel der Seele’ (SW I, p. 689: 1). The angel is the being in whom death is
already complete (‘Engel (sagt man) wüßten oft nicht, ob sie unter/Lebenden gehen
oder Toten’, DE, SW I, p. 688: 82) but also the being in whom poetry is already
complete.\(^{30}\) Rilke reinforces the idea that the poetic work is death-directed when,
referring to death (‘unterzugehen’), he exclaims: ‘Wie vertraulich ist er, wenn man ihm
im Eigenen, im leidenschaftlich Gekonnten begegnet!’ (Testament, p. 32) suggesting

\(^{29}\) Graff writes: ‘For death is the highest instance of life which forces our smooth cleverness back to “the
spot where we yet failed to master the trick and fell from each other like ill-suited beasts attempting to
mate”’ (1956, p. 231). He is quoting the Fifth Elegy here (SW I, p. 704: 74).

\(^{30}\) Bate argues: ‘The angel is the creature in whom the transformation of the visible into the invisible, of
earth into consciousness, is already complete. Potentially, the poet – or perhaps the poem itself – is the
angel’ (2000, p. 263). Wallace Stevens’s angel is also poetry, the new language through which the earth
can be seen differently: ‘Yet I am the necessary angel of the earth,since, in my sight, you see the earth
again,Cleared of its stiff and stubborn, man-locked set’ (‘Angel surrounded by Paysans’, Collected
Poems, pp. 496–7). Stevens’s angel also proclaims: ‘And I am imagination, in a leaden time and in a
world that does not move for the weight of its own heavi ness’ (The Necessary Angel, p. 63). Kermode
recognises that this ‘heaviness’ takes in death and the poetic challenge to the imagination: ‘It was a leaden
time; when reality is death, the imagination can no longer press back against it.’ He goes on: ‘in the end
you must find out for your ageing self how that weight is to be lifted, what fiction will transform death’
that death is something which has to be worked through with intimate suffering and achieved, and it is this work which is the writing of poetry. This achievement (‘das leidenschaftlich Gekonnte’) is the work of art which finds a space for death by going to the end of fear. Poetry is the individual’s strength (‘Kraft’) but it also gives strength because it is a language which takes on the burden of the unthinkable and opens its boundaries to it.\(^{31}\) It is the creative, empowering language of poetry, generating new meaning in its combinations and paradoxes and inviting the reader to think beyond what conventional language allows. It is within the difficulty of poetic language that one can recover and recreate one’s ‘own death’. The poet must suffer for the sake of the work, divorcing herself from the comfortable stasis of received language, hurting and losing herself as Rilke is lost in the ‘Draußensein’ of death in the last lines of his last poem.\(^{32}\)

Blanchot observes that Rilke’s project is to ‘establish with death a relation of freedom’ (Space, p. 95), a relation which recognises and affirms the possibility of otherness and non-being, and ‘Komm du, du letzter’ no longer clings to life and memories (‘Erinnerungen’) but looks forward to non-existence. Blanchot compares death’s possibility and space with literature as the search-space, ‘an investigation which is not undetermined but is, rather, determined by its indeterminacy’ (Space, p. 89). He identifies Rilke’s ‘imaginary space’ as a space where things are ‘transformed into that which cannot be grasped’ (p. 141), arguing that death sets up a space of uncertainty: ‘No one doubts death, but no one can think of death except doubtfully’ (p. 95). In ‘Komm du, du letzter’ this doubt is expressed in the language of negation. Death is defined negatively as destructive (fire), from elsewhere (‘nicht von hier’), destinationless (‘planlos frei von Zukunft’), unknowable (‘unkenntlich’), beyond memory (‘Erinnerungen reiß ich nicht herein’) and outside (‘Draußensein’). Blanchot asserts that ‘to be without being is possibility itself: the possibility of death’ (p. 96). Rilke makes his own death in his poem, and Blanchot asserts the importance of this for every individual: ‘It does not suffice for him that he is mortal; he understands that he has to become mortal, that he must be mortal twice over; sovendely, extremely mortal. […] Death, in the human perspective, is not a given, it must be achieved’ (p. 96). This approach has, in common with Rilke’s ‘eigener Tod’, the sense that death is not

\(^{31}\) ‘Und dennoch, seit einer Weile glaube ich, daß es unsere Kraft ist, alle unsere Kraft, die noch zu stark ist für uns’ (Malte, p. 862).

\(^{32}\) See del Nevo on the poetry of Edmond Jabès: ‘Writing (poetry) is an inner vertigo of the self on the edge of the self. […] Here at the vertiginous point also we are placed in relation with our own death – the sense that we ‘are written’ […] At the vertiginous point the language of poetry […] begins’ (c2000, p. 132). The point where language begins to exceed the conscious control of the writer is the point evoked in Rilke’s letter on the ‘Anschauen’ which is directed outside the self (to Clara, 8.3.1907, Briefe 1906-07, p. 214).
imposed from the outside or in the abstract but is made within the individual’s reception of death. The achievement in the work of art is the will to test possibility, to enter into the region of the ungraspable which is not the ‘beyond’ into which one is delivered, the end towards which death strives, but is the leap of death itself, the ‘empty depth’ (Blanchot, Space, p. 106), the willingness to be ‘planlos frei’ (‘Komm du, du letzter’) in death understood as the ultimate experience. Shakespeare’s Timon also faces this possibility of death as an empty depth, a deep well of abundance in nothingness: ‘And nothing brings me all things’ (Timon of Athens, v. 2. 73). This letting go of one’s own power constitutes at the same time an exercising of it, a venturing into the language of unstable signification. The space of poetry is its ungroundedness, its gesture of releasing rather than fixing meaning, and the work of art gestures perpetually towards the intimidatingly indiscernible and spacious.

In a letter written to Gräfin Sizzo after the death of one of her relatives Rilke writes of working through pain and suffering, dimensions of death, as ‘eine Einführung ins Ganze’, whereby the fearsome and the inscrutable are integrated to form a whole consciousness, a whole being and identity in the work of art:

[...] wie wahrhaft ist er [Schmerz], da Sie ihn bis ins Körperliche verfolgen und ihn in seinen beiden Extremen erfahren können: ganz im Seelischen, dort wo er uns so unendlich übertrifft, daß wir ihn nur noch als Stille, als Pause, als Intervall unserer Natur empfinden, und auch wieder, plötzlich, an seinem anderen Ende, wo er wie ein leibliches Wehtun ist, ein unhbeholfener heilloser Kinder-Schmerz, der stöhnen macht. Aber ist es nicht wunderbar (und ist es nicht irgendwie ein Werk der Mütterlichkeit), so in den Kontrasten des eigenen Wesens herumgeführt zu sein? Und Sie empfindens ja auch oft wie eine Einweihung, eine Einführung ins Ganze und so, als könne einem nichts Böses, nichts im bösen Sinne Tödliches mehr widerfahren, wenn dies elementarische Leid einmal rein und wahrhaftig durchgemacht ist. (12.4.1923, Sizzo, pp. 56-7)

Pain is at once ‘heillos’, purely physical and untranslatable like the unbearable pain of childbirth, and a spiritual experience of that which is at the limits of ourselves, which can be felt only as ellipsis, just as Rilke’s personal suffering and death in ‘Komm du, du letzter’ are both torment and passion. The whole experience is compounded by both these extremes, and suffering must be pursued into its greatest concentration in order to reveal its other, positive side, ‘the other side of the moon’ (6.1.1923, Sizzo, p. 53), and
achieve its completion. In this, the human being takes on the work of ‘das Ganze,’ the forging of the wholeness, or unity, of life and death, self and other. Rilke does indeed use the term ‘work’ – ‘ein Werk der Mütterlichkeit’ - and a few lines later he speaks of ‘eine Aufgabe des Überstehens’, ‘ein Aufarbeiten alles Leidens’. Here again there is a suggestion of work which translates suffering into art, poetic work, for it is poetry which dares to suffer contradictions, holding up the positive and the negative simultaneously to make a whole and giving expression to an otherness, without which the human existence is incomplete. Elsewhere Rilke writes of the artwork as the place where:

\[
\text{der Schmerz, woher er auch stammen mag, sofort zur puren Kraft wird,}
\text{etwa wie im Kunstwerk das Schwere, ja selbst das Häßliche über dem}
\text{reinen Dasein, das es annimmt, sich nur noch als Stärke, als}
\text{Entschlossenheit und Fülle des Lebens offenbart. (To Elsa Bruckmann,}
\text{11.4.1912, Briefe 1907-14, pp. 224-5)}
\]

This letter identifies the burden of suffering as a source from which creative strength is derived, and links this suffering to the difficulty of the artistic transformation. The work of language works upon itself, generating the strength to write the poetry of death. In ‘Die Spitze’ (NG I) emotion is transformed into an image, a work of art, a ‘thing’ which has its own space:

\[
\text{Du Langvergangene und schließlich Blinde,}
\text{ist deine Seligkeit in diesem Ding,}
\text{zu welcher hin, wie zwischen Stamm und Rinde,}
\text{dein großes Fühlen, kleinverwandelt, ging? (SWI, p. 512)}
\]

The lace is a piece of work which has been ‘done’: ‘Sieh: sie ward getan’. The blind lacemaker escapes the limitation of her emotion and her circumstances by doing the

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33 The suffering which charges such transitional movement to a place outside the bounds of the known is conveyed in physical terms again in ‘Fortgehen’: ‘Plötzliches Fortgehen: Draußen im Grauen/mit Augen, eingeschmolzen, heiß und weich/und nun in das was ist hinauszuschauen’ (1906, SWII, p. 195).
34 And if it is not writing it is not work: ‘[…] Aber vor allem, die Arbeit. Was man bei Rodin fühlt: sie ist Raum, sie ist Zeit, sie ist Wand, sie ist Traum, sie ist Fenster und Ewigkeit … Il faut travailler toujours’ (to Clara, 18.9.1902, Briefe 1902-06, p. 43).
35 Rilke writes: ‘Ein solcher Verlust (caused by death) ist, je tiefer er uns trifft und je heftiger er uns angeht, desto mehr, eine Aufgabe, das nun im Verlorensein hoffnungslos Betonte, neu, anders und endgültig in Besitz zu nehmen: dies ist dann unendliche Leistung, die alles Negative, das dem Schmerz anhaftet, alle Trägheit und Nachgiebigkeit, die immer einen Teil des Schmerzes ausmacht, auf der Stelle überwindet, dies ist tätiger, innen-wirkender Schmerz, der einzige, der Sinn hat und unserer würdig ist’ (6.1.1923, Sizzo, pp. 50-1). Note the words ‘Aufgabe’ and ‘Leistung’ here, referring to the work of writing. Nolte stresses that life and death must be created, figured into language – they are not given in advance: ‘das Leben soll eben vom Tode her gestaltet werden’ (1934, p. 37).
work of transformation: 'Durch einen Riß im Schicksal, eine Lücke/entzogst du deine Seele deiner Zeit'. In doing her work she finds herself on the other side of the ordinary.

The ‘Werk der Mütterlichkeit’ above also suggests the image of pregnancy which was discussed in the previous chapter. The poet gestates death in the creation and work of the work of art, the poem, as suggested in the verbs ‘bilden’ and ‘bauen’ of the Stundenbuch poem, ‘Denn wir sind nur die Schale und das Blatt’:

Denn wir sind nur die Schale und das Blatt.
Der große Tod, den jeder in sich hat,
das ist die Frucht um die sich alles dreht.

[...] 
und jeder, welcher bildete und baute,
ward Welt um diese Frucht, und fror und taute
und windete ihr zu und schien sie an.
In sie ist eingegangen alle Wärme
der Herzen und der Hirne weißes Glühn -
Doch deine Engel ziehn wie Vogelschwärme,
und sie erfanden alle Früchte grün. (SW I, p. 347)

Images of human work permeate the organic imagery of nature and fruit. The verbs of construction, ‘bilden’ and ‘bauen’, are the poetic creativity of the human subject transforming her own death-fruit. The analogy with weather is made (‘und windete ihr zu und schien sie an’) to show that the subject provides the right conditions for the ripening of the fruit, and these are poetic conditions whereby the fruit is created as a work of art. The imagery of transformation is both organic and artistic, and ‘alle Wärme/der Herzen und der Hirne weißes Glühn’ points to the emotional and intellectual work which goes into art. For rightly points out that nature, God and art are one and the same in Rilke’s thinking, and fruit is the absolute work of art. The ‘Schwere’ of artistic production is expressed in the ‘Schwere’ of pregnancy, as Requiem für eine Freundin, which I will examine in the next chapter, demonstrates. I would like to focus for a moment on the word ‘bilden’ which suggests the making of an image, an aesthetic

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37 In a letter to Gräfin Manon zu Solms-Laubach Rilke draws the analogy again, insisting that solitude provides the right conditions for the gestation of the poem: ‘Meine Einsamkeit schließt sich endlich, und ich bin in der Arbeit wie der Kern in der Frucht’ (3.8.1907, Briefe 1906-07, p. 305).

38 See Por on nature perfecting its work of art in ‘Der Apfelgarten’, and God behaving as an artistic agency in ‘Herbsttag’ (1998, p. 65).
construct, and, as I argued at the beginning of this chapter, Rilke’s project is the construction of a ‘death of one’s own’ by writing death differently, by making a poetic image of death within oneself. The fruit of death is the written work of death, the work which is done within the subject, within her language, metaphorically within fruitskin and protective leaves (‘Schale’ and ‘Blatt’). The other meaning of ‘Blatt’ – ‘page’ – also evokes poetic activity, the poem being the womb in which the ‘death of one’s own’ is gestated. Rilke runs together again here the making of death and the ripening of death. Pregnancy is a metaphor for creative writing but the physical intimacy with the work of art suggested by its status as offspring in the womb, the ‘Wärme der Herzen’ which is bodily as much as emotional warmth, and the physical imagery of blood and gesticulation (‘Blut und Gebärde’, Malte, p. 725), which I will discuss later, point to a relationship with poetry which is indeed internal, instinctive and bodily. ‘Komm du, du letzter’ throb with the physical pain of death (‘heilloser Schmerz im leiblichen Geweb’) and Rilke’s poetry of death is as much an assent to physical being as to writerly being. 

Taking into account the trees in ‘Ich liebe meines Wesens Dunkelstunden’ (SB, SW I, pp. 254-5) and the letter to Lotte Hepner (‘blüht ein Baum, so blüht so gut der Tod in ihm wie das Leben’, 8.11.1915, Briefe 1914-21, p. 90) it is possible to see that Rilke’s project is the reconstruction of the organic unity of life and death in an aesthetic space. The Sixth Elegy praises the ‘süßeste Leistung’ (SW I, p. 706: 7) of the fig tree which drives its juices directly into fruit and temporality, and bypasses the lingering and retarding process of blossoming which also refers to mortals ‘Verweilen’, their attempt

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39 Rilke argues that fruit is a work of art in which beauty can be housed: ‘und es ist immer noch nicht überflüssig geworden zu wiederholen, daß man Schönheit nicht ’machen’ kann. Niemand hat je Schönheit gemacht. Man kann nur freundliche oder erhabene Umstände schaffen für Das, was manchmal bei uns verweilen mag: einen Altar und Früchte und eine Flamme – Das andere steht nicht in unserer Macht’ (Rodin, p. 211).

40 In a letter to Mimi Romanelli Rilke writes of the preparation of the masterpiece of death, a slowly ripened death: ‘il faut apprendre à mourir: voilà toute la vie. De préparer de loin le chef-d’oeuvre d’une mort fièvre et suprême, d’une mort où le hasard n’est pour rien d’une mort bien faite, bien heureuse, enthousiaste comme les saints ont su la former; d’une mort mûrie longuement, qui efface elle-même son nom odieux, n’étant qu’un geste qui rend à l’univers anonyme les lois reconnues et sauvées d’une vie intensément accomplie’ (8.12.1907, Briefe I, pp. 229-30). The extremity associated with this death suggests the intensity of the Sixth Elegy’s hero and the willingness of the poet to submit to ‘das Schwere’ which is the burden of both death in the writing of death. In the same letter Rilke writes of death at work inside him, transforming his heart, running through his veins as something ‘bitter-sweet’: ‘C’est toujours cette mort qui continue en moi, qui travaille en moi, qui transforme mon cœur, qui augmente le rouge de mon sang, qui comprime la vie qui fut la nôtre, afin qu’elle soit une goutte douce-amère qui circule dans mes veines, qui entre partout, qui soit la mienne infiniment’ (p. 230).

41 In a letter to Franz Xaver Kappus Rilke writes: ‘Und auch im Mann ist Mutterschaft, scheint mir, leibliche und geistige: sein Zeugen ist auch eine Art Gebären, und Gebären ist es, wenn er schafft aus innerster Fülle’ (16.7.1903, B.a.e.j.D., p. 26). In the same letter he writes: ‘denn auch das geistige Schaffen stammt von dem physischen her’ (p. 25).
to stall death by postponing the ripening of life which, at its peak of blossoming, can then only proceed towards death. The word ‘Leistung’ here of course also points to the aesthetic achievement, and the hero’s and tree’s procreative activities are to be considered poetologically as figures of artistic creativity, particularly as the hero has transformed himself by the end of the elegy (‘stand er am Ende der Lächeln, - anders’, SW I, p. 708: 46), having found a different language of instinct and unity with death. There are more references to writing and articulation in the elegy:

Aber,
das uns finster verschweigt, das plötzlich begeisterte Schicksal
singt ihn hinein in den Sturm seiner aufrauschenden Welt.
Hör ich doch keinen wie ihn. Auf einmal durchgeht mich
mit der strömenden Luft sein verdunkelter Ton. (SW I, p. 707: 25)

Knowledge of transience silences mortals but the hero’s mortality is an inspiration (‘begeisterte Schicksal’) which ‘sings him into the storm of his uproarious world’ (my translation). These lines resound with noise and tone (‘Singen’, ‘Sturm’, ‘Rauschen’, ‘verdunkelter Ton’) and the poetic ‘I’ listens to sound (‘Hör ich doch keinen wie ihn’). The dark sounds of otherness associated with the hero penetrate and resonate within the poetic ‘I’, and the impression is that the poetic ‘I’ brings forth song and articulation by identifying with the death-driven hero. In the elegy’s connection of the fig tree and the hero there is a connection between the life and death instinct of the temporal fruit and the hero’s will to self-creation in his creation which manifests itself in the impulse to leave behind the familiar and find his way into the new constellation, the symbol of his new world: ‘beständig/nimmt er sich fort und tritt ins veränderte Sternbild’ (SW I, p. 707: 22).

Perhaps the most overt analogy between the organic fruit and the writing of death is made in ‘Der Tod des Dichters’:

Er lag. Sein aufgestelltes Antlitz war
bleich und verweigernd in den steilen Kissen, seitdem die Welt und dieses von-ihr-Wissen, von seinen Sinnen abgerissen, zurückfiel an das teilnahmslose Jahr.

Die, so ihn leben sahen, wüssten nicht, wie sehr er Eines war mit allem diesen: denn Dieses: diese Tiefen, diese Wiesen und diese Wasser waren sein Gesicht.
O sein Gesicht war diese ganze Weite,
die jetzt noch zu ihm will und um ihn wirbt;
und seine Maske, die nun bang verstirbt,
ist zart und offen, wie die Innenseite
von einer Frucht, die an der Luft verdirbt. (NG I, SW I, p. 495-6)

The fruit and the poet share an openness, an exposure of the ‘Innenseite’ to external space (‘gange Weite’), a readiness to transgress their pliant (‘zart und offen’) boundaries. (Sonette an Orpheus I, 13 and I, 15 depict the fruit coming out of its skin and being released into taste and nourishment as the fulfilment of fruit, SW I, pp. 739-40). The poet’s dying face is afraid but given to death, given to its decay, its final transformation. It is the death-mask, reminiscent of the ‘Maskenmund’ in ‘Todes-Erfahrung’, representing the language of poetry which crosses boundaries, and particularly the boundary between the person and the impersonal, the human and the inhuman. Poetry is the language of transformation and the poet embodies poetry on his deathbed as he assents to the physical transformation of death. The poet has written the fruit of his death.

The poem ‘Der Auszug des verlorenen Sohnes’ is a metaphor for the writing of poetry. It describes the ‘Draußensein’ of death and takes on the ‘Draußensein’ of poetic language, language outside of conventional, rational communication, in an attempt to discover whether it is possible to transcend the collective discourse of death. Whilst the English version of the parable is concerned with the son’s prodigality, the German parable is called ‘The Lost Son’ (‘Vom verlorenen Sohn’, Lukas 15, 11-32), interested in the condition of disorientation and instability in a world without the familiar markers:

Nun fortzugehn von alledem Verwormen,
das unser ist und uns doch nicht gehört,
das, wie das Wasser in den alten Bomen,
uns zitternd spiegelt und das Bild zerstört;
von allem diesen, das sich wie mit Dornen
noch einmal an uns anhängt - fortzugehn
und Das und Den,
die man schon nicht mehr sah
(so täglich waren sie und so gewöhnlich),
auf einmal anzuschauen: sanft, versöhnlich
und wie an einem Anfang und von nah;
und ahnend einzusehen, wie unpersönlich,
wie über alle hin das Leid geschah,
von dem die Kindheit voll war bis zum Rand -:
Und dann doch fortzugehen, Hand aus Hand,
as ob man ein Geheiltes neu zerrisse,
und fortzugehn: wohin? Ins Ungewisse,
weit in ein unverwandtes warmes Land,
das hinter allem Handeln wie Kulisse
gleichgültig sein wird: Garten oder Wand;
und fortgehn: warum? Aus Drang, aus Artung,
aus Ungeduld, aus dunkler Erwartung,
aus Unverständlichkeit und Unverstand:

Dies alles auf sich nehmen und vergebens
vielleicht Gehaltnes fallen lassen, um
allein zu sterben, wissend nicht warum -

Ist das der Eingang eines neuen Lebens? (NG I, SW I, pp. 491-2)

The theme of the poem is the letting go of what has gone before (recalling ‘Der Schwan’). Conventional family or home life is not celebrated as it is in the biblical parable. It is presented as paralysing (thorns are clinging to and hindering the body, as the swan was ‘schwer und wie gebunden’). The impression is of the son simply going and going into a future which holds the possibility of a lonely death, but also a new life. ‘Fortgehen’ conveys only a going away from something, offering no information on where this ‘going’ may lead, and it is as if the son presses instinctively, unthinkingly ahead, until the sudden realisation that he does not know his destination: ‘fortzugehen: wohin?’ Disconnectedness (‘unverwandt’) and the uncertainty (‘Ungewisse’) of the unfamiliar are sought as an estrangement from one’s daily, accustomed (‘so täglich waren sie und so gewöhnlich’) environment. The paradox of ‘der eigene Tod’ is evoked here in ‘Nun fortzugehen von alledem Verwornen,/das unser ist und uns doch nicht gehört’. The son intends to take deeper possession of his life, to make it his own, by depersonalising it. The lost son goes ‘weit’, striving for distance and dislocation from family, friends and the familiar. He is seeking difference in indifference (‘ein unverwandtes warmes Land,/das hinter allem Handeln wie Kulisse/gleichgültig sein wird’), transcendence and abstraction. Blanchot sums up this change of perception thus: ‘I see things then with the disinterested and somewhat distant look of someone who has just left them’; ‘To see properly is essentially to die’ (Space, p. 151). The lost son’s ‘Auszug’ culminates in the unknowing of death (‘um/allein zu sterben, wissend nicht warum’), which is paradoxically closer to the knowing of death in its unknowable absence. It is a death associated with the qualities which are inherent in the wild

42 The hero of the Sixth Elegy is turned away from all confinement (‘abgewendet’: SW I, p. 708: 46).
43 Rilke writes: ‘fast feindlich mußte sie [die Natur] sein in erhabener Gleichgültigkeit, um unserem Dasein eine neue Deutung zu geben mit ihren Dingen’ (Landschaft, p. 520). This indifference is associated with the dead in the Fourth Elegy: ‘Gleichmut, wie ihn Tote haben’ (SW I, p. 698: 45), and the Tenth Elegy: ‘die jungen Toten, im ersten Zustand/zeitlosen Gleichmuts, dem der Entwöhnung’ (SW I, p. 723: 50).
animal’s vision in the *Eighth Elegy*, unattainable for humans who have been habituated to definition:

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 wissen 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. (*SW I*, p. 714: 1)\(^4^4\)

The elegy reproduces the son’s confinement within the received perceptual structures (‘Gestaltung’) he has internalised since childhood and from which he strains to become lost. He is driven by a sense of incompleteness (‘Aus Drang, aus Artung/aus Ungeduld, aus dunkler Erwartung, aus Unverständlichkeit und Unverstand’), a sense that his conventional world cannot be the only one. The wild outside is pure, abstract indefiniteness – ‘das Offene’ – intangible and indescribable, gleaned only from the faces of those creatures who live and embody it. Whilst his fellow humans look backwards to the secure familiar the lost son’s impulse is outwards towards what he does not know, the eternal expanse of otherness and death, the ‘Draußensein’ of ‘Komm du, du letzter’.\(^4^5\)

The Rilkean eternity (evoked in the terms ‘das Ganze’, ‘das Offene’ and ‘Draußensein’) is glimpsed only in the presence of, on the acute threshold of, physical or existential borders, and the pain inherent in such testing of extremities is conveyed in ‘als ob man ein Geheiltes neu zerrisse’. The sense of overcoming, or becoming more, is grounded in a sense of boundary, whether this be the limitation of the imagination or the cessation which is death. To go beyond oneself to a distant, unrecognisable place is to discover more of oneself, as in the poems discussed earlier.\(^4^6\) Yet this new perspective does not offer any defined meaning, no sense of what is to be found on the other side.

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\(^4^4\) ‘Kindheit’ describes the child as open to the same infinite distances and change which roam in the animal (*NG I*, *SW I*, pp. 510-1).

\(^4^5\) Rilke writes: ‘jeder wählt sich sein Bleiben nach dem Geschmack [...] seines Todes. Was jene Männer hinausdrängt in ihr zielloses Gehen, in die Steppe, in die Wüste, das ist das Gefühl, daß ihr Tod sich nicht gefiele in ihrem Haus, daß er nicht darin Platz hat’ (*Testament*, p. 36).

\(^4^6\) See also the *First Elegy*:
  Ist es nicht Zeit, daß wir liebend
  uns vom Geliebten befrein und es bebend bestehn:
  wie der Pfeil die Sehne besteht, um gesammelt im Absprung
  mehr zu sein als er selbst. Denn Bleiben ist nirgends. (*SW I*, p. 687: 150)
The moment of renewal, signified by the ‘auf einmal anzuschauen’, is underscored by ignorance, pain and isolation, and the poem ends on a note of confusion. The expectation of epiphany or transfiguration remains unfulfilled, the possibility of futility foregrounded (‘vergebens/vielleicht Gehaltenes fallen lassen’), and yet neither is the apparent vanity of the exercise confirmed. The poem invites the reader to work out for herself whether a new perspective is offered. If the reader can see anything new in this it is a death which is experienced for what it is, without an accompanying narrative which claims to rationalise and define death. It is a death which transports the mind to pure ignorance for its own sake, releasing it from the stiflingly cumbersome ‘gedeutete Welt’ of the everyday (DE 1, SW I, p. 685: 12). This death is framed with a question mark. It may or may not be a possible new beginning (‘wie an einem Anfang’). The redemption imagined is perhaps that of the Lost Son’s potentially new language, the ‘erlöstendes Gleichnis’ (Landschaft, p. 520) – a language of art – expressing the new experience of nature and existence outside and beyond previous vocabularies.

The theme of the poem is the stuff of the poem itself. The compulsion to get outside of stale and soporific structures also constitutes the Rilkean poetic in its defamiliarisation of old metaphors and introduction of new ones. Poetic language does something other than try to impart the literal, and ‘Der Auszug des verlorenen Sohnes’ self-consciously gets outside of (enacts an ‘Auszug’ from) the parabolic, dogmatic mode of its biblical original. The ideological seal of that text is broken, the poem ending on a question instead of the confirmation of homecoming and happiness. The parable is no longer a closed message received passively but an invitation to the reader to draw out of it something new. This readerly participation and innovation is a resistance to the linguistic control and stabilisation of convention and tradition which impose on the self from outside. The poem reworks the prescriptive parable as poems rework and transform a standardised reality. Rilke’s poetry is the language of process, never knowing its end in advance, for it is within the operations and manoeuvrings of poetry, within its capacity to rewrite and change that poetry fulfils itself. ‘Archaïscher Torso

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47 During a period of separation from his lover, Baladine Klossowska, Rilke explains to her that in his writerly solitude he is moving away from her and his identity and into the relinquishment and abstractedness of death: ‘car là où je vais aucun nom n’est valable, aucun souvenir ne doit persister, on doit arriver comme on arrive parmi les morts, en remettant toutes les forces entre la main de l’Ange qui nous conduit’ (18.11.1920, Merlina, p. 91).

48 ‘The authentic answer is always the question’s vitality. It can close in around the question, but it does so in order to preserve the question by keeping it open’ (Blanchot, Space, p. 9).

49 Rilke says that an artist is required to test herself against extremity whilst at the same time being concerned not to express this extremity in advance of the work of art: ‘Wir sind also sicher darauf angewiesen, uns am Äußersten zu prüfen und zu erproben, aber auch wahrscheinlich gebunden, dieses Äußerste nicht vor dem Eingang in das Kunstwerk auszusprechen, zu teilen, mitzuteilen’ (to Clara,
Apollos' culminates in the command: 'Du mußt dein Leben ändern' (NG II, SW I, p. 557) but it is the thrust of change which is called for – the action, and not some specific product of, transformation. The hero of the Sixth Elegy stands at the end changed ('anders', SW I, p. 708: 46). This is the elegy's last word and no expansion of it is given. The reader must accept that the hero's transformation is the sum of a life's resistance to confinement and stasis.

Departure or 'Auszug' from familiar language is the dynamic of the Neue Gedichte. It is the process of rethinking, a sustained probing of the indescribable, not necessarily the resultant description, which is authentic, infinite life, life which approaches 'das Offene', or 'Draußen-(sein):50 'Der Auszug des verlorenen Sohnes' demonstrates this movement towards 'das Offene', a language of the infinite, in the movement of its lines. The urgency of the need to get outside of appropriative language and initiate the new is conveyed in the introductory long sentence, its many conjunctions pushing it onwards over fourteen lines, briefly pausing at 'Rand' where the poet-son has already achieved extremity and distance but takes the decision not to return and reintegrate but to go further away. The poem continues ('Und dann doch fortzugehen') doggedly into the next sentence, again beginning with 'Und'. It is as if the son presses instinctively ahead, motivated by the journey, not the destination. The word 'fortgehen' appears, insistently, five times in the poem. The poem itself is language pushing outside and onwards into an abyss of possibilities. The caesura which marks the exceeding of the 'Rand' also marks the parameter of a traditional fourteen-line sonnet as the poem pushes well beyond the confines of form. This condition and poetic of 'Gehen' appears again in the Eighth Elegy:


Wallace Stevens writes of poetry's experimental character: 'While there is nothing automatic about the poem, nevertheless it has an automatic aspect in the sense that it is what I wanted it to be without knowing before it was written what I wanted it to be, even though I knew before it was written what I wanted to do' ('The Irrational Element in Poetry', Opus Posthumous, 216-29, pp. 219-20).

Blanchot writes: 'Art is experience because it is experimental: because it is a search – an investigation which is not undetermined but is, rather, determined by its indeterminacy, and involves the whole of life, even if it seems to know nothing of life' (Space, p. 89)

50 The eternal or the infinite in Rilke's poetry is always a feature of language. 'Nächlicher Gang' (1908, SW II, pp. 30-1) is a poetological poem, presenting the ambiguity of existence as its shaking off of all names: 'wir nennen nichts'. The poem's biggest statement is, perhaps: 'Und wer zuviel begreift/dem geht das Ewige vorbei'. These lines identify moments of incomprehension when analogies and comparisons seem impossible ('Nichts ist vergleichbar') as moments of greater comprehension. The poem creatively writes this eternity, i.e. it writes eternity into existence, by writing a non-appropriative, non-totalising language into existence.
The repetition of ‘going’ is the expression of its infinite quality, its movement being its only motivation. The poet aspires to a writing which absorbs death and its unknowability and delivers language into a condition of destinationless, non-teleological process. Matching the patterns of non-linearity, apparent regression and ‘Unverstand’ the solid bulk of lines seems to fray at the end of the poem into the 3-line stanza and the isolated, single-line dilemma. As well as asking whether confrontation with death and uncertainty can be positive, the poem asks whether poetry gets outside of the language of certainty and truth, and whether readers gain anything from reading it. The poem still has death as ‘unbeschreiblich’ (DE 4, SW I, p. 700: 82).

If the reader can hear the language of paradox at the end of the poem, the paradox that this death could be new life, it is a paradox which does not yield sense as readily as the paradoxes in the parables of Christ. It retains the stark incomprehensibility of an entirely new creation and invites the reader to approach the unfathomable, a condition which she may never have sought before, Blanchot’s ‘imaginary space’ of art where things are ‘transformed into that which cannot be grasped’ (Space, p. 141). Paradox is the language of Rilkean poetry, drawing the reader outside of utilitarian, everyday, habitual usage. Death is a metaphor central to poetry as it exceeds the boundaries of thought and language, and Rilke’s poetry inscribes this process of transition, constructing and refiguring death on the page.

The work of art creates a space in which language can operate less constrictedly and new associations can be perceived. Rilke reflects in a remarkable passage on how poetic language is different from everyday language and the world of common indication it defines:

Unsere Sicherheit muß irgendwie ein Verhältnis zum Ganzen werden, zu einer Vollzähligkeit; Sichersein heißt für uns die Unschuld des Unrechts gewahren und die Gestalthaftigkeit des Leidens zugeben; heißt Namen ablehnen, um dahinter die einzigen Bildungen und Verbindungen des Schicksals wie Gäste zu ehrwürdigen; heißt zu Nahrung und Entbehrung, bis weit ins Geistige hinein, unbeirrt bleiben, wie zu Brot und Stein -, heißt, nichts verdächtigen, hinausdrängen, nichts für das Andere halten, heißt über allen Begriff des Eigentums hinaus in Aneignungen leben, nicht in besitzenden, aber in gleichnishaften -, und schließlich, ob es gleich
This quotation recalls ‘Der Schwan’ in which graspable, certain life is exchanged for the uncertainty of death and yet the swan glides ‘unendlich still und sicher’. ‘Die Unsicherheit ganz groß nehmen’ means a rejection of conventional, reductive descriptions of death which obscure the imaginative dimensions of existence, unable to articulate the paradoxical crossings of boundaries. Meaning should not be appropriated and secured but transformed metaphorically in art (‘gleichnishaft’), permitted its instability and insecurity (‘Unsicherheit’). The crucial word ‘Vollzähligkeit’, which is also encountered in the letter to Gräfin Sizzo (6.1.1923, Sizzo, p. 53), introduces ‘Unsicherheit’ as a more complete consciousness because it does not exclude or nominally delimit ‘das Andere’ – by admitting the destabilising Other insecurity legitimises itself, offers wholeness and a different, more authentic kind of security.51

‘Unsere Sicherheit muß irgendwie ein Verhältnis zum Ganzen werden, zu einer Vollzähligkeit’ expresses the need for relation to death and the Other, and this relation is more productive than an appropriation and distortion of these, as the letter to Ilse Jahr states: ‘statt des Besitzes erlernt man den Bezug’ (to Ilse Jahr, 22.2.1923, Muzot, p. 196).

In a letter to Ilse Erdmann, as part of his rejection of suicide as an escape from difficulty and desperation, Rilke writes of the struggle to resist the linguistic instinct to reduce and homogenise meaning, the struggle to permit the ‘Unbegriffene’ to enter the artwork. It is writing, the work of art, which is the place of this struggle:


The motion of transformation, whereby that which has been learned with difficulty and perhaps never fully understood (‘alles mühsam Erlernte und Unbegriffene’) is gathered and absorbed in apparently insignificant language (‘jenes kleine, vielleicht unscheinbare Wort’) until this modest, unambitious articulation becomes the very language which moves towards magnificent, profound meaning (‘sich gegen einen herrlichen Sinn hinüberkehrt’), is inherent in the writing of poetry, for it is poetic language which tempers the urge to name and order according to pre-existent categories of meaning, and approaches new meaning out of its willingness to shoulder the burden of complexity. The language of the ‘Unerhört’ (‘diese unerhörten Verhältnisse’), of the ‘incredible’ relations between polar opposites, is preserved in the writing of poetry. Death is allowed to enter language and remain there as the impossible. The ‘magnificent meaning’ is the attained equanimity of the balance between subject and object – between the self and the non-self.

The poet writes on the boundaries of received articulation and in so doing breaks out of them, crafting, like the lost son, a new space for death within language which does not delimit death. It is a negative principle whereby the work which goes into language, which expresses and refuses the insularity and insufficiency of standard definitions, actually invents a new metaphoric of death’s inexpressible space which is not contaminated by appropriative language. This space is not positively charged but is the negation of old metaphors, a clearing in the design and definition (‘Gestaltung’) of the Eighth Elegy (SW I, p. 714: 8), and death is evoked as the absence of the known. The work of poetry and metaphor is a resistance to the homogenisation of meaning and a sustained gesturing towards the as yet unsaid. Metaphors operate in a space in which nothing is ever finally sayable for new metaphors can always be written, and it is this...

52 ‘Das Töthliche hat immer mitgedichtet:/ nur darum war der Sang so unerhört’ (Mitterer, ‘Elfte Antwort II’, p. 84). The letter to Paula Modersohn-Becker quoted earlier confirms Rilke’s sense that poetic creativity does not take place solely in the conscious mind of the poet, that something enters into the poem which exceeds the poet’s control and introduces the incommensurable: ‘Es handelt sich ja doch um Dinge, die nicht ganz in unseren Händen liegen, und das Gelingen, das schließlich etwas so Einfaches ist, setzt sich aus Tausendem zusammen: wir wissen nie ganz woraus. […] Wo man Großes erwartet, ist es ja nicht das oder jenes, worauf man rechnet, man kann gar nicht rechnen und raten, denn es handelt sich um das Unerwartete, Unabsehbare’ (17.3.1907, Briefe 1906-07, pp. 225-6).

53 Rilke writes that everything has a meaning and ‘ihre Gesamtheit’ is ‘ein harmonisches Ganze voll Ruhe und Sicherheit und Gleichgewicht’ (FTB, p. 68). In Das Testament he stresses the different, equalised and cosmic beauty which is produced in art: ‘Wer denkt noch, daß die Kunst das Schöne darstelle, das ein Gegenteil habe; (dieses kleine “schön” stammt aus dem Begriffe des Geschmacks). Sie ist die Leidenschaft zum Ganzen. Ihr Ergebnis: Gleichmut und Gleichgewicht des Vollzähligen’ (p. 23).

constant rewriting which evokes the unsayableness of death. Poetry approaches death as the impossible and the non-renderable, but the paradoxical turn is that it is within this confrontation that death's evocation is possible. Poetry becomes an art of dying. It learns to say death differently and make death different by operating from within the principle of death, the inexpressible, itself.

2.3 The Dead Body and the Body of the Poem

A look at the poem ‘Morgue’ might clarify this negative definition of death further:

Da liegen sie bereit, als ob es gälte,  
nachträglich eine Handlung zu erfinden,  
die mit einander und mit dieser Kälte  
sie zu versöhnen weiß und zu verbinden;

denn das ist alles noch wie ohne Schluß.  
Wasfür ein Name hätte in den Taschen  
sich finden sollen? An dem Überdrüß  
um ihren Mund hat man herumgewaschen:

er ging nicht ab; er wurde nur ganz rein.  
Die Bärte stehen, noch ein wenig härter,  
doch ordentlicher im Geschmack der Wärter,  
nur um die Gaffenden nicht anzuwidern.  
Die Augen haben hinter ihren Lidern  
sich umgewandt und schauen jetzt hinein. (NG I, SW I, p. 503)

The corpses in this poem are a disturbing enigma to the living who lay them out and gawk (‘die Gaffenden’) at them. They present an unmanageable, unresponsive, intolerable vacuum, which the living struggle to suppress. They lie there irreversibly disconnected while the living try to somehow reconnect them (‘verbinden’) to a narrative context. The dead defy all definition, and the anxiety this triggers in the living is conveyed in the frantic enquiry into the names of the dead and the unbearable lack of closure (‘denn das alles ist noch wie ohne Schluß’). Nameless and incomplete, the dead are beyond rational comprehension. The living resort to self-delusion, trying to discipline the corpses’ fearful otherness through cosmetic treatment which restores a semblance of life and familiarity to them (their contorted faces are manipulated and

55 Heather McHugh writes: ‘Poetic language is language in which meaning splits, as we mean more than we intend. More like evidence than judgment, the well-crafted poem can present several versions at once; it is the site of possibility. Having so many ends, it remains open-ended’ (1993, p. 3).
their beards tidied and waxed). The living are repulsed by death’s withdrawal, its away-turned eye (‘Die Augen haben hinter ihren Lidern/sich umgewandt’), recalling the letter to Gräfin Sizzo in which death is described as the side of life which is turned away from the living (6.1.1923, Sizzo, p. 53).

The poem offers an alternative to the language of assimilation. Its space becomes the untouchable space of death as it writes unremittingly the unwriteable text. A transformation takes place on the page precisely because poetry has refrained from translating death into a language the reader can understand. This transformation is the evocation of death through the inadequacy of automatic, pre-programmed reactions and words. Language is rethought in this poem, which hinges on the word ‘rein’ as death’s pure, emancipated space. The disfigurement of the rigor mortis that has reached the mouth cannot be corrected – it only becomes more purely, more confirmedly itself (recalling ‘Ganz rein, ganz planlos frei von Zukunft’ in ‘Komm du, du letzter’, SW.II, p. 511). This is an expansion of the meaning of ‘rein’ which ordinarily means purity in a moral or religious sense. It is rhymed with ‘hinein’ and invites the reader to consider death as an introverted retreat from external representation. The closed eyelids are one obstacle to the transparency of death but ultimately the eyes are turned inwards, severing all relation with the world outside that inner self-containment. The dead gather themselves around their closed centre and although the reader is invited to follow their gaze (‘schauen jetzt hinein’) she is actually being teased by the poem in two ways. Firstly the eyelids prevent access to the gaze, and secondly the gaze does not lead to an object or reveal what is at the core of death. The gaze itself is pure in that it asserts its own being over any purpose that might be ascribed to it, and it can be compared to the lost son’s journey which takes him out of specificity rather than towards it. The gaze is an image of the poetic language of death which evokes death’s invisibility and unutterability, and the poem, by its censorship of the gaze, does draw the reader into it, does stimulate her imagination to begin this non-appropriative gaze herself, to begin a new language. In this sense the visitors to the morgue, the readers of the dead, are invited to cease their attempts to reconvert the dead back into life and begin instead their own conversion towards death. The integration of death into life takes place in the rewriting of death in the present, in a change of perception which can absorb the inconclusiveness of death and imagine the condition of otherness turned away from all expectations.56

56 See again ‘Narziss’: ‘Denn wie ich mich in meinem Blick verliere/ich könnte denken, daß ich tödlich sei’ (1913, SW II, p. 57). The pure gaze is not dependent on its object, and neither is it conditioned by the
In 'Morgue' the process rather than the object of seeing is foregrounded and this means that the reader can neither follow the gaze to its object (i.e. death) nor meet the gaze and become that object. The corpses are profoundly elusive, and in his monograph on Rodin Rilke attributes to Rodin's sculptures a 'Schauen, dem man nicht begegnen kann' (Rodin, p. 159). It is this unrelatedness to, and difference from, the interpreted world which, in Rilke's view, is the purity art and death share; the work of death defines the work of art, and vice versa. Finding new metaphors for death is the work of the artist, and art and poetry are languages which integrate death for they can say death's otherness. Art is the place where humans can go to change and turn themselves towards death. Art is the site of transformation out of impure, received understanding and into the ongoing, self-renewing process of metaphorical change. It is the space of pure, incompressible, dynamic meanings, a space which is the other side of conventional language, as death is the other side of life. In creating death anew – and 'new' means outside of all familiar narrative structures – art and poetry enter the 'other' terrain of death. Dying in Rilke's work is work, the poet's work. It is the rearrangement of language and the mind in the artwork and Blanchot writes of art as the relinquishment of objects into the purity of a space which is outside the self but open to a different kind of intimacy (Space, pp. 134-6). Going back to the Eighth Elegy's vision of 'der reine Raum' (SW I, p. 714: 15) – the pure space of death which is free from human preconceptions – Rilke's poetry endeavours to construct a purity of space within art. The Ninth Elegy's wanderer comes down from the mountain without a souvenir, a piece of mountain earth to own which testifies to his mastery over the mountain. He brings instead 'ein erworbenes Wort, reines' (SW I, p. 718: 31), and in refraining from plundering the world, in relinquishing things and creating instead a second space for them within language, the wanderer-poet invests things with purity. 'Morgue' demonstrates the interaction of death and art in their commitment to the pure untouchability of otherness.

'Morgue' restores the wonder of 'Reinheit' to the dead, reintroducing, like other poems in the Neue Gedichte, otherness into the human encounter with things. The poeticised objects of the Neue Gedichte are not just paraphernalia at human disposal – they define themselves as they turn away from the human gaze, absorbed in their own being. They are art-objects endowed by poetry with an aura of disconnection and indifference. They seem to be independent of the human subject. But these are not

subject. The looking outwards and away from the self and its preconceptions, is the making of death within oneself.
things which stand outside of human subjectivity. They exist in a transformed, metaphorical state, in a state of art, because language has put them there. Poetic language itself creates the objects in their otherness – the human subject creates a space within her subjectivity for the strangeness of things, and this strangeness and indifference should not be confused with objectivity. Rilke writes in his Rodin monograph that art objects are ‘unantastbar, sakrosankt’, meaning that they have been transformed into an outsidedness, set apart from their familiar identities (Rodin, p. 149).

In ‘Morgue’ the corpses’ purity does not succumb to human interference and in the Neue Gedichte objects (such as death) are remade, metaphorised into poems, resisting the kind of subjectivity which tries to manhandle them and fit them neatly into a preconceived order. This poem-space is the pure space of art, in which the purity of death is achieved. In the poetic image the subject has overcome its self-reflexivity and the boundary separating it from its object - it has learned ‘Bezug’, relation to the Other. Subject and object are held in balance and personal perspective is not allowed to dominate.

‘Leichen-Wäsche’ is another poem of the Neue Gedichte which refigures the dead body as cryptic and self-withdrawing, refusing to yield to the appropriative gaze. Here again it is language which discloses death by creating itself as death’s hiding place, language which hosts death by writing a space for it. The Rilkean project is the creation of death within poetry. If Rilke can write death in the ‘work’ of poetry he can write death into his language and therefore into himself. The poem, the work of art, becomes death’s actual space, the site where poet and reader can imaginatively encounter the other side of life and language as they know them:

Sie hatten sich an ihn gewöhnt. Doch als
die Küchenlampe kam und unruhig brannte
im dunkeln Luftzug, war der Unbekannte
ganz unbekannt. Sie wuschen seinen Hals,

und da sie nichts von seinem Schicksal wußten,
so logen sie ein anderes zusamm,
fortwährend waschend. Eine mußte husten
und ließ solang den schweren Essigschwamm

auf dem Gesicht. Da gab es eine Pause
auch für die zweite. Aus der harten Bürste

57 Rilke confirms the compatibility of the imagination and death: ‘Wenn also Tote, wenn also Künftige einen Aufenthalt nötig haben, welche Zuflucht sollte ihnen angenehmer und angebotener sein, als dieser imaginäre Raum?’ (to Nora Purtscher-Wydenbruck, 11.8.1924, Muzot, p. 291).
klopften die Tropfen; während seine graue
gekrampfte Hand dem ganzen Hause
beweisen wollte, daß ihn nicht mehr dürste.

Und er bewies. Sie nahmen wie betreten
eiliger jetzt mit einem kurzen Huster
die Arbeit auf, so daß an den Tapeten
ihr krummer Schatten in dem stummen Muster
sich wand und wälzte wie in einem Netze,
bis daß die Waschenden zu Ende kamen.
Die Nacht im vorhanglosen Fensterrahmen
war rücksichtslos. Und einer ohne Namen
lag bar und reinlich da und gab Gesetze. (NG II, SW I, pp. 588-9)

The poem begins by breaking the women’s sense of familiarity with the dead, ‘Sie hatten sich an ihn gewöhnt’ recalls Rilke’s dissatisfaction with ‘Gewohnheit’ in the *First Elegy* (SW I, p. 685: 16) and ‘gewöhnlich’ in ‘Der Auszug des verlorenen Sohnes’ (SW I, p. 492). The anxious (‘unruhig’) lamplight in the dark draught of death (‘im dunkeln Luftzug’) disturbs the women’s stabilising acclimatisation to death, casting the corpse as the stranger (‘Unbekannte’) who hides from its writer and reader. The estrangement intensifies in ‘war der Unbekannte/ganz unbekannt’, where the expectation of new information is disappointed in the impenetrable, unknowable tautology. The corpse is bare and clean (‘bar und reinlich’) but nakedness and exposure do not in this case offer insight into the world of the dead. The women, belonging to the conscious world which represses death and its unfamiliarity, try to counter the corpse’s anonymity by imposing a biography onto it. Rilke calls this ‘lying’: ‘da sie nichts von seinem Schicksal wußten,/so logen sie ein anderes zusamm’. They falsify the dead man’s unutterable difference, the contradiction he embodies. Rilke inverts the women’s washing and purification of the corpse, for as in ‘Morgue’, this is an attempt to make death presentable, but here it is accompanied by lies which in fact threaten to contaminate death’s sheer, unknowable presence. Rilke plays on the meaning of ‘reinlich’, turning the women’s attempts to sanitise the corpse, and the death it embodies, back on them in its inherent ‘Reinlichkeit’, its opaque ‘purity’ which makes its own laws (‘Gesetze’), defining itself in a way which commands assent.

The corpse’s purity can be compared to that of a Rodin sculpture as Rilke sees it, for it comes ‘aus seinem einfachen Dasein, nicht aus seiner Bedeutung’ (Rodin, p. 61). Biggs argues that the light represents the ‘light of understanding in all of us’ (1967, p. 346). She goes on: ‘even the negative side of this idea, the anxiety generated by the “Luftzug,” is inseparable from the offer of knowledge which it brings’ (p. 348).
149), and therefore its purity is its strange, uninterpretable presence. Work in this poem is an activity which distracts from death’s destabilising difference, ‘fortwährend waschend’ reinforcing the attempt to invent a story for the dead man. As soon as there is a pause in the work (‘Da gab es eine Pause’) the women’s self-delusion is momentarily interrupted, the corpse instilling fear in its manipulators with the ‘grause/gekrampfte Hand’ because its stubborn rigor mortis is insistently part of a different world. The women are embarrassed by their own fear (‘wie betreten’) and there is an uncomfortable cough (‘kurzen Huster’) which attempts to expel the tension. Repressing this anxiety the women fall back on their hurried work. In the ‘stummen Muster’ the women become representatives of the collective human repression of death’s estrangement, losing their individual contours and voice in self-anaesthetising, paralysing (‘wie in einem Netze’), futile activity. The winding and twisting is, like the Fifth Elegy’s acrobatic display, riddled, with negative pain and exhaustion, the contorted shadows (‘ihr. krummer Schatten’) writhing on the wall.

Heidegger suggests that language is based not on signs with ready-made meanings but on ‘showing’: ‘Das Wesende der Sprache ist die Sage als die Zeige’ (‘Der Weg zur Sprache’, Unterwegs zur Sprache, p. 242). The corpse’s gesturing is a Zeigensprache which draws attention to its individual material surface rather than a Sagensprache which has semantic content and enters into conventional linguistic relations. Tubach argues that Rilke’s departure from his early poetry came about because words were losing their expressivity, and draws attention to Rodin’s ‘Sprache der Hände’ (Rodin, p. 176) (Tubach, 1961, p. 240) which offers surface and gesture as a new language. Rilke’s move into the sculptural poetry of the Neue Gedichte is an attempt to create a language of more immediate expression in lines, movements and surfaces. The unsignified physical gesture represents a pure, non-functional motion (Tubach, p. 240). It is within the physical that ‘der eigene Tod’ is finally realised. The bodily images of pregnancy and the hero’s prowess, and the organic images of fruit, refer to a creative writing which writes life and death back into the mortal body, which writes life and death from within the body, and so writes the poetry of physical existence. Rilke writes of Rodin’s sculptures: ‘Ihre Sprache war der Körper’ (Rodin, p. 146).

The gesture of Rilke’s poetic corpse which hints at, but does not say, its own incomprehensibility, is the gesture of the poem which beckons the reader to it and asks

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59 Rilke associates this ‘language of hands’ with ‘Sachliches und Namenloses’ (Rodin, p. 176), recalling the Cézanne letters and their celebration of a new objectivity.
her to invest her imagination in it. Like the other Neue Gedichte ‘Leichen-Wäsche’ does not transmit a statement to the reader. The poem unfolds a clean surface on which the object can be redescribed, clean because prior, collectively upheld discourse has been purified and the reader can now begin to restore the object by giving it back its imaginative potential. The emphasis on surface in the Neue Gedichte is the attempt to change the reader’s sensibility, to detach her from both her habitual interpretations and her sense that the surface of objects is inferior to some deeper, pre-defined meaning. The surface is released from the weighty narratives which fix it, and becomes a page for the imaginative play of the poem. In ‘Leichen-Wäsche’ the corpse’s hand does not pronounce death but is the gesture of death’s covertness and illegibility, a closure which can paradoxically open up the human relationship to death.

‘Leichen-Wäsche’’s middle stanza becomes the empty centre of death which captivates and pulls its reader in, the ‘leere Mitte’ which Judith Ryan identifies at the centre of many of the Neue Gedichte (1972, pp. 32-8). The hard brush might represent the stubbornness of human interpretation and the determination to be rid of the strangeness of death, but this discipline is impotent and cannot suppress the presence of the foreign. The hand is ‘grause’, ‘dreadful’, i.e. intimidating, even life-threatening. It is death come to remind the living of their subjugation, come to overwhelm them. This battle between man and death on the surface of the corpse, with the women using brush and sponge, and death coming up through the body into its self-assertion, results in a defeat for the stabilising, sterilising force symbolised by the activity of washing. That the hand is ‘gekrampft’ also conveys that other aspect of foreignness - a repulsive ugliness with which human vanity cannot bear to be associated. Rigor mortis and decay threaten the civilised order and control on which humanity prides itself. Death may be manifest in the hand but this does not make it any more transparent. What the reader sees is a repellent rigor mortis, and this is the material fact of death. The women’s refusal to accept that once active muscle is now in seizure and subjugation, is now stark, dead matter, is a refusal to accept that this is all that death makes available to them. Death cannot be known. Allemann argues that mortality cannot be outwitted or dismissed but can be surpassed in the making of an image for it which intensifies rather

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60 Hartman is another witness to the incommensurable centre (which he calls ‘die unerhörte Mitte’; ‘Unheard and unheard-of. Inaudible, pure vision without image’, 1954, p. 94) of the Rilke poem. He goes on: ‘just as the mouths fashioned by Rodin express the mouths of the body, so Rilke’s own words aim to render the physical rather than the historical, social, emotional, or religious connotations. Rilke attempts to create a new idiom which would neglect the anthropomorphic for the physical basis of language. The commonplace sense of words is neglected for their seeming origin as signs signifying weight, direction, and invisibly oriented gesture’ (p. 95).

On the inappropriability of the corpse Fynsk writes: ‘the cadaver presents a materiality that refuses itself to language and gives only its refusal. The cadaver, in effect, is “exemplary” in this way; a strange “non-thing”, it is of the earth, as Heidegger might say, but in the extreme form of the ab-ject, a residue that has always fallen from signification as inassimilable (in cadaver we should hear the Latin cadere). What ‘object’ is more other, more unheimlich, more charged in its obtrusive but fleeting presence, and what leaves a more indelible image when we chance upon it. A material (non-) presence that is not quite of nature, no longer of the world and given in the absence of life, the corpse presents the inassimilable other of spirit and meaning that has in fact always been there’ (1996, p. 75). Ockenden argues that death in the Neue Gedichte and in this poem is a sign or gesture of closure which resists transformation (2000, p. 100). My argument is that this resistance becomes an opening and part of the transformation.

The brief pause (‘Pause’) in the women’s work in which this registering of otherness takes place is the moment of breach and bafflement, when the opacity of the corpse paradoxically offers a new insight into the reality of death.⁶¹ The gaze of the women and the reader is arrested and forced towards the corpse to undergo the alienating strain of witnessing the vinegar-soaked sponge dripping on the frozen face. The onomatopoeia and internal rhyme, with the repetition of awkward consonants in klopften die Tropfen, decelerates and prolongs the moment as the thirstlessness of the corpse foregrounds the strangeness of its dead presence. The sheer impenetrability of the body makes a deep impression upon both the women washing it, who are startled into their work again, and the reader who is forced to accept the corpse’s unconditional, self-affirming otherness.⁶² This intensification of raw materiality reaches its climax at

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⁶¹ ‘Suddenly they feel the “unknownness” of life as well as death, because a mysterious force emanates from this particular human being and confers a kind of understanding’ (Biggs, 1967, p. 344).
⁶² Biggs compares this ‘klopften die Tropfen’ with the knocking of Malte’s dead father’s perforated heart: “ein warmes, verschlossenes, doppeltes Klopfen. […] Das Klopfen war, was das Tempo betrifft, beinah schadenfroh” (Malte, p. 854) (Biggs, 1967, footnote 15, p. 351). I would like to go further and argue that this knocking expresses the indescribability of death which Malte tries to express: ‘Die Wirklichkeiten aber sind langsam und unbeschreiblich ausführlich’ (p. 854). The heart’s ‘Schadenfreude’ is death’s self-repleteness and hermeticism, its resistance to cognitive penetration by the living. The magnification of the drops of vinegar in ‘Leichen-Wäsche’ does not increase the reader’s understanding, rather only makes her aware of death’s obscurity. The ‘Schadenfreude’ of Malte’s father’s death parallels the self-replete smiles
the point when the corpse seems for a moment to presense a will (‘beweisen wollte’) and become extraordinarily present and powerful in its difference. Its gesture, apparently performed by its hand, is the gesture of absence, announcing a negative state - thirstlessness. The corpse is defining itself as the Other - the contradiction of the living who will always become thirsty again, and the principle of negation that defines its being is mediated by the phrase ‘nicht mehr’: ‘daß ihn nicht mehr dürste’. Intrinsic to this negation is that the corpse communicates its message, its announcement that it is dead, in the frozen fixity of its hand. It is not just a non-representational gesture which conveys nothing but itself – it is also questionable whether it is a gesture at all, for it is the lack of movement which is expressive. The emphatic statement ‘Und er bewies’ is the corpse confronting the women with the absolute proof of its extinction. Reinforcing this absolute inanimation is the allusion in the mention of vinegar and thirst to Christ on the cross (John 19, 29-30). In this secular rewriting of the crucifixion story, Rilke’s corpse remains untranslatable and unresurrected.

This impenetrability is accompanied by the disengaged, impersonal night which enters unsparingly and inconsiderately ‘rücksichtslos’, in the final lines with its constatation of death. It recalls the night on which Christ’s conversion to atheism takes place in the ‘Der Ölbaum-Garten’ (‘Die Nacht, die kam, war keine ungemeine’, NG I, SW I, p. 493). The night of Rilke’s Gethsemane is an unremarkable night, free of signification, and the night in ‘Leichen-Wäsche’ matches it in its bareness (the curtailless window). The window frames and immobilises the night in its austere unnegotiability, isolating a piece of an unknowable eternity and asking the reader to gaze into it as into an otherness beyond her comprehension. The window represents the boundary between life and death, the known and the unknown. Neither the night nor the corpse, which figure death, can be known and appropriated, and the power of their self-justification is mediated in the corpse’s law-giving. There is no specific definition of these laws, and neither can their source be named (‘Und einer ohne Namen/lag bar und reinlich da und gab Gesetze’), but their incomprehensibility is their force. Recalling the torso’s command in ‘Archaïscher Torso Apollos’, and McHugh’s interpretation of this poem (1993, p. 2) might help to focus the character of this force. The corpse’s legislative presence is not oppressive, as the word ‘Gesetz’ might suggest. This law

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in the *Neue Gedichte* – see ‘Archaïscher Torso Apollos’ (NG II, SW I, p. 557) and ‘Sankt Sebastian’ (NG I, SW I, pp. 507-8).

63 Biggs says: ‘the words “nicht mehr dürste” become a statement of sufficiency, attainment – they express the release from the mortal longing for immortality’ (1967, p. 356). Biggs has got to the core of Rilke’s relation of freedom with death here. Across his work he seeks reconciliation with human mortality outside narratives of consolation.
does not initiate constraint but a ‘relation of freedom’ with death for, to think along Heidegger’s lines, the speaker’s relationship with the word ‘is not that of expression or use; it is one in which renunciation replaces enunciation or pronouncement’ (Bruns, 1989, p. 104). The law asks readers to relinquish prejudice in the presence of the corpse, just as the command in ‘Torso’ urges them to be prepared to change their preconceptions.

The corpse presences itself and its injunction by gesturing into the space of the house (‘dem ganzen Hause’) and this evokes Rilke’s discussion of Rodin’s ‘Kunstding’ in its space. I would like to quote again the poem, ‘Ich liebe meines Wesens Dunkelstunden’ in order to introduce the idea of ‘Raum’:

Ich liebe meines Wesens Dunkelstunden,
in welchen meine Sinne sich vertiefen;
in ihnen hab ich, wie in alten Briefen,
mein täglich Leben schon gelebt gefunden und wie Legende weit und überwunden.

Aus ihnen kommt mir Wissen, daß ich Raum zu einem zweiten zeitlos breiten Leben habe.
Und manchmal bin ich wie der Baum, der, reif und rauschend, über einem Grabe
den Traum erfüllt, den der vergangne Knabe
(um den sich seine warmen Wurzeln drängen)
verlor in Traurigkeiten und Gesängen. (SB, SW I, pp. 254-5)

The poetic ‘I’ here discovers or creates a space (‘Raum’) apart from the everyday life to which it is accustomed (‘mein täglich Leben’). This space is described as a second, infinitely more timeless, expansive life (‘zu einem zweiten zeitlos breiten Leben’) and I would like to argue that this is a space apart from conventional significations, a locus of poetic writing (the old letters appear as an image of writing) which can reach into the dark recesses of death (represented here by the roots in the earth’s grave). Poetry creates a space of darkness and otherness for death in the exploratory spaciousness and inclusiveness of its language. Rilke’s study of Rodin’s sculptural space is an investigation into what makes the space of art different from common space. The poetic connection of ‘Raum’ and ‘Baum’ in this poem recalls ‘Durch den sich Vögel werfen’ (1924, SW II, p. 168), and anticipates ‘Da stieg ein Baum. O reine Übersteigung!’

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64 See Fynsk on how literature returns us to the materiality of language – its incantatory power – when detached from meaning (1989, pp. 46-7).
65 Rilke’s ‘reader’ is turned towards the ‘second existence’ of literature: ‘Wer kennt ihn, diesen, welcher sein Gesicht/wegsenkte aus dem Sein zu einem zweiten’ (‘Der Leser’, NG II, SW I, p. 636).
Orpheus singt! O hoher Baum im Ohr!’ (SO I, 1, SW I, p. 731) in its identification of the tree and the poetic transformation which engenders the Orphic, ‘other’ space.

The Rodin Monograph is focused on the physicality of Rodin’s ‘Kunstdinge’. Rilke describes sculpture as relishing the physically present world (‘Sehnsucht nach Wirklicherem und Einfachem’, Rodin, p. 145), noting how art’s gesture is the phenomenal expressivity of the body, its capacity to reveal dimensions of life and experience which have perhaps been relegated: ‘Ihre Sprache war der Körper. Er war ein anderer geworden. Wenn man ihn jetzt aufdeckte, vielleicht enthielt er tausend Ausdrücke für alles Namenlose und Neue’ (Rodin, p. 146). Rilke sees that Rodin’s sculpture does not try to transcend the physical in a metaphysical interpretation for there is already an infinity in the traces of the physical world. Rilke writes of the object under artistic transformation: ‘In die Luft, die es umgab, mußte man es wie in eine Nische hineinpassen und ihm so eine Sicherheit geben, einen Halt und eine Hoheit, die aus seinem einfachen Dasein, nicht aus seiner Bedeutung kam’ (p. 149). The work of art’s transformation should be a foregrounding of the object’s indescribable (‘alles Namenlose’, p. 146) phenomenality (‘aus seinem einfachen Dasein’, p. 149), its extraordinary (‘Neue’, p. 146) physical presence, instead of a distorting of the object in imposed, recycled signification (‘nicht aus seiner Bedeutung’, p. 149). Rodin demonstrates this transformation, which promotes the object’s profound, physical quality, on bodies themselves, and Rilke observes that Rodin’s bodies express an infinite eccentricity whereas facial expressions are conventionally interpretable: ‘Das Leben, das in den Gesichtern wie auf Zifferblättern stand, leicht ablesbar und voll Bezug auf die Zeit, - in den Körpem war es zerstreuter, größer, geheimnisvoller und ewiger’ (p. 151). There is no mention of the dead man’s face in ‘Leichen-Wäsche’, and ‘Archaïscher Torso Apollos’ relocates Apollo’s gaze in the torso. Death is a physical phenomenon which is integrated into life in its transformation into ‘das Werk’, a poetry which unifies language and consciousness with the mortal body, a poetry which is produced in the body’s womb or breast. To Rilke the overt physicality of the Rodin sculptures offers a means of access to the unbounded and the infinite.

66 Kahl is helpful here when he discusses the poem ‘Pietà’ (NG I, SW I, 494) as an example of the desymbolisation of objects in Rilke’s middle period. Christ’s dead body, the most interpreted body of all, is read not as meaningful but only as a physical entity. The physicality of this body, its ‘einfaches Dasein’, as the Monograph reminds us, is intensified to the point where the body becomes an object of sexual desire, of purely physical lust. The object’s sheer physical being is heightened over the burdening of the object with significations (1999, p. 16). See also Hartman on Rilke’s poetry of gesture, his refusal to ascribe immediate human significance and sympathy to nature’s sublime indifference (1954, pp. 73-9).
Rilke stresses the solidity and form of sculpture, the heightened, uncanny presence of things which have been taken out of their everyday functionality - their conventional meanings - and given back their dignity as objects which resist familiarisation: 'Es war ein Ding, das für sich allein bestehen konnte, und es war gut, ihm das Wesen eines Dinges zu geben, um das man herumgehen und das man von allen Seiten betrachten konnte' (Rodin, p. 148). Art objects become 'things in themselves':

Es gibt Bildwerke, welche die Umgebung, in der sie gedacht sind oder aus welcher sie gehoben werden, in sich tragen, aufgesogen haben und ausstrahlen. Der Raum, in dem eine Statue steht, ist ihre Fremde, - ihre Umgebung hat sie in sich, und ihr Auge und der Ausdruck ihres Gesichtes bezieht sich auf diese in ihrer Gestalt verborgene, zusammengefaßte Umgebung. (p. 252)

Art gives the object a presence, a space and dimensions of its own, and Rodin's sculptures extricate their objects from common, signified space, granting them self-definition. Rilke calls this separation a 'Ganz-mit-sich-Beschaftigtsein', a 'Bewegung, die nach innen geht' (p. 159), pointing to the transcendency which is also evoked in the strange quality of this space ('ihre Fremde'). This religiousness, whereby the object appears to be absorbed in the infinite, is based on the breach it makes in its perspicuity and legibility and the breach it makes in isolating itself. Rilke describes this self-replete, inner space in sculpture: 'Das war es, was der Plastik ihre Ruhe gab; sie durfte nichts von außen verlangen oder erwarten, sich auf nichts beziehen, was draußen lag, nichts sehen, was nicht in ihr war. Ihre Umgebung mußte in ihr liegen' (p. 159).

Rodin’s art objects withdraw from the contact and relation which is the intelligible world, shedding all dependence and recognisability. Like the shaft or breach ('Spalte') in 'Todeserfahrung' they are disruptions in the regular pattern. Rodin’s sculptures close around their own imperceptible centres, seeking the infinite within their own contours. They refuse to be drawn into relationship with the observing subject, as shown in 'Morgue' and the Rodin sculpture's 'Schauen, dem man nicht begegnen kann' (Rodin, p. 159).

67 Rilke also writes: 'Das Kunstwerk möchte man also erklären: als ein tiefinneres Geständnis, das unter dem Vorwand einer Erfahrung, einer Erfahrung oder eines Ereignisses sich ausgiebt und, losgelöst von seinem Urheber, allein bestehen kann. Diese Selbstständigkeit des Kunstwerkes ist die Schönheit. Mit jedem Kunstwerke kommt ein Neues, ein Ding mehr in die Welt' (Über Kunst, p. 428).

68 For a description of the role motion plays in the definition of the art-space see Jayne: 'What is decisive is the ability of the 'Bildwerk' to create its own space through reflexive motion' (1972, p. 52).

69 See Allemann on the Rilkean language of withdrawal which frees up signification (1961, p. 30).
The hand in 'Leichen-Wäsche' has the quality of a 'thing in itself', bearing its self-repleteness and purity ('einfaches Dasein', Rodin, p. 149) into what Rilke terms 'die stille Dauer des Raumes' (p. 149), a permanence and quietness which constitute the infinite I described earlier as 'das Offene' and 'Draußensein', the infinite mark of intensity an object can make on consciousness if it is defamiliarised and enriched, opened up to its other side in the silence and space of art (e.g. the hushed pause in 'Leichen-Wäsche'). This poetic, quiet space of art is set apart from common space and language. It is Blanchot's 'espace littéraire' where things are 'transformed into that which cannot be grasped' (Space, p. 141). Again, this transformation is the result of a creative act by the subject, and the aesthetic space in which the object eludes the subject is actually the space in which consciousness forges a deeper relation to the universe by overcoming its self-reflexivity.\(^{70}\) The introvertedness of art paradoxically, then, relates to the openness of 'Being' in Rilke's work. The poem 'Leichen-Wäsche' creates this aesthetic space for death, a self-internalising space which the poem offers as our space, the inner, poetic imagination which can receive and cultivate what is beyond rational categorisation and expression.

Life in Rodin's body-sculptures is 'zerstreuter, größer, geheimnisvoller und ewiger' (Rodin, p. 151) but also 'grausamer und ruheloser' (p. 153), conveying the savage nature of the infinite unknown, and recalling the 'grause/gekrampfte Hand' of 'Leichen-Wäsche', the pain of otherness. It is the art-objects' irreducibility which puts them outside conventional comprehension, and this restlessness is paradoxically a feature of the 'Ruhe' (Rodin, p. 159) of the plastic arts. The tranquillity of the object which denies itself to the world beyond itself is, at the same time, a distractedness which takes it beyond the familiar, present world, and situates it elsewhere – in the 'other' world of art ('zerstreuter', p. 151), for it is precisely its unknowability which is its stability. This restlessness is also located in the subject, for the restful self-repleteness of the 'Kunstding' is a source of anxiety for the subject who is challenged by the object's emancipation. I am arguing that the concealed dimension which art creates for objects is the imperceptible and unutterable otherness of death. I think Rilke's idea of the 'Kunstding' is of a creation in which life and death are one. Each of the Neue Gedichte announces a familiar object in the title and then goes on to estrange it, to create its other side, its other space. In each poem there is presence and something other than presence, something like death which withdraws from view. 'Ding' and

\(^{70}\) 'Both the object and the cosmos seem to be intricately linked in Rilke's mind as two aspects of a unified vision of reality' (Jayne, 1972, p. 55).
'Gedicht', real and imaginative space, are held in equanimity, for imagination writes the poetry, the otherness, of things. Poetry makes an image of the world and an image of death, as argued earlier in my discussion of 'bilden'. The Neue Gedichte are a set of 'Bilder' in which reality is transformed into more engaging, imaginative constellations. In a letter to Lou Andreas-Salomé Rilke writes: 'das Modell scheint, das Kunst-Ding ist', expressing the peculiarly Rilkean authenticity of the created image over the literal model (8.8.1903, Briefe 1902-06, p. 112).

2.4 ‘Die Figur’

I would like to come back here to the corpse’s ‘Gesetze’ and argue that ‘Gesetz’ refers to the connectedness between the visible and the invisible but also to the structure of poetic space. Rilke's impression of Toledo, Spain, is that it is 'voll Gesetz' (to Marie von Thurn und Taxis, 2.11.1912, Briefe 1907-14, p. 246). I would like to argue that ‘Gesetz’, along with ‘das Offene’, ‘Draupensein’ and ‘der Raum’, is a poetological metaphor. Rilke named Toledo ‘eine Stadt Himmels und der Erden’ (to Fürstin Marie von Thurn und Taxis, 13.11.1912, Briefe 1907-14, p. 249). This suggests the ‘Vollzähligkeit’ of the letter to Gräfin Sizzo, where life and death are unified (6.1.1923, Sizzo, p. 53). Rilke goes on to speak of this wholeness: 'Mein Gott, wieviele Dinge hab ich lieb gehabt, weil sie etwas von diesem da zu sein versuchten, weil ein Tropfen dieses Blutes in ihrem Herzen war, und nun soll's das Ganze sein, halt ichs denn aus?' (to Fürstin Marie von Thurn und Taxis, 2.11.1912, Briefe 1907-14, p. 248). Toledo's saturation with 'Gesetz' seems to be its conflation of familiar and unfamiliar space, its realisation of 'das Offene' where there is no dividedness.\(^\text{71}\) To go back to that other metaphor which describes the inclination towards death and the Other – ‘Draupensein’ – Rilke notes Toledo’s expansion into an outer ‘space’: ‘so sehr sternisch ist die Art dieses ungemeinen Anwesens gemeint, so hinaus, so in den Raum’ (to Fürstin Marie von Thurn und Taxis, 2.11.1912, Briefe 1907-14, p. 246). ‘Sternisch’ expresses a mythical space, a space of the imagination where star constellations suggest a different (‘ungemeinen Anwesens’), non-analysable order like the corpse’s law which symbolises otherness.\(^\text{72}\)

\(^{71}\) In a letter to Franz Xaver Kappus 'Gesetz' denotes the unity at the core of existence: 'Lassen Sie sich nicht beirren durch die Oberflächen; in den Tiefen wird alles Gesetz' (16.7.1903, B.a.e.j.D., p. 25).

\(^{72}\) In the Sixth Elegy the hero’s transformation is his daring entry into the aesthetic, astronomical space of difference: ‘beständig/nimmt er sich fort und tritt ins veränderte Sternbild/seiner steten Gefahr’ (SW I, p. 707: 22).
Rilke notes the internally defined, inappropriae relations within star constellations when he writes of the Valais that it is characterised by: ‘Distanzen und Spannungen, die wir aus dem Aufgang der Sternbilder kennen: als ginge aus diesem großartigen Entfaltet- und Aufeinanderbezogensein der Einzelheiten Raum hervor’ (to Nora Purtscher-Wydenbruck, 17.8.1921, *Muzot*, p. 26-7). The mythical space which is configured in the self-defining constellation and the self-substantiating corpse is ‘Raum’, a space outside of received definitions. The relation to wholeness in ‘Gesetz’ and ‘Raum’ is formulated in the object’s unique and unrepeatable individuality (‘mit ihrer eigenen Gestalt’). The corpse ‘gab Gesetze’, producing its own, profound self-definition, a self-definition of the kind that conventional language cannot approach.  

Rilke relates the creation of ‘Raum’ to the peculiar space of the art object again:

Wie eine rodinsche Skulptur eine eigene Geräumigkeit in sich mitbringt und um sich herum ausgibt: so benehmen sich – für meinen Blick – die Berge und Hügel in diesen Gegenden des Valais; unerschöpflich geht Raum aus und zwischen ihnen hervor. (Buddeberg, 1954, pp. 366-7)

Toledo and the corpse contain an infinite space, or rather the poet configures this space in and around them, making of them a ‘Bild’, inscribing them with a poetry which forges the other side of reality, the ‘Raum/zu einem zweiten zeitlos breiten Leben’ (‘Ich liebe meines Wesens Dunkelstunden’, *SB, SW* I, p. 255), a poetry which reconstructs subject and object into a whole. The Rilkean death is comprised of precisely this simultaneity of the physically real and the poetically configured, for the making of one’s own death takes place in writing. Rilke continues by saying of the Valais: ‘es sind nicht die Berge, die mich überzeugen, sondern der merkwürdige Umstand, daß sie (sei es durch ihre Gestaltung oder auch ihre besondere Verteilung) raum-schaffend sind’ (Buddeberg, p. 366). Here the poet invests physical reality with the spaciousness of the imagination, the law which demands new metaphors, the rewriting of subject and object into unity. Buddeberg points out that the ‘Gesetz’ cannot be seen in reality, only in the imagination, and that it is a figure of language, an imaginative use of language, i.e. poetry: ‘Es ist ein mythischer Raum, in dem Gott eigenhändig handelt, in dem Sprache der Engel ist’ (here she is quoting Rilke in Toledo: ‘Da ist Sprache der Engel’, to Fürstin Marie von Thurn und Taxis, 2.11.1912, *Briefe 1907-14*, p. 246) (Buddeberg, p. 362). Another indication that ‘Gesetz’ is the space of the work of art is in *Requiem für*
eine Freundin, where Paula Modersohn-Becker detaches herself from her art in order to re-enter ordinary life: 'da gingst du hin/und brachst in Brocken dich aus dem Gesetz' (SW I, p. 651: 130). I will return to the Requiem in the next chapter.

The ‘Kunstdinge’ of the Neue Gedichte are objects transformed into poetic figures which define their own space and are a world in themselves. They operate by their own law, refusing external rationalisation, and their status as both recognisable and unrecognisable things is their ‘Vollzählichkeit’, their internalisation of outsidedness or otherness. This law cannot be replicated in language but poetry can evoke it. Rilke’s poetry never offers an elaboration of the meaning of ‘Gesetz’. It leaves words such as ‘Gesetz’, ‘das Offene’ and ‘Draußensein’ suspended in their own, poetic space. The poetic figure (‘die Figur’) recurs in Rilke’s work as the cast of the imagination with its suspension of the rational and its disbelieving belief.

The figure (‘die Figur’) is a refiguration of reality into new metaphor which asks the reader to believe that reality is changed if the language which describes it is changed. In the Neue Gedichte the reader reads objects anew and their reality is transformed for her, and in the sonnet quoted above a new constellation is read into the night sky. The figure also conveys the ‘Draußensein’ of the universe to human consciousness, asking consciousness to expand and begin its relation to otherness. The poetic figure is the inscription of imaginative relation rather than an attempt to define and possess the world.

Auch die sternische Verbindung trägt.
Doch uns freue eine Weile nun
der Figur zu glauben. Das genügt. (SO I, 11, SW I, p. 738)

Allemann argues that poetic figures structure ‘the space of invisibility’ (1961, p. 190), existing as transformation itself (‘Die Figuren bestehen aus Verwandlung’, p. 185), and that they transform earth-time into ‘höhere Gleichzeitigkeit’ (p. 193) or ‘die höhere Zeit’ (p. 186). In each case the figure is turned towards a possibility other than regular reality, and I would like to add to previous definitions of Rilke’s ‘Figur’ that it is within this seeking of the other side that the integration of death takes place. De Man identifies the different reality towards which ‘die Figur’ turns as a poetic ‘totality’, a world constituted wholly in language. In this linguistic reality ‘the primacy of meaning located within the referent’ is lost, resulting in an inwardsness which can indulge in rhetorical play ‘without being hampered by the referential constraints of meaning’, and he argues that the poetic figure thus refrains from appropriation (1979, p. 47). He goes on to suggest that the non-appropriating poetic figure itself resists appropriation by its literariness: ‘The figure stripped of any seduction besides that of its rhetorical elasticity can form, together with other figures, constellations of figures that are inaccessible to meaning and to the senses, located far beyond any concern for life or for death in the hollow space of an unreal sky’ (p. 48).

In the Sonette an Orpheus the poetic figure is a fictive world separated from conventional reality but more authentic than it:

Heil dem Geist, der uns verbinden mag;
denn wir leben wahrhaft in Figuren.
Und mit kleinen Schritten gehn die Uhren
nicht des eigentlichen Tag. (SO I, 12, SW I, p. 738)

Allemann (1961, p. 110) on the connection between the constellation and the poetic figure.

See Krumme (1988, pp. 213-4) and Allemann (1961, p. 110) on the connection between the constellation and the poetic figure.
in language: ‘statt des Besitzes erlernt man den Bezug’ (to Ilse Jahr 22.2.1923, Muzot, p. 196). The corpse in ‘Leichen-Wäsche’ asks its reader to accept the ‘Gesetz’, the figure of poetic relation which is the only figure capable of expressing Rilke’s ‘Bezug’ (this term was discussed in the previous chapter) which is ‘unbeschreiblich’ (DE 4, SW I, p. 700: 82). Language will never find a formula in which the world and its forces can be replicated. The Sonette an Orpheus reject such literal, possessive language, and turn instead to the poetic language of song and praise to approach death: ‘Sei immer tot in Eurydike -, singender steige,/preisender steige zurück in den reinen Bezug’ (SO II, 13, SW I, p. 759). Again, this poetry does not simply thematise death but becomes the movement towards it, the dynamic of death itself. Song propels the singer into the ‘pure relation’ signified in the ‘rein’ of ‘Komm du, du letzter’, ‘Morgue’ and ‘Leichen-Wäsche’, i.e. the poet is related to death through poetry, for only song can reach into otherness and the abyss. Pure relation and law are the emancipated, extraordinary language of poetic writing in which speaker and reader cannot possess the words, for the words do not reduce truth and meaning to an immediate presence within themselves, rather they evoke absence and death in the uncharted spaces they open up.78

Above I argued that Rilke’s description of Rodin’s sculptures as permanent, as placed in ‘die stille Dauer des Raumes’ (Rodin, p. 149) is a sense of infinity as ‘das Offene’ and ‘Draußensein’ where the expansiveness and intensity of experience is created in an aesthetic which is turned away from narrow, habitual experience. Rilke’s infinity is not an objective eternal life but a subjective creativity producing poetic ‘Bilder’, a language of gesture, space and difference which cannot be translated or paraphrased. In Requiem für eine Freundin the verb ‘bilden’ points again to the making of an image:

Wenn irgendwo ein Kindgewesensein
tief in mir aufsteigt, das ich nicht nicht kenne,
vielch als die reinste Kindsein meiner Kindheit:

77 In contrast to the bias of ‘Besitz’, ‘Bezug’ expresses the equanimity of the work of art in which subject and object, proximity and distance, human and non-human, and familiar and different are held in balance. See Rilke’s essay Über Kunst for the equanimity of the child’s relation to things (pp. 429-30). The poem ‘Kindheit’ describes the non-possessive relation of children to the world, a dynamic relation ‘von Begegnen/von Wiedersehen und Weitergehn’ which does not stall and seize objects (NG, SW I, pp. 510-1).

78 Nolte writes: ‘Tod und Liebe haben beide das Ziel, sich eine eigene Welt zu schaffen’ (1934, p. 39), rearticulating Rilke’s ‘Wie alle Gruppen des Rodin’schen Werkes, war auch dies in sich selbst verschlossen, eine eigene Welt, ein Ganzes, erfüllt von einem Leben, das kreiste und sich nirgends ausströmend verlor’ (Rodin, p. 193). Nolte is arguing that love and death set up spaces of difference which are not premised on conventional signification, and the Rilkean position is that for this reason they are only fully rendered in poetry.
ich wills nicht wissen. Einen Engel will
ich daraus bilden ohne hinzusehn
und will ihn werfen in die erste Reihe
schreiender Engel, welche Gott erinnern. (SW I, pp. 653-4: 205)

The transformation of original experience here does not mean a transfiguration or embellishment which might make experience easier to bear or more comprehensible. The Rilkean transformation preserves the strangeness and otherness of experience (‘ich wills nicht wissen’), and it does this by making or ‘imaging’ an angel (‘Einen Engel will/ich daraus bilden’). The poetic voice cries out to the angelic order in the First Elegy, offers works of art to the angel in the Seventh Elegy and praises the world to the angel in the Ninth Elegy, in each case offering up language to the being in whom life, death and poetry are already complete. The angel represents a different order of being which expresses the estrangement of the work of art (the ‘Bild’), and here the poetic ‘I’ seeks to retain the richness of childhood by working it into the non-analytical language of the poetic.

Requiem für Wolf Graf von Kalckreuth also takes up the poetological theme of the ‘Bild’:

Dies war die Rettung. Hattest du nur ein Mal
gesehen, wie Schicksal in die Verse eingeht
und nicht zurückkommt, wie es drinnen Bild wird
und nichts als Bild, nicht anders als ein Ahnherr,
der dir im Rahmen, wenn du manchmal aufsiehest,
zu gleichen scheint und wieder nicht zu gleichen -
du hattest ausgeharrt. (SW I, p. 663: 135)

This requiem traces the transformation of narrow, conventional experience (‘Schicksal’) into poetic image. The ancestor is a picture in a frame and so has already entered the image-world of difference where familiar things are only half-recognisable. This

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79 Elsewhere Rilke says that poetic transformation can render an object ‘als ein Dasein-Aussagendes, Sein-Wollendes: als einen Engel’ (to Jakob Baron Uexküll, 19.8.1909, Briefe 1907-14, p. 74).
In a letter to Clara Rilke writes again of his work becoming an angel which is more potent than himself. Here Rilke desires that poetry be an intensity of life and death, that the angel of poetry take the poet to the threshold of death: ‘und dann will ich daran bauen mit aller Andacht, die ich in meinen Händen habe, und will von keiner Stelle lassen, solange sie geringer ist als ich selbst, und will jede zu einem Engel machen und mich von ihm überwinden lassen und ihn zwingen, daß er mich beuge, obwohl ich ihn gemacht habe’ (24.4.1903, Briefe 1902-06, p. 91). In a letter to Ellen Delp about Toledo the angelic perspective is again one which transcends the limitation of the human: ‘Diese, nicht mehr vom Menschen aus, sondern im Engel geschauten Welt, ist vielleicht meine wirkliche Aufgabe [...]’ (27.10.15, Briefe 1914-21, p. 80).
80 Rilke himself was interested in psychoanalysis and met Freud in Vienna in 1915 but finally refused to undergo Freudian analysis, fearing that this would remove the generative source of his creativity – the tormenting and elating incomprehensibility of experience. ‘Die Psychoanalyse ist eine zu gründliche Hilfe für mich, sie hilft ein für allemal, sie räumt auf, und mich aufgeräumt zu finden eines Tages, wäre vielleicht noch aussichtsloser als diese Unordnung’ (to Lou Andreas-Salomé, 28.12.1911, Briefe 1914-21, p. 150).
estrangement is represented in the *Requiem* as identification followed by non-identification with the ancestor. Estrangement from the ancestor also suggests self-estrangement, for the descendent descends from the ancestor’s blood. The requiem asks the poet Kalckreuth to get outside of himself, to go beyond his identifiable emotions by transforming them into the strangeness of poetry. I will return to the requiem poems in the following chapters, but they demonstrate in their ‘bilden’ and ‘Bild’ that Rilke’s understanding of poetic image, figure, space or law is as a created otherness which extends outside the self, its limitations and reflexivity, into new metaphors.\(^{81}\) In the poetic image subject and object are undivided.

Eurydice’s death in sonnet II, 13 is a poetic figure expressing the new metaphors of otherness which death demands from language, and it draws on the earlier poem ‘Orpheus. Eurydike. Hermes’ which invites the reader to acknowledge death’s indescribability as the exquisiteness of death itself.

\[\text{Sie aber ging an jenes Gottes Hand,}\
\text{den Schritt beschränkt von langen Leichenbändern,}\
\text{unsicher, sanft und ohne Ungeduld.}\
\text{Sie war in sich, wie Eine hoher Hoffnung,}\
\text{und dachte nicht des Mannes, der voranging,}\
\text{und nicht des Weges, der ins Leben aufstieg.}\
\text{Sie war in sich. Und ihr Gestorbensein}\
\text{erfüllte sie wie Fülle.}\
\text{Wie eine Frucht von Süßigkeit und Dunkel,}\
\text{so war sie voll von ihrem großen Tode,}\
\text{der also neu war, daß sie nichts begriff.}\
\text{[...]}\
\text{Sie war schon aufgelöst wie langes Haar}\
\text{und hingegen wie gefallener Regen}\
\text{und ausgeteilt wie hundertfacher Vorrat. (NG I, SW I, pp. 544-5: 57)}\]

Eurydice’s death is at once turned in on itself and dispersed into space, eluding intellectual grasp in both directions (the reappearance of ‘Dunkel’ here recalls the benightedness of death in ‘Ich liebe meines Wesens Dunkelstunden’ (SB, SW I, 254-5), in the ‘verdunkelter Ton’ (SW I, p. 707: 28) of the *Sixth Elegy*’s death-driven hero and in the ‘dunkler Luftzug’ of ‘Leichen-Wäsche’ (NG II, SW I, p. 589). In the presence of

\(^{81}\) Ricoeur argues that poetic writing creates a different set of relations to the language of the immediate experience: ‘Thanks to writing, man and only man has a world and not just a situation. This extension is one more example of the spiritual implications of the substitution of material marks for the bodily support of oral discourse. In the same manner that the text frees its meaning from the tutelage of the mental intention, it frees its reference from the limits of situational reference’ (1991, p. 330).
absence the reader must be satisfied with simile, the marker of the untranslatable: ‘Und ihr Gestorbensein/erfüllte sie wie Fülle’; ‘Wie eine Frucht von Süßigkeit’; ‘wie langes Haar’; ‘wie gefallner Regen’; ‘wie hundertfacher Vorrat.’ Death is pure paradox – a blank, empty space which is also ripe and abundant, an introverted darkness which is intense with the promise of fertility. The paradox which embraces simultaneously nothingness and everything is the richness of death in this poem. As Eurydice is ‘der Vermählung/so sehr entwohnt’ (SW I, pp. 544-5: 69), so does her death evade Orpheus (who represents the effort to read death), going off the scale, disappearing and expanding at the same time. The verb ‘hingeben’ (‘hingegeben wie gefallener Regen’) indicates a crossing of boundaries, so that the ‘Fallen’ of death is an absenting from the recognisable, a transition into something beyond identification. ‘Gehen’ is the key verb of the poem, denoting the nameless, destinationless movement of death. Death is ‘Gehen’ itself, the projection out of the familiar without arrival at any definition of the unfamiliar. It is the unintelligible process of change which is the fulfilment of death. Neither Eurydice nor the reader can comprehend this enormous death ‘der also neu war’. It is its newness, its difference, which exceeds, which is at once an emptiness and an indefinability and a repleteness and definition in itself. Eurydice is the sweet fruit of her self-belonging (her being ‘in sich’). Eurydice is ‘unsicher’ but ‘in sich’, paradoxically fulfilled in the indefinability and untranslatability of her death, taken up into the poetic world of nameless, infinite experience. Eurydice ‘goes’ ‘unsicher, sanft und ohne Ungeduld’ twice in the poem (SW I, p. 544: 59; SW I, p. 545: 95), the second time marking her final disappearance as the poem closes up around her. The repetition contributes to the sense of stability within ‘Unsicherheit’. Eurydice’s death is profoundly ‘in sich’, saturated with meaning because it does not know what it means - it is ‘unbeschreiblich’ (DE 4, SW I, p. 700: 82).

The inwardness of the poetically transformed object in Rilke’s Neue Gedichte is the ‘in dir’ of the transformation-poem, ‘Die Erwachsene’, where the girl internalises the otherness of adulthood. The girl bears the difficulty of otherness (‘Und sie ertrug es; trug bis obenhin/das Fliegende, Entfliehende, Entfernte,/das Ungeheure, noch Unerlernte’, NG I, SW I, p. 514), standing on the same boundary of the self as the lost son who is becoming something else and at the same time more authentically himself. Having approached this boundary the transformation can take place whereby something unknown is integrated. Eurydice also contains all of this outsidedness and ambivalence, an ambivalence conveyed in ‘Die Erwachsene’ as the ‘vagueness’ of inwardness (‘nur eine Antwort vage wiedergebend:/In dir, du Kindgewesene, in dir’, NG I, SW I, p. 515).
The metaphor of pregnancy in ‘Orpheus. Eurydike. Hermes’ conveys the inner indeterminacy and exquisiteness of death. Death as ripeness is full of the promise of opening, newness and difference. Eurydice herself is now an artist, no longer the object of Orpheus’s poetry, for she is on the verge of bringing forth her own fruit (‘Wie eine Frucht von Süßigkeit’), a death defined by herself, the poetry of her death. The ‘in dir’ of ‘Die Erwachsene’ becomes ‘in sich’ in ‘Orpheus. Eurydike. Hermes’, and Eurydice’s ‘In-sich-Sein’ consists in the death of her own which she harbours within her: ‘Der große Tod, den jeder in sich hat, das ist die Frucht um die sich alles dreht’ (SB, SW I, p. 347). Hartman points out that for those who live in nature the plenitude of death is indistinguishable from the plenitude of life (1954, p. 81), and the ‘Dunkel’ of Eurydice’s death contains the sweetness and intensity of an infinite which desires to be fully death. She is full of the death which reaches the brim of the container (6.1.1923, Sizzo, p. 54).

Eurydice has become ‘Figur’ in her death, set apart from conventional relations and belonging to a transformed poetic configuration. She demonstrates the same qualities as Rodin’s Homme au nez cassé as Rilke describes it in the Rodin Monograph: ‘Es wendet sich nicht an die Welt; es scheint seine Gerechtigkeit in sich zu tragen, die Aussöhnung aller seiner Widersprüche’ (Rodin, p. 157). Eurydice is ‘in sich’, an autonomous intensity, an introverted poetic constellation which expresses the concealed quality of death, and within this non-lucid, evocative poetry death can sustain its paradoxicality – its concentration and expansiveness. Like a Rodin sculpture Eurydice is art because in death she expresses an infinite: ‘die Bewegung, die nicht zu Ende geht’ (Rodin, p. 158). As this movement disappears into itself it goes beyond itself, and a gesture which seems ‘weit über uns hinaus zu dehnen’ (p. 160) is ‘ein Ding mehr, das keinen Namen hat und niemandem gehört’ (p. 165). Eurydice has exceeded her relationship to Orpheus, related within herself now to her own otherness, her absence, and therefore related outside of herself to the profound and excessive beyond.

The landscape of the underworld which forms the background to Eurydice’s death is also curiously shaped by absences:

Felsen waren da
und wesenlose Wälder. Brücken über Leeres
und jener grosse graue blinde Teich,

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82 Hartman, referring to ‘Sei immer tot in Eurydike’ (SO II, 13, SW I, p. 759), argues that to be always dead in Eurydice means to retreat into self and bear all and bring forth poems as fruit (1954, pp. 71-96).
der über seinem fernen Grunde hing
wie Regenhimmel über einer Landschaft.
Und zwischen Wiesen, sanft und voller Langmut,
erschien des einen Weges blasser Streifen,
wie eine lange Bleiche hingelegt. (SW I, p. 542: 7)

Insubstantiality, blindness and colourlessness are the images of this place which is
already on the other side of referentiality and sayable only in metaphor: 'Das war der
Seelen wunderliches Bergwerk' (SW I, p. 542: 1). The world of the dead evade the
discipline of language as the dead Eurydice resists Orpheus's possessive appropriation.
In order for human consciousness to enter into relation with death the language of death
must be changed to a poetry of 'In-sich-Sein' which permits the unsayable. 'Orpheus.
Eurydike. Hermes' is such a poem, imagining beyond the conventional bounds and
expressing the inexpressibility of death.

Orpheus had proved himself to be the poet of absence:

Die So-geliebte, daß aus einer Leier
mehr Klage kam als je aus Klagefrauen;
daß eine Welt aus Klage ward, in der
alles noch einmal da war: Wald und Tal
und Weg und Ortschaft, Feld und Fluß und Tier;
und daß um diese Klage-Welt, ganz so
wie um die andre Erde, eine Sonne
und ein gestirnter stiller Himmel ging,
ein Klage-Himmel mit entstellten Sternen - :
Diese So-geliebte. (SW I, p. 544: 47)

Orpheus's lament for Eurydice had brought a new world into being, a self-replete, self-
sustaining poetic universe founded on the loss of the beloved. This poetry had grown
into her vacated space, and had posited a dimension other than the real world, an
imaginatively reshaped reality in which the constellations are 'deformed' and
different. This poetic remodelling recalls 'Todes-Erfahrung' in which the 'mask-

83 See Judith Ryan on Rilke's terms of inversion, such as 'entstellt' and 'umgestellt', which denote the
imaginal move out of the real world (1972, p. 16). De Man offers a different reading of this section of the
poem, arguing that Orpheus's lament is 'anti-poetic' in its desire to 'recover what is absent', in its re-
representing of the world that is lost to him. He says that the authentic reversal comes when Orpheus faces
the 'privation and non-being' of Eurydice's new condition (1979, p. 47). The critics seem to be divided in
their interpretation of Orpheus's elegy here. Engel and Fülleborn read it positively (KA I, p. 955). Outside
Rilke's particular adaptation of the myth, Blanchot's reading of Orpheus's descent draws out a paradox in
Orpheus's impatience in turning round to look at Eurydice. In turning to her he indulges his impulse to
gaze into 'the empty depths', into the absence of Eurydice. Blanchot calls this impulse 'boundless' and
'imprudent', which does not demand Eurydice in her diurnal truth and her everyday charm, but in her
nocturnal darkness, in her distance, her body closed, her face sealed, which wants to see her not when she
is visible, but when she is invisible, and not as the intimacy of a familiar life, but as the strangeness of
mouth' of poetry 'strangely deforms' death ('den ein Maskenmund/tragischer Klage wunderlich entstellt', *NG* I, *SW* I, p. 518), putting it at one remove from the mourner and drawing imaginatively upon its otherness. The 'Maskenmund' is an alternative form of mourning – the Greek tragic lament – which does not contradict authenticity but transforms the personal into the aesthetic, into an expression which retains death's strangeness ('wunderlich'). This second mouth offers the mourner a voice to balance her emotion:

[...] man darf die Klagesaiten nur dann so ausführlich gebrauchen, wenn man entschlossen ist, auf ihnen, mit ihren Mitteln, später auch den ganzen Jubel zu spielen, der hinter jedem Schweren, Schmerzhaften und Ertragenen anwächst und ohne den die Stimmen nicht vollzählig sind. (To N. N., 17.11.1912, *Briefe 1907-14*, p. 254)

The lament must find its second music and the second voice which can utter oppositional elements simultaneously. Humans however do not put on the extraordinary 'mask-mouth' of poetry in their mourning, the mouth which extends a complete ('vollzählig') language. Humans are polarised emotionally, and therefore thwarted by, death:


Paralysed by their immediate feelings they are prisoners of their fear (see Hennig, 1965). Orpheus's poetry of absence and otherness had transcended his personal mourning, but as the encounter in the underworld brings him into the potential presence of his dead wife once again and offers him the opportunity to bring her back to the land of the living, Orpheus's lament regresses and he wills her presence again. Eurydice is patiently abundant and whole in her absence but Orpheus is 'stumm und ungeduldig' (*SW* I, p. 543: 17) and divided – 'seine Sinne waren wie entzweit' (*SW* I, p. 543: 24) – as his senses hang back, determined to stay within the presence of Eurydice ('blieb sein Gehör wie ein Geruch zurück', *SW* I, 543: 28) because he is now no longer reconciled to

that which excludes all intimacy; it does not want to make her live, but to have the fullness of death living in her' ('The Gaze of Orpheus', *The Gaze of Orpheus*, p. 100). This interpretation, then, suggests that the act of turning is an artistic and death-orientated – not a personal – act, and it contrasts the reading of the Rilke poem which I offer above.
the difference of death. Eurydice is reborn as, and pregnant with, the fruit of absence, full of the newness of possibility now that she is outside of proprietary relation to Orpheus. The poem takes Orpheus into the underworld where he is enticed by the possibility of restoring Eurydice to life but is actually forced to confront her absence, and witness the self-repleteness of death. As Eurydice recedes into death her husband’s former, Orphic lament is confirmed as the authentic language of death which he must re-achieve in his acceptance of her departure. In ‘Der Tod der Geliebten’ the lover forms this same new partnership with the beloved based on her absence.

In ‘Die Brandstätte’ (NG II, SW I, pp. 592-3), the empty space created by a house burning down, anticipates the burnt offering and the assent to nothingness of ‘Komm du, du letzter’, and evokes the underworld of ‘Orpheus. Eurydike. Hermes’. This emptiness is a positive entity in itself, one more place (‘Eine Stelle mehr’), not less. ‘Neues’ and ‘Leeres’ stand side by side in mutual definition. The house’s disappearance remakes it in imaginative intensity: ‘Denn seit es nicht mehr war, schien es ihm so/seltsam: phantastischer als Pharao’. Like Eurydice it is freed from its habitual, static definition and has become strange and richly indefinable. The burnt-out place becomes the site from which the poem can emerge. Orpheus must learn to forget the Eurydice he knew by witnessing her withdrawal into an unreachable absence. The following lines from ‘N’est-ce pas triste’ (1924, SW II, p. 538) describe a gaze which sets itself towards

84 See also: ‘Ein solcher Verlust (caused by death) ist, je tiefer er uns trifft und je heftiger er uns angeht, desto mehr, eine Aufgabe, das nun im Verlorensein hoffnungslos Betonte, neu, anders und endgültig in Besitz zu nehmen. […] Was mich angeht, so starb mir, was mir starb, sozusagen in mein eigenes Herz hinein: der Entschwendete, wenn ich ihn suchte, nahm sich in mir eigentümlich und so überraschend zusammen, und es war so rührend zu fühlen, daß er nun nicht dort sei, daß mein Enthusiasmus, seiner dortigen Existenz zu dienen, sie zu vertiefen und zu verherrlichen, fast in demselben Augenblick die Oberhand bekam, in dem sonst der Schmerz die ganze Landschaft des Gemüts überfallen und verwüstet haben würde’ (1.6.1923, Sizzo, pp. 50-1). Here the poet derives inspiration from the ‘Verlorensein’ of the object which is now released from the rigidity of old definitions and relations and can be described by new metaphors – ‘neu, anders’. Absence becomes the source of a creativity which enriches and entrenches the dead within the poet. Loss is affirmation of possession in Rilke’s preface to Balthus’s Mitsou, ‘Quarante images par Balthus: ‘la perte, toute cruelle qu’elle soit, ne peut rien contre la possession, elle la termine, si vous voulez: elle l’affirme; au fond ce n’est qu’une seconde acquisition, toute intérieure cette fois et autrement intense’ (SW VI, p. 1103). The paradox occurs again in Abelone’s song in Malte: ‘Du machst mich allein. Dich einzig kann ich vertauschen./Eine Weile bist du, dann wieder ist es das Rauschen, oder es ist ein Duft ohne Rest./Ach, in den Armen hab ich sie alle verloren,/du nur, du wirst immer wieder geboren;/weil ich niemals dich anhielt, halt ich dich fest’ (p. 936). Inga Junghanns was Rilke’s Danish translator, and she asked him the meaning of ‘vertauschen’ in this song. Rilke’s reply indicates a synonymy between ‘exchanging’ or ‘transposing’, the ejection of the object from the contingency and fallibility of personal relation, and the transformation into a weatherscape of the senses and the imagination, distilling an essence into a profundity which can reach into other and different relation: ‘vertauschen: wo Du mir plötzlich zu viel bist, kann ich Dich ohne Dich fortzugeben, vertauschen mit irgend etwas, mit dem Rauschen des Windes, des Meeres, mit einem Duft. Du bist verwandelbar und so kann ich allein sein, ohne dich zu verlieren’ (Rilke’s answers to Inga Junghanns’s questionnaire sent with her letter 4.7.1917, Junghanns, p. 49).
its own limitation, a gaze which is determined to take in not just presence but also absence and disappearance:

N’est-ce pas triste que nos yeux se ferment?
On voudrait avoir les yeux toujours ouverts,
pour avoir vu, avant le terme,
tout ce que l’on perd.

Here the withdrawal of the object from the gaze into a place where the gaze cannot follow is witnessed. As this seeing accepts its boundedness, witnesses its own contradiction, so does Orpheus fully confront the death and loss of his object: ‘Er stand und sah’ (SW I, p. 545: 89) Eurydice as she ‘zurückging’ (SW I, p. 545: 93). This is Orpheus’s ‘Ans-Ende-Gehen’ (‘Kunstdinge sind ja immer Ergebnisse des In-Gefahr-Gewesen-Seins, des in einer Erfahrung Bis-Ans-Ende-Gegangen-Seins’, to Clara, 24.6.1907, Briefe 1906-07, pp. 279-80), his meeting with death. He sees and writes Eurydice anew because he sees her going to the end of, and exceeding, her definition. He is perhaps on the threshold of a new poetry like the Neue Gedichte where objects change and disappear into different, poetic association, as their previous definitions are relinquished: ‘Erst in der Eingestaltung/in dein Verzichten wird er wirklich Baum’ (‘Durch den sich Vögel werfen’, 1924, SW II, p. 168).

2.5 The Outside on the Inside

Elsewhere Rilke writes of a poetic language which imparts the irreducibility and inapprobriability of the existence conveyed in the bodily presence of the Rodin sculptures:

Ach, aber mit Versen ist so wenig getan, wenn man sie früh schreibt. Man sollte warten damit und Sinn und Süßigkeit sammeln ein ganzes Leben lang und ein langes womöglich, und dann, ganz zum Schluß, vielleicht könnte man dann zehn Zeilen schreiben, die gut sind. Denn Verse sind nicht, wie die Leute meinen, Gefühle (die hat man früh genug), - es sind Erfahrungen. Um eines Verses willen muß man viele Städte sehen, Menschen und Dinge, man muß die Tiere kennen, man muss fühlen, wie die Vögel fliegen, und die Gebärde wissen, mit welcher die kleinen Blumen sich auftun am Morgen […] Und es genügt auch noch nicht, daß man Erinnerungen hat. Man muß sie vergessen können, wenn es viele sind, und man muß die große Geduld haben, zu warten, daß sie wiederkommen. Denn die Erinnerungen selbst sind es noch nicht. Erst wenn sie Blut werden in uns, Blick und Gebärde, namenlos und nicht mehr zu unterscheiden von uns selbst, erst dann kann es
geschehen, daß in einer sehr seltenen Stunde das erste Wort eines Verses aufsteht in ihrer Mitte und aus ihnen ausgeht. (Malte, pp. 723-5)

The poet is discouraged from writing under the influence of emotion, which reacts impulsively and reproduces stock language. The patient gathering of meaning (‘Sinn’) and sweetness (‘Süßigkeit’) recalls the gestation of the fruit of death in ‘Orpheus. Eurydike. Hermes’ (‘Wie eine Frucht von Süßigkeit’, NG I, SW I, p. 544: 65), in ‘Wir stehn in deinem Garten Jahr und Jahr/und sind die Bäume, süßen Tod zu tragen’ (‘Herr, wir sind ärmer’, SB, SW I, p. 348), and in ‘ihr eigener hângt grün und ohne Süße/wie eine Frucht in ihnen, die nicht reift’ (‘Da leben Menschen’, SB, SW I, 347). The poem swells with meaning as the fruit grows in flesh and intensifies in taste, taking on a richness of new metaphor lacking in the conventional, trapped language, the literalised metaphor, of first response, and this distinction is the distinction between emotions and experiences. The patience of poetry which seeks the other side of the immediately sayable is conveyed in the gestation period, and poetry is swelled by the untranslatable pulse of the universe (e.g. the flight of birds and the heliotaxis of plants). Rilke makes a case here for poetry as the language of the physical rather than the analytical mental, of the transformational imagination rather than of clarified memory.\textsuperscript{85} The language of memory sheds its linear, connective properties in poetry and is rewritten into the infinitely instinctive and hidden. The namelessness of memory derives from its being forgotten, its being lost from rational categories and integrated fully into life and death in poetry.\textsuperscript{86} The poetic word is composed when the conscious mind is turned away.\textsuperscript{87}

\textsuperscript{85} Malte senses change of consciousness as he begins a new seeing and a new writing: ‘wird ein Tag kommen, da auch meine Hand, die da schreibt, weit von mir sein wird’, ‘wenn die Zeit der anderen Auslegung wird anbrechen, und es wird kein Wort auf dem anderen bleiben’ (p. 756). Buddeberg recognises the onset of the impersonal and inhuman in symbolistic and surreal language here: ‘Zu den Worten, die dann von ihr ausgehen werden, kann er nicht mehr “mein” sagen, eben darum, weil er sie nicht “meint”. Die Beziehungen, in denen er dann stehen wird, die ihm unbekannten, kaum noch geahnten, sind dann nicht mehr die seiner eigenen Ausdeutung’ (1954, p. 169).

\textsuperscript{86} The following poem invites the reader to ‘forget’ and suggests that this forgetting is a portal to a lunar world of reflections and inversions, the other side of the imagination:

\textit{Vergiff, vergiff, und laß uns jetzt nur dies erleben, wie die Sterne durch geklärten Nachthimmel dringen, wie der Mond die Gärten voll übersteigt. Wir fühlten längst schon, wie spiegelnder wird im Dunkeln; wie ein Schein entsteht, ein weißer Schatten in dem Glanz der Dunkelheit. Nun aber laß uns ganz hinübertreten in die Welt hinein die monden ist –} (1909, SW II, pp. 362-3).

See ‘Für Hans Carossa’:

\textit{Auch noch Verlieren ist unser; und selbst das Vergessen hat noch Gestalt in dem bleibenden Reich der Verwandlung. Losgelassenes kreist; und sind wir auch selten die Mitte einem der Kreise: sie ziehn um uns die heile Figur.} (1924, SW II, p. 259)
Memorial language is presented here as imposing narrative and name, suppressing the integral otherness of existence, whilst poetry strives to get outside the self-reflexivity of memory and narrative in order to be absorbed into the infinitely indescribable. Poetry is therefore offered as a language which tries to be within its object, as ‘Bezug’ is the relation of unity between subject and object or otherness. Malte describes this language as being within the body, within blood, gaze and gesture, inseparable from the energy of life itself, ‘in uns’. This is a Romantic idea of the unity of language and world, but in Rilke’s thinking this unity is not pre-established – it must be constructed by the poet in the patient gestation of the work of poetry. This is a gestation of language in the imagination, in blood and in the womb which nourishes the physical fruit of the ‘eigener Tod’. The poem is the womb of language, unwriting the self-reflexivity which keeps subject and object apart, and writing the imagination, the nameless, the intensive and infinite into life and death. Memory and language in this passage are intrinsic to life and death, participating in the blood’s circulation, the individual’s perception and neural impulses. It is imagined that the individual’s language constructs her identity and existence. Poetry issues from the integration of otherness (represented in the gathering

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88 Malte writes of the power in experience which has never been part of conscious memory: ‘Und mit dem, was kommt, hebt sich ein ganzes Gewirr irrer Erinnerungen, das daranhängt wie naßer Tang an einer versunkenen Sache. Leben, von denen man nie erfahren hätte, tauchen empor und mischen sich unter das, was wirklich gewesen ist, und verdrängen Vergangenes, das man zu kennen glaubte: denn in dem, was aufsteigt, ist eine ausgeruhte, neue Kraft, das aber, was immer da war, ist müde von zu oft Erinnern’ (p. 766). Niels Lyhne reabsorbs, at the age of twenty-three, his memories anew, no longer shackled to a fixed interpretation of them, and this is part of his development as a poet (Jacobsen, Niels Lyhne, p. 417).

89 ‘doch, mit der dunkelten Erde einig/wag ich es, in dir zu sein’ (‘Nacht. Oh du in Tiefe gelöstes’ SW...)

90 Rilke may have been acquainted with the second of Nietzsche’s ‘Vom Nutzen und Nachtheil der Historie für das Leben 1’, in which Nietzsche envisions past events entering the blood and human nature capable of drawing into itself all of the past, its own and what is most foreign to it, and transforming it into its own blood (pp. 213-4). See also Rilke’s Über die Kunst (pp. 431-2) on the presence of history and the dead in the artist. In ‘Die Spanische Trilogie II’ an individual existence absorbs external phenomena: ‘Ichm dringt, was andern/gerne gehört, unwirtlich wie Musik/und blind ins Blut und wandelt sich vorüber’ (1913, SW II, p. 45). The transformation is the inclusion of the unfamiliar and unknowable signified by blindness. I will come back to the significance of blindness for Rilke in the next chapter.
of external phenomena and the defamiliarisation of memory) but poetry also simultaneously creates this relation, for Rilke’s creation of a “death of one’s own” is a creativity within language, a writing of the poem of death. Rilke writes the otherness of death into the blood.

Graf Brahe in *Malte* tells of the Marquis of Belmare who had stories in his blood:

“Die Bücher sind leer”, schrie der Graf mit einer wütenden Gebärde nach den Wänden hin, “das Blut, darauf kommt es an, da muß man drin lesen können. Er hatte wunderliche Geschichten drin und merkwürdige Abbildungen, dieser Belmare; er konnte aufschlagen, wo er wollte, da war was beschrieben; keine Seite in seinem Blut war überschlagen worden” (p. 848)

The marquis was a fusion of physical and imaginative presence, the unreal dimension brought forth intensely in language, and the language circulating in the blood, as Brahe describes:


Brahe goes on to testify that the marquis’s narration transferred the images evoked into the bodies of his audience: “Ich saß in einer Ecke einmal und hörte, wie er meinem Vater von Persien erzählte, manchmal mein ich noch, mir riechen die Hände davon” (p. 848). And, inspired by the marquis to tell stories, the count dictates to Abelone who retains in her body the story of Julie Reventlow and her stigmata even though she says she has forgotten it:

“Von der Gräfin Reventlow ist ja dann oft bei euch gesprochen worden”, schloß Abelone kurz, als ich sie bat, mehr zu erzählen. Sie sah müde aus; auch behauptete sie, das meiste wieder vergessen zu haben.“Aber die Stellen fühlt ich noch manchmal”, lächelte sie und konnte es nicht lassen und schaute neugierig in ihre leeren Hände. (p. 851)

As she stares at her hands she bodily tells the story of the duchess, herself reproducing the stigmatic imprintation which is both the theme and the effect of the story. The story has become part of Abelone, and this absorption marks the Romantic unity of language and consciousness in Rilke’s work which is also the principle underlying ‘den eigenen
Tod', the death which is written into consciousness and the circulation of the blood. The marquis could only believe in the past if he could feel it inside him, i.e. if he had worked it into his own language and imagination, his real and living self: "Aber es gab natürlich genug, die ihm übahnahmen, daß er an die Vergangenheit nur glaubte, wenn sie in ihm war" (p. 848). Imagination was instinctive to the marquis. He was a hybrid of the real and the unreal, finite body and infinite poetry, and the Rilke poem seeks just this interfusion of life, death and language which constitutes 'das Sein'. The Rilkean death is a poetry of death and timelessness written from within and therefore living within the real and individual consciousness. The next chapter will explore this unity between artist and work of art further.

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91 See again Engel and Fülleborn's commentary on 'Kindheit' (KA I, p. 937) which notes the combination of substantiality and abstract 'Figur'. The following extract is concerned with the unity of aesthetic work and the physical, living body: 'C'est toujours cette mort qui continue en moi, qui travaille en moi, qui transforme mon cœur, qui augmente le rouge de mon sang, qui comprime la vie qui fut la nôtre, afin qu'elle soit une goutte douce-amère qui circule dans mes veines, qui entre partout, qui soit la mienne infiniment' (to Mimi Romanelli, 8.12.07, Briefe I, p. 230).

92 This French poem asks whether flowers can live again within our blood, independent of the significations we give them, and in communion with our death: 'Ô fleurs, prisonnières de nos instincts de bonheur, revenez-vous vers nous avec nos morts dans les veines?' ('Cimetière', SW II, p. 611).

'Strophen' from Das Buch der Bilder locates death in the blood: '[Death] Ist einer, der nimmt alle in die Hand' and 'Er ist kein Fremder, denn er wohnt im Blut, daß unser Leben ist und rauscht und ruht' (BB I, SW I, p. 406).
3. Requiem für eine Freundin

Introduction

Rilke and Paula Modersohn-Becker

Rilke wrote Requiem für eine Freundin one year after the death, soon after childbirth, of his friend, the painter Paula Modersohn-Becker, a year in which he had only once hinted at the feelings within him over her loss (the morbidity of a letter to Sidonie Nádherný might be attributed to Modersohn-Becker’s death, 7.12.07, Nádherný, pp. 52-4). In the letter to his publisher which accompanied the manuscript of the Requiem, Rilke describes the writing as an unplanned outpouring: ‘Eine unerwartete starke innere Strömung hat mir in diesen Tagen die kleine Arbeit heraufgebracht, die ich Ihnen so schnell reiche’ (4.11.1908, Verleger II, p. 53). In another letter he summarises the poem’s ‘plot’. Modersohn-Becker’s pregnancy meant that she had given herself to her family, whereas her artistic potential demanded that she be wholly art – purely individual life and death:

Ich schrieb und vollendete, ohne an den merkwürdigen Kontakt mit dem Tag zu denken, ein Requiem für eine rührende, vor einem Jahr fortgenommene Gestalt: eine Frau, die aus den großen Anfängen eigener künstlerischer Arbeit zurückglitt in die Familie zunächst und von da ins Verhängnis und in den unpersonlichen, nicht selbst vorbereiteten Tod, den man im gemeinsamen Leben stirbt, unausgelöst, schmerzhaft und trübe verflochten. (3.11.08, Nádherný, p. 89)

Rilke told Katharina Kippenberg that Modersohn-Becker was the only one of his dead friends who troubled him (Kippenberg, 1935, p. 230), and this might explain the imbalance whereby inhibition and silence were followed by eruption and outpouring in the year after Modersohn-Becker’s death. In a letter to Countess Lili Kanitz-Menar after the death of her sister in this same year Rilke does not mention Modersohn-Becker by name but writes:

Und jetzt stehe ich zum Tode so, daß er mich mehr in denen erschreckt, die ich versäumt habe, die mir unerklärt oder verhängnisvoll geblieben sind, als aus denen, die ich, als sie lebten, mit Sicherheit liebte, wenn sie auch nur
The biography of Rilke’s friendship with Modersohn-Becker consistently comes back to ambiguity. There is no evidence that they were lovers, but her husband, Otto Modersohn, was suspicious of Rilke and his influence on her. Rilke declined to comment on Modersohn-Becker’s work after her death, saying he was not acquainted with it, and yet he visited her in her home in Worpswede and in her studio in Paris many times. His letters to her show that he did take a strong interest in her as an artist, and the Requiem demonstrates a knowledge of her work which he may have acquired before or after her death. Gass points out that as Modersohn-Becker struggled in the tension between marital and artistic life, moving backwards and forwards between Paris and Worpswede, Rilke had been ‘ambivalent, unhelpful, distant’ towards her, failing to support her unequivocally in her separation from Otto (2000, p. 124). The Requiem is clearly burdened by the ‘alte Feindschaft/zwischen dem Leben und der großen Arbeit’ (267) which Rilke felt at every turn, but that it is Modersohn-Becker’s ghost which manifests this dividedness suggests that Rilke’s unease about her death is also personal. Gass argues that ‘As with most apparitions, guilt is the ghost that walks within the Requiem’ (p. 124). This is the guilt of someone who wishes he had been a better friend and perhaps tries to restore this friendship in a poem which names Modersohn-Becker as his friend (‘für eine Freundin’) and asks her to return this friendship by supporting and becoming part of him (‘Doch hilf mir so, daß es dich nicht zerstreut/wie mir das Fernste manchmal hilft: in mir’: 272). I will look into the possible significance of Modersohn-Becker’s ghostly ambiguity later, but one interpretation could be that it represents Rilke’s guilt about his sometimes strained relationship with Modersohn-Becker.

The Poetry of Requiem

I will argue that above all this Requiem seeks to clarify or underwrite the boundary between the transformed and the untransformed death, the authentic artistic and the inadequate reproduction. Rilke wrote four poems to which he gave the title ‘Requiem’:

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'Requiem (Clara Westhoff gewidmet)' (BB II, SW I, pp. 469-76), Requiem für eine Freundin (SW I, pp. 643-56), Requiem für Wolf Graf von Kalckreuth (SW I, pp. 657-64) and 'Requiem auf den Tod eines Knaben' (1915, SW II, pp. 439-40). He wrote these during 'these November days' of the festival of All Souls on different years, as Schuelke points out (1957, p. 180). All Souls seems to have been the only Catholic festival Rilke kept. He wrote to Modersohn-Becker:


(5.11.1900, BTF, p. 68)

Schuelke explains that All Souls was celebrated with a Requiem mass and a vigil at a grave (p. 180). November's Catholicism lay for Rilke in the memory it brought of the dead and of one's own mortality (p. 180). The letter to Modersohn-Becker goes on: 'Damals kam mir wohl zuerst der Gedanke, daß jede Stunde, die wir leben, eine Sterbestunde ist für irgendwen und daß es wohl sogar mehr Sterbestunden als Stunden der Lebendigen gibt' (BTF, p. 68).

Modersohn-Becker had died at the beginning of November 1907, and so All Souls coincided with the anniversary of her death. Rilke's Capri hostess, Alice Faehndrich, and his friend Countess Schwerin had also died, and although none of the Requiems reflect an external, religious observance of All Soul's, they do retain the prayerful appeal for the repose of the dead inherent in Catholic requiem. The requiem mass for the eternal rest of the soul begins: 'requiem aeternam dona eis' ('Grant them eternal rest'), and on the surface Rilke's requiem poems seek to reconcile the dead with their death, but of course his ghosts and dead addressees are the restlessness which death's annual visitation caused in him. Schuelke draws attention to the lines in the First Elegy which express the demand of the young dead that the poet bring death to rest: 'leise soll ich des Unrechts/Anschein abtun' (SW I, p. 687: 66, p. 186). The poetic imperative is to justify death, and a poetic justification is always a project of language. The Rilke of the Requiem sets himself to utter a language which is not Christian, not a prayer sent out to an external creator and arbitrator, but a poetry which founds death in

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3 Von Schmidt-Pauli writes of Rilke's having told her Modersohn-Becker's story on All Soul's Day 1919 as they lit candles for the dead at his apartment in Munich (1940, pp. 167-8)
its own transformational process. Throughout *Requiem für eine Freundin* the poet asks the artist – or art – for transformation, and in this the poem can be heard praying to itself. Laying the dead to rest means for Rilke the creation of a poetry of death, a death which is addressed within, rather than excluded from or belied by, language. ‘Der eigene Tod’ becomes ‘the strange death’ if ‘eigen’ is read in its antiquated sense, and language must become death by pushing itself beyond the one-sidedness of the human. It must constantly create spaces outside of norms and definitions, and the dead can rest in peace if they have found this strange, poetic language, for they have made an authentic death in that they have lived transformation. In his *Requiem* Rilke wishes to restore the dead artist to her rightful state of transformation beyond the boundary of the literal, human world, to clarify her as an artist again.

In 1923 Rilke wrote to Gräfin Sizzo: ‘Was mich angeht, so starb mir, was mir starb, sozusagen in mein eigenes Herz hinein’ (6.1.1923, *Sizzo*, p. 51). I will argue that Rilke’s *Requiem* for his friend will be a commemoration, a mourning and a laying to rest, which addresses ‘den eigenen Tod’ within Modersohn-Becker’s heart and within his own. The work of poetry which is the *Requiem* purports to be an attempt to reconcile Modersohn-Becker with her death but her restless ghost is Rilke’s projection of his own need for reconciliation with the death of his friend soon after childbirth, and with death as a whole. The *Requiem* subliminally becomes the attempt at a language in which the poet can rest in death, the written death which Rilke is preparing for himself. The Rilke of the *Requiem* will invite Modersohn-Becker to die into his heart, for the Rilkean ‘death of one’s own’ is the presence of death and the dead within the living heart, within deep consciousness, body and blood. But this invitation is a written invitation, and it is poetry which is extended to Modersohn-Becker, poetry which, as the language of otherness, creates death within art and the imagination. The *Requiem* is fundamentally concerned with its function as writing, for it is in the making of the poem that Modersohn-Becker’s and the poet’s deaths are made. The *Requiem* is a poetological poem in which the character of mourning determines the character of death.

In Rilke’s work death is immanent in the individual’s dwelling within the earth and within herself but this intimacy and dwelling must be striven for in language and art. Cysarz was one of the first to identify the relationship between death and art in

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Rilke's work and recognise its relevance to *Requiem für eine Freundin* and *Requiem für Wolf Graf von Kalckreuth*. He writes that the *Requiems* hold immanence and transcendence in balance by presencing both to the imagination, and he goes on:


The *Requiem* ascribes to Modersohn-Becker’s art a timelessness because it inhabits a space of simultaneity, expressing the unity of life and death, and the communion of the artist with both herself and the objects external to her – she is ‘im Sein der Dinge und im eigenen’. Her dwelling or staying within the earth and herself, the immanence which is founded by her painting, is paradoxically her transformation and transcendence of the real world, for her art gives the earth back not as familiar and comprehended but as distant and deeply challenging. Rilke demands of all art that it produce ‘Sein’, a possibility of existence in which there is still wonder and an infinite. Death, the contradiction which introduces the unknown into life, is idealised in the *Requiem* as it is in the *Neue Gedichte*, and Rilke tries to write Modersohn-Becker back into the infinite otherness of art and death.

The purpose of the *Requiem* is the same as that of the *Neue Gedichte* which transform real objects into the unreal. Modersohn-Becker is the object which must be refigured and made other. The *Requiem* encourages her to be dead but it also tries to write her into the twin states of death and art by transforming her in language. The *Requiem* tries to incant Modersohn-Becker’s language and address it to her so that she may recognise it as her own and receive the death she had been preparing for herself in her own language, in her finest art, before she died. The *Requiem* is an act of writing which seeks to transform death for both its recipient (this is a *Requiem ‘für eine Freundin’*) and its writer. The ‘death of one’s own’, I have been arguing, is a death created in the languages of poetry and art, and the poet’s rewriting of the artist’s death is an attempt to inscribe the artistic, transformed death in his poetry and therefore in himself. Rilke tries to re-evoke Modersohn-Becker’s artistic idiom in his poem, and restore it to her. Rilke is writing Modersohn-Becker’s ideal artistic death into her through his poetry, making a gift of this language but also assimilating it as part of his own work and his own death. A collaboration is imagined whereby the poet recreates.
the death and the art of the dead friend, transcribing her art into his poetry and therefore her death into his death.\(^5\) The *Requiem*’s ‘Hilf mir’ (269) entreats Modersohn-Becker to take possession of her death again in order that she might inspire and help the poet in his requiemising, his poetry of death. It is both the poet and the *Requiem* which cry out for help, for the making of poetry meant for Rilke the making of the authentic existence.\(^6\)

The artistic imperative of transformation, ‘Du mußt dein Leben ändern’, announced in the torso of Apollo, reverberates through *Requiem für eine Freundin*, and Rilke demands from Modersohn-Becker the extremity he demanded from himself – the complete and solitary transformation of the self into art.\(^7\) This artistic ideal summons all of life into the painting or the poem, and anything which coerces or takes the artist in a direction which runs contrary to her art must be resisted. Rilke’s Eurydice dies Rilke’s ideal death. To look again at the letter to Sidonie Nádherný above, Eurydice has absolved herself of husband and, by implication, of motherhood, extricated herself from this ‘Verflochtensein’ in domestic community (‘im gemeinsamen Leben’) which can only impede the artist’s ‘In-sich-Sein’, and, in contrast to Modersohn-Becker who is ‘unausgelöst’ (‘unreleased’), Eurydice is disentangled and dissolved: ‘aufgelöst wie langes Haar’ (79). Rilke locates the ‘eigenen Tod’ in the disengaged, artistic existence which does not have to compromise. The death constituted in communal life cannot be authentically self-made. The word ‘Verhängnis’ in the letter refers to Modersohn-Becker’s premature death as an abomination, a death which comes from the outside rather than from within the artistic core (the *Requiem*’s word for this is ‘Schicksal’ (164), suggesting that the disaster of the commonplace, non-artistic existence is its

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5 In a letter Rilke speaks of perpetuating the art of dead friends: ‘Was aber den Einfluß des Todes eines nahestehenden Menschen auf diejenigen betrifft, die er zurückläßt, so scheint mir schon seit lange, als dürfte das kein anderer sein als der einer höheren Verantwortung; überläßt der Hingehende nicht sein hundertfach Begonnenes denen, die ihn überdauern, als Fortzusetzendes, wenn sie einigermaßen ihm innerlich verbunden waren? Ich habe in den letzten Jahren so viele nahe Todeserfahrungen erleben müssen, aber es ist mir keiner genommen worden, ohne daß ich nicht die Aufgaben um mich herum vermehrte gefunden hätte’ (to Elisabeth Frein Schenk zu Schweinsberg, 23.9.1908, *Briefe 1907-1914*, p. 57).

6 Schuelke makes the same point but extends the appeal to cover work other than the requiem poems: ‘the two poems concern not only the two artists who have died; they are requiems as well for Rilke, the living artist, and for the poetic creation with which he was intensely occupied at this time, *Malte Laurids Brigge*’ (1957, p. 184).

7 Rilke describes Rodin’s renunciation of life as an artist: ‘Daß er ein Arbeiter war, der nichts ersehnte, als ganz, mit allen seinen Kräften, in das niedrige und harte Dasein seines Werkzeugs einzugehen. Darin lag eine Art von Verzicht auf das Leben; aber gerade mit dieser Geduld gewann er es: denn zu seinem Werkzeug kam die Welt’ (*Rodin*, p. 201). Here the artist enters into his art, sending his life into his art in order to win life. Rilke writes to Mimi Romanelli of life as transformative, non-purposeful, endless, infinite work: ‘C’est le travail que je veux, toujours le même, le travail long, sans fin, sans sort: enfin, le travail’ (7.12.1907 *Briefe* I, p. 229). And the *Requiem* believes that Modersohn-Becker was originally committed to the *work* of art: ‘und wolltest nichts, als eine lange Arbeit’ (251).
fatedness, its perpetual replication of conventional forms and language) and Rilke repeats this word in a letter to his publisher years later when he refers to Modersohn-Becker as 'jene verhängnisvoll zerstörte Gestalt' (10.8.1917, *Verleger* II, p. 316). The vocabulary of disaster and destruction features strongly in the *Requiem* as the constructive work of Modersohn-Becker's 'eigenen Tod' comes undone. In this chapter, I will argue that in the pair of requiem poems written in 1908 the difficulty of the artistic transformation comes to the fore, and that Rilke begins to negotiate a possible language for death from within the threatened violation and collapse of the transformed, other world created in poetic language, from within the faltering of precisely that figuration by means of which he had been forging the strange death which he might call his own.

### 3.1 The Circle as the ‘Figure’ of the ‘Death of one’s Own’

The *Requiem* is the poem which confirms the aesthetic significance of ‘der eigene Tod’ and the womb and the blood as its setting. The connectedness of art, life and death, and the body in Rilke’s work is the focus of this thesis. Rilke uses the image of blood circulation connecting the realms of life and death in a letter to Witold von Hulewicz: ‘Die wahre Lebensgestalt reicht durch beide Gebiete, das Blut des größten Kreislaufs treibt durch beide’ (13.11.1925, *Muzot*, p. 372). The physical circulatory system is exceeded here by a ‘greater’ metaphorical one in which the individual is imagined to be physically joined to death and sharing its energy. When in the *Requiem* this metaphorically physical connection with art and death ruptures, it ruptures bodily and bloodily. A tearing pain is wrought right through the poem, in which grieving for the dead becomes the suffering and adversity of poetry. The *Requiem* panics, ‘Mich verwirrt’ (13), and this disorientation is the simultaneous unravelling of the authentic, artistic death and of the Rilkean work of transformative poetry. Modersohn-Becker’s

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8 Key may have given Rilke the imagery of blood for his complex association of the female body with the work of art. Key argues that the female must nourish the fruit of her intellect (‘Geistesfrucht’) with blood just as she nourishes the physical foetus (‘Leibesfrucht’) (1905, p. 56). Note again here the fruit motif for intellectual or artistic creativity.

9 Rilke encourages Regina Ullmann in her writing, telling her to send her blood into her work: ‘Und obendrein sagen Sie, daß Sie in Schwerem stehen und sich wehren, und da kann nichts Ihnen eher helfen, als daß einer, der das sieht, Ihnen versichert, daß Ihr Herz mit großen Dingen muß in Verwandtschaft und beginnender Freundschaft verbunden sein, um Ihr Blut in solche Formen und in eine so wirklich Handlung zu treiben’ (3.9.1908, *Briehe, 1907-14*, p. 40). The *First Elegy* also identifies a circuit which unites life and death, but here it is current rather than blood (*SW* 1, p. 688: 80). Catling identifies the ‘Kreislauf’ as the connection between art and death, arguing that it represents the world of the eternally dead and also serves to define ‘Arbeit’, the aesthetic realm (1986, pp. 22-3).
death is a hiatus in Rilke’s attribution of ‘der eigene Tod’ to artists, and the *Requiem* struggles throughout for restoration. The imagery which manifests the sundering of the artist from her work, and therefore from her death, is that of the blood. As discussed in the previous chapter, blood represents for Rilke the immanence of an infinite ‘Dasein’, the stretch of the imagination in language which deepens and redefines physical and mental being. In the *Requiem* blood becomes the pivotal image because Rilke is dealing with the bodiliness of a pregnant woman and a death which originates in the blood. Modersohn-Becker died of an embolism– a blood clot or an air bubble which impedes circulation – and Rilke explores the Modersohn-Becker’s ‘eigener Tod’ in an extending of the physical embolism into metaphor. In the Rilkean imagination the body and work of the artist are deeply fused, blood integrating the artist’s own, created language into the body, the life and the death of her own. Blood in Rilke’s work is a metaphor for the internalisation of artistic creation, yet it is not always easy to keep out the non-metaphorical; particularly in Rilke’s ideas of female creativity the physical is not wholly sublimated.

But if we regard the transformation of the physical self into art as a metaphor for a change in intellectual or aesthetic perception, ‘Kreislauf’ in the *Requiem* is an image of the circulation of the blood which represents both the inner, spiritual state of the individual and the internal configuration of the poem. The term ‘Kreislauf’ is used twice:

\[
\text{daß aus dem Kreislauf, der dich schon empfing,

die stumme Schwerkraft irgend einer Unruh
dich niederzieht zur abgezählten Zeit - : (29)}
\]

and

Por argues that Rilke deliberately chose the theme of death in order to break the ‘selbstranzendente Teleologie der orphischen Figur’, the figure of poetic completion and ‘In-sich-Sein’ which dominates the *Neue Gedichte*. He continues: ‘Man kann die beiden Requien als thetische Widerlegungen des doppelt-einen Grundprinzips zusammenfassen, das den vorherigen Band bestimmt’ (1998, p. 56). I agree that Rilke’s poem is more troubled here than anything which goes before, but I do think that the poem still strives for ‘den eigenen Tod’ and the transcendent poetic figure.

In a letter to Hugo Heller about the *Requiem* Rilke describes female art again as a sublimation of the physical: ‘die Geburtsvorgänge, die der künstlerische Mann rein geistig – gewußt, erleidet und übersteht, lassen sich auch in der Frau, die künstlerisch auszutragen vermag, bis ins Geistigste erweitern und verherrlichen, aber sie erfahren dabei doch nur eine graduelle Steigerung und bleiben in unbegrenzter Verzweigung im Physischen beruhen (so daß man, übertreibend, sagen könnte, daß auch ihr Geistigstes immer noch irgendein Leib ist, sublim gewordener Leib)’ (12.6.1909). A facsimile of the original letter is published in the *Berliner Tageblatt*, no. 563, 9 November 1929 (see appendix 1). I am indebted to Fred Wagner for the transcription of this letter. An English translation is available in *Letters* I (p. 345).
O laß uns klagen. Weißt du, wie dein Blut
aus einem Kreisen ohnegleichen zögernd
und ungern wiederkam, da du es abriefst?
wie es verwirrt des Leibes kleinen Kreislauf
noch einmal aufnahm; (142)

and finally there is an image of the artist projecting her blood into the work of art:

Jedem, der sein Blut
hinaufhob in ein Werk, das lange wird,
kann es geschehen, daß ers nicht mehr hochhält (263)

The circulation of the blood supplying the transcendent organism of the artwork is an
image of the artist projecting herself into a poetic figure, a new circulation or
constellation. It is a world of otherness generated by its own internal circuit of
imaginative relations, and the artist’s transformation of the motions of her own
existence into a new orbit. Rilke describes this translation of the self into the higher
circulatory system of art thus:

Deiner Tränen Kraft und Andrang
hast du verwandelt in dein reifes Anschauen
und warst dabei, jeglichen Saft in dir
so umzusetzen in ein starkes Dasein,
das steigt und kreist, im Gleichgewicht und blindlings. (119)

The poetic figure is ‘reif’ and ‘stark’, suggesting the ripeness of the fruit of death and
the strength or intensity of experience discussed in the previous chapters, and it ‘circles’
in a projected space, a space towards which it ‘ascends’. The circulation on another

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12 ‘Die Fensterrose’ also uses the imagery of blood circulation to depict the action of art on the gaze of the
observer. The rose window steals the gaze and the heart for its divine, circular space:

wenn dieses Auge, welches scheinbar ruht,
sich auftut und zusammenschlägt mit Tosen
und ihn hineinreiβt bis ins rote Blut:
So griffen einstmals aus dem Dunkelsein
der Kathedralen große Fensterrosen
ein Herz und rissen es in Gott hinein. (NG I, SW I, p. 501).

See also ‘Das Einhorn’ in which the unicorn, as an imaginal creation, represents the generation of images
which are enclosed in the poetic circle or figure: ‘Doch seine Blicke, die kein Ding begrenzte/warfen sich
Bilder in den Raum/und schlossen einen blauen Sagenkreis’ (NG I, SW I, p. 507).

13 The ascent to a higher level in art is the artist’s pursuit of the individual within herself by pushing the
boundaries of normality to get to the extraordinary, and Rilke may have been influenced here by Niels
Lynhe: ‘When the individual strove to bring his life into harmony with what seemed to him, in his best
moments, the highest that dwelt in him’ (Jacobsen, Niels Lynhe, p. 268). In ‘Atmete ich nicht aus
Mitternächten’ there is an expansion of space and the discovery of other dimensions within blood:
‘Lautlos wurde Raum in meinen Zügen/deinem großen Aufschaun zu genügen/spiegelte, vertiefte sich
mein Blut’ (1913, SW II, p. 70).
plane signifies the difference of poetic space, a language which has found a way of transforming the entrapping, habitual, reflex vocabulary of emotion (‘Deiner Tränen Kraft und Andrang’) and the immediate, physical compulsions of the body (‘represented by ‘Saft’), in other words, of transforming the personal into something different. The translation of physical and emotional ‘juice’ into the ‘stronger’, more potent or profound, existence is the transformation of reality into art. Artistic or poetic space is characterised by equanimity (‘Gleichgewicht’), a condition which transcends the pushing and pulling of physically real life (equanimity is the indifference and abstractedness, the infinite openness to the paradoxical ‘das Ganze’ sought by the lost son discussed in the previous chapter\(^\text{15}\)), and its blindness suggests, among other significations which I will mention later, its intemality (‘In-sich-Sein’). I will return to the Requiem’s exploration of poetic space but, for now I would like to concentrate on the ‘Kreislauf’.

The image of circulation is also one of enclosure and unity, the predominant poetic figure of the Neue Gedichte. The image of the completed circle suggests the achievement of the balance and unity of the infinite in art, and it offers a contrast to the fragmentary nature of the untransformed life which perpetually lapses into a negative and limited transience. ‘Requiem (Clara Westhoff gewidmet)’ of the Buch der Bilder (BB II, SW I, pp. 469-76) was written earlier than the Neue Gedichte, and belongs wholly to the subjective lyricism of the Buch der Bilder, but it does explore the motif of

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\(^{14}\) The ideal of the Requiem is also that of Rilke’s Cézanne-influenced ‘Sachlichkeit’ (to Clara, 13.10.1907, Cézanne, p. 29) in which ascension or intensification to a non-subjective plane of reality takes place. Both the Requiem and the Cézanne letters employ the metaphor of heightening – the Requiem in ‘das steigt und kreist’, and a letter in its description of transformation as the ‘bis ins Unzerstörbare hinein gesteigerte Wirklichkeit’ (to Clara, 9.10.1907, Cézanne, p. 21). Rilke writes to Kurt Becker of Modersohn-Becker’s artistic translation of feeling into infinite being: ‘Denn so großmütig und meisterhaft war sie in ihrer Freude, daß sie nie überstürzte, sondern, der Reihe nach, schon die Vorfreude ganz ernst und ausführlich nahm und durch sie durch, langsam führend, hinein in die Freude ging; und grad über die Freude hinaus war offen für sie in die Ewigkeit.’ He goes on to speak of Modersohn-Becker’s expectation that there is more possibility than immediate reality suggests, and of ‘moments of transport’ in which Modersohn-Becker’s art connected her to the infinite wholeness of existence: ‘Denn sie, in diesen hingerissenen Augenblicken, die ihr Leben sind, sprach wie für immer, stellte sich mit jeder bewegt oder müde, zweifelnd oder froh hingeschriebenen Zeile in ein Verhältnis zum Ganzen, war ein Stimme, wo sie glaubte, und der ganzen Erde selig gegenüber; und wo sie noch nicht glauben durfte, was wie die Dämmerung eines anhebenden Tages und hüllte die Erde ein. Aber Enttäuschung war nicht in ihrem Dasein, Bedauern war nicht, keine Spur eines minderen Anspruchs, nichts, was schlecht werden konnte, abgestanden, trüb’ (copy of a letter to Kurt Becker in a letter to Clara, Easter Monday, 1913, Briefe 1907-1914, p. 285).

\(^{15}\) Schuelke restates the artistic programme central to Requiem für eine Freundin and Requiem für Wolf Graf von Kalckreuth: ‘The crisis centers in the problem of acquiring and maintaining in temporal life an attribute natural to the higher state of being securely held in eternity. One can refer to this variously as pure vision, recognition of essence, or the perception of truth. It is a quality inherent to the naïve child. […] Rilke knows it to be fleetingly present in the high, selfless moments of heroic action, of true poverty, of great love, and in the telescoped moment of dying; he knows it also to be an achievable state for the dedicated artist’ (1957, p. 183).
the circle in its central image of the wreath which transforms grief into art. This *Requiem* was written in response to a letter from Clara which related the death of her friend Gretel Kottmeyer and, as Catling points out, Gretel’s death is fitted into the Rilkean pattern of predestined, virginal death (‘Gretel, von allem Anbeginn/war dir bestimmt, sehr zeitig zu sterben’, p. 470: 22) whereas Modersohn-Becker’s is not (1986, p. 7). The motif of the circle is introduced as Gretel’s living connection with the wholeness of life and death (‘das Ganze’, p. 472: 76), which is described as the ever increasing circles of space (‘Leben hat Sinn nur, verbunden mit vielen/Kreisen des weithin wachsenden Raumes’, p. 472: 79).

The *Requiem* imagines that the heavy wreath, made by Clara and placed on Gretel’s coffin, bears down on the lid and breaks it, slipping into the coffin and releasing its sap into the dead girl’s veins. The ivy enters her dark, open heart (‘das Herz, das, ganz verklungen,/dunkel, allen offen steht’, p. 474: 134) which participates in the equanimity of the earth (‘Die Erde ist voller Gleichgewicht,/Deine Erde’, p. 474: 142). The wreath is the work of art, taking on the burden of loss and transforming it into ‘Gleichgewicht’, hence:

Aber dieser Kranz ist schwer
nur im Licht,
nur unter Lebenden, hier bei mir;
und sein Gewicht
ist nicht mehr
wenn ich ihn zu dir legen werde. (p. 474: 136)

These lines recall Rilke’s question to Wolf Graf von Kalckreuth in his *Requiem* to the dead poet:

Was hast du nicht gewartet, daß die Schwere
ganz unerträglich wird: da schlägt sie um
und ist so schwer, weil sie so echt ist. (SW I, p. 660: 31)

Clara’s wreath must be made heavy with the difficulty and suffering of absence and death, it must travel through contradiction and paradox in order to reach the stabilisation which is the reconciliation with otherness and death. It must make the journey towards death and be given to death, for if it stalls and does not transcend the world of the living it will remain bloated with untransformed suffering. In the wreath grief is closed in a circle, shaping a separate poetic world of art, a circulation on a different level, a space which can be a portal to the other side of the known, comprehended world (the wreath
transgresses the boundary between life and death by breaking through the lid of the coffin). The wreath’s mourning is too heavy for this world of life, but in entering the coffin and circling within the dead body, it enters into a new circulation with the otherness of death. Gretel, whose untouched, intact virginity gave her, according to the poem, premonitions of possible completedness and an existence which is not biased towards life (‘denn du wuβtest: das ist nicht das Ganze’, p. 472: 76), finally meets with this otherness in death:

Jetzt weiβt du das Andre, das uns verstößt,
so oft wir’s im Dunkel erfaßt;
von dem, was du sehnest, bist du erlöst
zu etwas, was du hast. (p. 476: 174)

Her equanimity in death also consists in an acquiescence which does not divide or designate: ‘du wirst nicht mehr/unterscheiden, was steigt oder sinkt’ (anticipating the image of ‘ein Glückliches fällt’ in the Tenth Elegy, SW I, p. 726: 109). The capacity of the work of art, the wreath, to give form to the deepest otherness and openness of death and absence, has triggered the release of the dead girl into the abundant and infinite relation which completes and fulfils her. The ivy travels round her body and expands her into infinite forest and foliage: ‘vielleicht bist du jetzt ein erwachsener Wald/mit Winden und Stimmen im Laub’ (p. 476: 181). This image suggests that her unification with, and subsumption into, the work of art is her coming back to nature and oneness with the earth.

As simple material from the real world, the ivy is familiar and unchallenging (‘leichtes Laub’, p. 469: 3), but as it becomes the wreath of mourning it takes on other significations, drinking up all the strangeness of night and death which transforms the material thing into more than thing. The ivy wreath is invested with imagination, feeling and otherness, and becomes a poetic object:

Seit einer Stunde ist um ein Ding mehr
auf Erden. Mehr um einen Kranz.
Vor einer Weile war das leichtes Laub ... Ich wands:
Und jetzt ist dieser Efeu seltsam schwer
und so von Dunkel voll, als tränke er
aus meinen Dingen zukünftige Nächte.
Jetzt graut mir fast vor dieser nächsten Nacht,
allein mit diesem Kranz, den ich gemacht,
nicht ahnend, daß da etwas wird,
wenng sich die Ranken ründen um den Reifen;
ganz nur bedürftig, dieses zu begreifen:
The wreath is an art object which binds other worlds to it and to its artist,\textsuperscript{16} shaping itself around the otherness of the dead girl’s absence. As a manifestation of the strange, it takes on a presence and substantiality of its own: ‘jetzt ist dieser Efeu seltsam schwer/und so von Dunkel voll’. The creator of the wreath is afraid of her creation because it exceeds her own interpretative grasp. New and strange meaning is conceived in the becoming of a new thing, and what is produced is not known in advance of its production. The making of the art-thing in this \textit{Requiem} is the production of a thing which gravitates towards death in its strangeness and difference. In the making of the wreath a poetry of death is written, a language which can produce a death of wonder and intimation. The wreath is Clara’s poem (great poetry has traditionally been rewarded with a laurel wreath crown), submitting to a potentially overwhelming negation, an infinite pressure of absence of meaning and definition, in order to produce new meaning.

To come back to the image of ‘Kreislauf’, the wreath flows through Gretel like blood, a blood of poetry and death, setting up a greater ‘Kreislauf’, greater because it is an intercirculation of life and death. This wreath refigures death differently for both the mourned and the mourner, for the creator of the wreath translates herself and her self-limitation into it. She transforms herself into art, as the final lines state: ‘meine Kraft/kreist in dem Kranz.’ Her energy and creativity have found a new circulation within art, for she has extended herself to include the darkness and strangeness which is outside of, or unknown to, herself. The artist makes her own death in the making of the wreath of death, and it is her ‘eigener Tod’ which is in that wreath. The metaphor of poetry as wreath-making occurs again in Rilke’s description of how he wrote the \textit{Sonette an Orpheus}. He says that he received ‘ein Kranz von fünfundzwanzig Sonetten, geschrieben als ein Grabmal für Wera Knoop’ as a gift (8.2.1922, \textit{Volkart} I, p. 247).

Central to \textit{Requiem für eine Freundin} is the transformation of blood circulation into art. A letter from Rilke to Hugo Heller about the \textit{Requiem} provides a useful gloss on this. In it Rilke expresses again his conviction that women are physical and physically creative creatures, but he also stresses here that a woman must enact ‘a slow transformation of her organs’ if she is to produce art, a transformation from the personal into the objective:

\textsuperscript{16} See ‘aus vielen Ungenaun und immer mir/aus nichts als mir und dem, was ich nicht kenn/das Ding zu machen, Herr Herr Herr, das Ding’ (‘Spanische Trilogie I’, 1913, \textit{SWII}, p. 44).
Das Schicksal, das mit dem Requiem nachzusagen und zu beklagen versucht worden ist (und dessen unabwendbares Verhängnis auch Sie mit schmerzlicher Nähe erkannt haben), ist vielleicht der eigentliche künstlerische Konflikt: das Widerspiel und der Widerspruch von sachlichem und persönlichem Genuß der Welt. Das alles setzt sich in einem Mann von künstlerischer Notwendigkeit nicht weniger gefährlich und entscheidend auseinander; in der Frau aber, die entschlossen ist zu den unendlichen Umsetzungen des künstlerischen Daseins, wächst Schmerz und Gefahr dieser Wahl zu einer unvergeßlichen Sichtbarkeit an. Indem sie bis weit in ihre Seele hinein körperlich ist und auf physisch – lebendige Hervorbringung angelegt, muß etwas von einer langsamten Umbildung aller Organe in ihr vor sich gehen, damit sie eine seelisch – vitale Fruchtbarkeit erreicht. (12.6.1909, Berliner Tageblatt, no. 563, 9 November 1929)

Modersohn-Becker’s death is depicted as a recalling of the blood from its circulation within the work of art (which Rilke calls here ‘objective’ – ‘sachlich’) back to the body in which it is destined to do the work of the physical in the form of childbearing. This world of the personal and physical is immersed in itself, unable to get beyond its own immediacy and create art, unable to do anything but replicate itself. (I will come back to the idea that Modersohn-Becker’s pregnancy is presented in the Requiem as a reproductive event, an event which reproduces old structures rather than creates new language.) The immediacy of the everyday world is prominent in the emotional and physical urges of ‘Deiner Tränen Kraft und Andrang’ (119) and ‘Saft’ (121). It is a world in which ‘Säfte wollen’ (126), in which humans are dominated by instant gratification, trapped within themselves and unable to find the new language and perspective of intense, infinite being (‘ein starkes Dasein,/das steigt und kreist’: 122), being which is aware of the possibility of its otherness. Art takes the individual outside the personal space demarcated by the circulation of the blood, inviting her to imagine a different space and different contours.

The conventional level of circulation is characterised throughout the Requiem as enclosing and delimiting. The lines, ‘Da riß ein Zufall dich, dein letzter Zufall/riß dich zurück aus deinem fernsten Fortschritt’ (124) describes Modersohn-Becker’s pregnancy as wrenching her back out of her expansion, and this regression is the weight of ordinary reality increasingly bearing down on her and forcing her backwards:

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17 See footnote 11.
18 ‘Für Hans Carossa’ attributes ‘Kreisen’, the greater circulation, to ‘Losgelassenes’, to the relinquishment of a limiting language and perspective. This relinquishment takes place in ‘Verlieren’ and ‘Vergessen’, as quoted in the previous chapter in footnote 86.
Rilke elaborates on the idea of burden and weight in the letter to Hugo Heller where he describes the return of the female artist from artistic production to physical reproduction as outsized blood cramming itself into the smaller circulation it had left behind:

'Deshalb ist für sie jeder Rückfall in eine primitivere und engere Art des Leidens, Genießens und Hervorbringens eine Überfüllung ihrer Organe mit dem für einen anderen größeren Kreislauf vermehrten Blut' (12.6.1909, Berliner Tageblatt, no. 563, 29 November 1929). The *Requiem* describes the blood of the work of art as a heavier blood which cannot be borne by the original, ordinary body:

Jedem, der sein Blut
hinaufhob in ein Werk, das lange wird,
kann es geschehen, daß ers nicht mehr hochhält (263)

These lines might recall the wreath for Gretel becoming heavier with intensity and uncanniness as it becomes more and more a work of art. Rilke poetically transforms Modersohn-Becker's embolism until it becomes an aesthetic event. The body's smaller circulatory system, a metaphor for the scope of a life contained within the real and devoid of imaginative input, is described as diminutive and therefore limited: 'des Leibes kleinen Kreislauf' (145). This circulation is a circulation within time rather than outside of it in Rilkean artistic transcendence, and Modersohn-Becker's reentering of time is described as relapse into illness: 'Zeit/ist wie ein Rückfall einer langen Krankheit' (158). Ordinary time where there is no transformation is encroaching and disabling. Later, the *Requiem* points to a freedom within every individual which must be preserved in love relationships, and this can be traced back to the Rilkean ideal of the circulation which is not subjected to coercion:

Denn das ist Schuld, wenn irgendeines Schuld ist:

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19 See footnote 11.
20 'Das Lied des Idioten' also recognises the heavy quality of blood: 'Das Blut ist das Schwerste. Das Blut ist schwer' (*SB, SW* I, p. 452).
The wedding ring should not oppress and bind. Love should not encircle and enclose as part of human neuroses and possessiveness, rather it should aspire to a greater circular unity in which there is self-realisation. The ‘Kreislauf’ of the Requiem represents the artist’s inner relationship to her art. She is not fully artist if the whole of her is not poetry or picture, not circulating in a space which is outside the dominant contours of the real. Modersohn-Becker’s inner dividedness culminates in Rilke’s statement of the divergence between these spaces: ‘Denn irgendwo ist eine alte Feindschaft/zwischen dem Leben und der großen Arbeit’ (267). Life offers a reduced reality whereas the work of art circulates beyond the immediate and the familiar.

Rilke acknowledges Modersohn-Becker’s artistic achievement of ‘ein starkes Dasein,/das steigt und kreist, im Gleichgewicht und blindlings’, and blindness is a characteristic of the Rilkean aesthetic of the circle. The Requiem comprehends itself as the art of poetry in applying a metaphorical blindness to the comprehension of death:


Necessary to ‘Begreifen’ within Rilke’s poetry is an element of absence. The blind are divorced from the world of immediate sensuous recognition (See ‘Die Blinde’, BB II, SW I, pp. 465-9), and Rilke employs this distance paradoxically in the Requiem to bring him closer to the language of death and therefore death itself. The blind man’s sensitivity to things is not one which comprehends them directly as if meaning were instantaneous. The object is visually absent and the imagination is freed, released from a focal point, to wander ‘around’ it (‘rings’). An imaginative perception is triggered in which blindness travels the object’s circles of ambivalence. This circular perception is enabled by the blind centre of the circle, the invisible object being experienced as removed and poetic, rather than immediate and unambiguous. The blind man

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21 In the Sonette an Orpheus lovers are invited to step into a different respiratory system of impersonal breath. They are asked to love in a manner which transcends the human need for recognition and self-confirmation: ‘O Ihr Zärtlichen, tretet zuweilen/in den Atem, der euch nicht meint’ (SO I, 4, SW I, p. 733).
comprehends the space of resonance around the object and so does not impress upon it a reductive definition (‘weiß ihm keinen Namen’). The object has an empty centre if it is explored through blindness and this is the imaginative space of indefinition and play. The object does not assert an unequivocal essence and does not evoke a merely prescribed language already in place. Language must be created ‘around’ it just as it must be created around death’s empty centre.

This blind language or awareness is called ‘feeling’ (‘fühl ich dein Los’) but this is not the subjective outpouring of the early poetry, rather a perception which is outside both personal impulse and rationality or knowledge (‘und weiβ ihm keinen Namen’) in its own space. Rilke is trying to understand Modersohn-Becker’s crisis in death, and ultimately to understand death, but he can only do this in language. If the Requiem can be poetry, the language of death, it can offer itself to Modersohn-Becker as the completion of her own, incomplete, ‘eigenen Tod’. The Requiem discovers the non-naming, ambivalent language of ‘Fühlen’ in its confrontation with the ghost of Modersohn-Becker. It does not mourn in the conventional manner, willing Modersohn-Becker’s ghost to clarify itself, to become more living and human, rather it asks her to become more ghost, more ambiguous and invisible, absent and dead (‘Komm nicht zurück’: 270). Rilke will not put a conventional name to Modersohn-Becker’s death in the Requiem (nor will he put a name to her, the ‘Freundin’) but he will try to understand and express it in the different language of poetry. The Requiem’s objective is to become the language which Modersohn-Becker began but could not fully achieve, the language of death and ‘den eigenen Tod’ which seeks absence and otherness. Modersohn-Becker is mourned (‘Läβ uns zusammen klagen’: 117) differently in the Requiem since the mourner longs for her distance, not her nearness, in death.

Rilke’s poem tries to restore a nameless, strange death to the dead friend, but this must begin with the poetry of blood. Rilke must ‘feel’ in himself the beginnings of a different language if he is later to invite Modersohn-Becker to mourn with him and participate in this language and this poetic death (‘So mußt du kommen, tot, und hier mit mir/Klagen nachholen’: 194), the death made in the language of absence and ambivalence. When Rilke says ‘fühl ich dein Los’ (116), he is taking into him the language of art and death, a language which has come from the artist Modersohn-Becker. At the end of the Requiem Rilke begs Modersohn-Becker to be ‘in mir’, to help him in his art by being nameless and dead in his poetic blood, the blood which carries

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22 See Ryan on ‘die leere Mitte (1972, pp. 32-8).
his own death and the possibility of hers. Rilke must lay to rest the ghost of the physical, living Modersohn-Becker, must dissolve her memory into the imaginal relations within art (‘Denn die Erinnerungen selbst sind es noch nicht’, Malte, p. 724); in fact her memory must become the memory of her art. Rilke takes Modersohn-Becker into him, via his Requiem to the memory of her art, in order to lose her into the poetry of death, her own, rightful death. The transformation of Modersohn-Becker in Rilke’s poem is the creation of Rilke’s own death, for the language of transformation is transformation itself in Rilke’s poetics.

The poem finishes: ‘Doch hilf mir so, daß es dich nicht zerstreut, wie mir das Fernste manchmal hilft: in mir’ (272). When Rilke asks Modersohn-Becker to collaborate with him as an artist (‘hilf mir’), it is an invitation to her and her art to become part of him and the poetry of his own death. Her death should converge with his in the poetry of death that is being written within him. Throughout the Requiem, blood has represented the energy and internality of the aesthetic space, and when the last line conjures up a space ‘in mir’, it is perhaps the space of the veins and arteries, recalling the internalisation of memory evoked in the words: ‘Denn die Erinnerungen selbst sind es noch nicht. Erst wenn sie Blut werden in uns, Blick und Gebärde, namenlos und nicht mehr zu unterscheiden von uns selbst’ (Malte, pp. 724-5). Rilke is asking Modersohn-Becker to be within him in the anonymous and indistinguishable way in which death can be within the living. The Requiem is an attempt to restart Modersohn-Becker’s, and perpetuate Rilke’s own, ‘Kreisen’ on the removed, poetic and artistic level, the level of ‘der eigene Tod’, and in extending an invitation to Modersohn-Becker to enter him, Rilke beckons to himself great distance, extremity and otherness (‘das Fernste’: 273). An absorption of Modersohn-Becker’s art into the blood would mean an internalisation of the outsidedness she achieved in the work she completed before her death. Rilke is beginning to practise Modersohn-Becker’s non-reductive and non-omniscient ‘Begreifen’ and this is Modersohn-Becker’s becoming in him, and his transformation of himself through her.

### 3.2 Paula Modersohn-Becker’s Art

Before looking at the dilemma at the centre of the Requiem it is necessary to understand what Rilke believes Modersohn-Becker’s best work accomplishes. The Requiem does indeed get Modersohn-Becker’s art inside it, presencing her paintings on the page. Her pictures do circulate within the poem, swelling and feeding it as blood might, and Rilke
is driven by her to pursue things in the world which feature as images in her work ('Land', 'Frauen in den Türen', 'Kinder', 'Landschaft', 'bei der alten Arbeit/der Wiesen und der Felder', 'Tiere', 'Blumen', 'Früchte': 51-73). The poem tries to absorb as much of her as it can, and Rilke explicitly states that his urge to buy fruit is connected to her painted fruits:

Und Früchte will ich kaufen, Früchte, drin
das Land noch einmal drin ist, bis an den Himmel.
Denn das verstandest du: die vollen Früchte. (72)

Once again, fruit represents a wholeness of being and an artistic achievement. Earth and sky inhabit the fruit, and the fruit is the place of infinite experience, but the words 'noch einmal' are not irrelevant here, for they mark the aesthetic recreation. The fruit can be the whole of existence at once because it is a transformation. It cannot be earth and sky, but it can be a concentrated world of its own which embodies and expresses the universe in a single serving, as the Sonette an Orpheus celebrate (SO I, 15, SW I, p. 740). This fullness is understood in art, another recreation, an attempt at a language which does not delimit its object. Rilke then compares her still lifes of fruit to her best self-portrait:

Denn das verstandest du: die vollen Früchte.
Die legtest du auf Schalen vor dich hin
und wogst mit Farben ihre Schwere auf.
Und so wie Früchte sahst du auch die Frau
und sahst die Kinder so, von innen her
getrieben in die Formen ihres Daseins.
Und sahst dich selbst zuletzt wie eine Frucht,
nahmst dich heraus aus deinen Kleidern, trugst
dich vor den Spiegel, ließest dich hinein
bis auf dein Schauen; das blieb groß davor
und sagte nicht: das bin ich, nein: dies ist.
So ohne Neugier war zuletzt dein Schaun
und so besitzlos, von so wahrer Armut,
daß es dich selbst nicht mehr begehrte: heilig. (74)

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23 Paula Modersohn-Becker, 1876-1907. Werkverzeichnis der Gemälde is a comprehensive collection of her work.

24 Perry provides a picture of a work, Figurenkomposition (1907, Oil on board, 110 x 74cm, now destroyed but once in the Roselius Collection, Bremen), to which, if he is not referring to Modersohn-Becker's work in general, Rilke might be referring with 'Früchte' and 'Frauen' (1979, p. 55). Stahl says that Rilke is referring to Modersohn-Becker's still lifes of fruit (1978, K1444, p. 249).
The key to this interpretation of Modersohn-Becker’s paintings is the fullness of ‘die voll en Früchte’ which stands for the Rilkean ‘Ganze’, the infinite abyss. Modersohn-Becker’s art is a language which releases rather than compresses meaning, revealing the other side of a reality which might have become over-determined and therefore alienated from the wholeness of possibilities which includes the uncanny and the ambivalent. Modersohn-Becker looks again at fruit, looks beyond the immediacy of their habitual visual impression and looks to their weight, their more compelling, more invisible aspect. She does not excavate or correct this invisibility, rather she preserves it, giving it back to the observer in colour (Rilke says she balances its weight with colour). The fruit appears therefore as something new, inexhaustible and pregnant with the unity and fullness of the comprehensible and the incomprehensible. The non-appropriating gaze of the artist is applied to her human subjects too, and women and children are comprehended not by their familiar appearances but by the new artistic forms created for them (‘getrieben in die Formen ihres Daseins’: 79) which express their invisible worlds and preserve the indeterminacy of this inwardness. Modersohn-Becker gives these figures back in the ‘Formen ihres Daseins’, and important here is the ‘ihres’, for the artist does not impose form and name on them, rather she speaks their existence as their own, their unreachable, irreducible own constituted within themselves (‘von innen her’: 78), and not hers. Modersohn-Becker approaches her subjects as instances of an abyss of meaning.

Modersohn-Becker’s undressing for her self-portrait re-enacts this departure from the old names and structures which inhibit an authentic confrontation with self and world. She regards herself as she regards fruit and the other objects of the world – as naked, uninterpreted and wondrous. She shifts outside her sense of self and towards death and its strangeness where things are released from previous identifications and take on the different, more porous existence of ‘Dasein’, signified by ‘dies ist’ (84). This is the Rilkean sense of being as a relation between self and other and life and death, the artist moving towards death as she casts off the limitedness of her desires and her self-possession, entering the mirror-space of art where she can regard herself from a perspective which transcends the conventionally subjective. Modersohn-Becker has moved into a more universal plane of circulation now that she can say that she simply ‘is’, and Rilke calls this ‘heilig’ (87). The difference between a trapped subjectivity

25 Rilke’s Die weiße Fürstin identifies the artistic gaze as one which expresses death within life, for it is an unprejudiced gaze which does not impose order on paradox, but offers the paradox as it is: Sieh, so ist Tod im Leben. Beides läuft
and an artistically transformed, Rilkean perspective is the difference between the underwhelming and the overwhelming (infinite) life.

I would like to look more closely now at the nature of Modersohn-Becker’s fruits and her nude self-portraits as Rilke sees them. The key images in the lines from the *Requiem* quoted above are the fruit and the mirror, for they represent the kind of art Rilke himself is trying to achieve. I will come back to the relevance of fruit for the ‘death of one’s own’, and for now I will concentrate on Modersohn-Becker’s applying to herself through the mirror the gaze she applies to the fruit so that the self-portrait she produces is ‘wie eine Frucht’ (80). Rilke is connecting Modersohn-Becker’s and Cézanne’s fruit here. He writes to Clara of Cézanne’s reworking of fruits into estranged, introverted, inedible phenomena: ‘Bei Cézanne hört ihre Eßbarkeit überhaupt auf, so sehr dinghaft wirklich werden sie, so einfach unvertilgbar in ihrer eigensinnigen Vorhandenheit’ (8.10.1907, *Cézanne*, p. 20). And of Cézanne’s approach to his objects, Rilke writes: ‘Man malte: ich liebe dieses hier; statt zu malen: hier ist es’ (13.10.1907, *Cézanne*, p. 29). The representation of fruit in Modersohn-Becker’s and Cézanne’s work takes the fruit out of any prior association the observer has made with it. Like the women and children who are ‘getrieben in die Formen ihres Daseins’ (79), the fruit in Modersohn-Becker’s and Cézanne’s work does not have subjectivity painted into it.

The apples stand in their own space, their self-definition, outside the human desire to consume them, and Modersohn-Becker’s fruit is seen ‘von innen her’ (78), independent...

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26 Petzet notes that whilst standing before Cézanne’s paintings with Clara Modersohn-Becker had said that Cézanne seemed to her ‘wie ein großer Bruder’ (Clara’s oral witness) (1957, p. 102).

27 Of *Stilleben mit Georgienstrauß* (1907, Oil on canvas, 46 x 55cm. Privately owned) Uhde-Stahl writes that the observer must retract personal associations so that the traditional division between picture and observing subject is overcome: ‘Auf dem Weg durch das Bild wird der Betrachter immer wieder zurückgewiesen. Er muß seine persönlichen Raumassoziationen zurücknehmen und sich auf eine „objektive“ Weise mit dem Bild verbinden, um ihm nahezukommen. Die herkömmliche Trennung zwischen Bild und Betrachter wird dabei aufgehoben, der Betrachter in den Bildprozeß einbezogen. Er wird schließlich dieses Prozesses bewußt und erfährt somit eine Verwandlung und einer [sic] Erweiterung seines Werkbesitzes. Ähnliche Prozesse vollziehen sich auch beim Betrachten von Werken der Maler Braque, Klee, Baumeister, Rothko and Hartung – um nur wenige zu nennen’ (1990, p. 87).

Rilke records his thoughts on Modersohn-Becker’s paintings: ‘Man staunt und erkennt mitten im Staunen und lebt, eh man’s noch weiß, das Leben von hundert Dingen, tritt in ihre Zusammenhänge, hat ihr Vertrauen und erwiedert es’ (3.11.1908, *Nádherny*, p. 89). Here he emphasises the entry into the world of things which is preceded by an exit from the limited scope of the subject.
of the possessive interpretations imposed on it from outside. The idea in the *Requiem* of the artist weighing the object with colour is also related to Cézanne. It is taken from a comment Mathilde Vollmoeller made to Rilke during a visit to the *Salon* in Paris. Rilke quotes Vollmoeller in a letter:

Und dann verglichen wir artistische Sachen, die er in Paris unter dem Umgang mit anderen gemacht haben mochte, mit seinen eigensten, in Bezug auf die Farbe. In den ersten war die Farbe etwas für sich; später nimmt er sie irgendwie, persönlich, wie kein Mensch noch Farbe genommen hat, nur um das Ding damit zu machen. Die Farbe geht völlig auf in dessen Verwirklichung; es bleibt kein Rest. Und Fräulein V. sagte sehr bezeichnend: “Es ist wie auf eine Waage gelegt: das Ding hier, und dort die Farbe; nie mehr, nie weniger, als das Gleichgewicht erfordert. Das kann viel oder wenig sein: je nachdem, aber es ist genau, was dem Gegenstand entspricht.“ (to Clara, 12.10.07, *Cézanne*, p. 27)

The *Requiem* and Vollmoeller’s comment show that an art has been achieved in which the weight of the object in its physical reality has been perfectly balanced with the colour of the aesthetic world. Colour has become a function of the object so that it is the thing itself which is art and not just its overlaying with colour which actually might distract from it. The object loses its conventional weightedness towards significations in the real world and takes on a painterliness which defamiliarises, or transforms, it. Art estranges the object from its conventional context and puts it into its own world where it can be a ‘thing in itself’ (recalling Rilke’s characterisation of the Rodin sculpture: ‘es scheint seine Gerechtigkeit in sich zu tragen’, *Rodin*, p. 157). Rilke is focusing his poetics on the expression – in fact the creation – of a thingly world in art which reveals to its audience the possibility of an infinite within the here and now of the imagination. In the letters on Cézanne the weighing of colour is mentioned again:

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28 Uhde-Stahl describes the function of colour in *Stilleben mit Tonkrug, Pfingstrosen und Apfelsinen* (1906, Oil on canvas, 61 x 49.5cm. Privately owned), saying that on the one hand the oranges have a realistic, tangible surface, and on the other they possess a peculiar ambivalence in their status as pure, spherical objects contained by their own colour and creating their own effect. This, says Uhde-Stahl, is where Modersohn-Becker’s art borders on the abstract (1990, p. 86).


30 Modersohn-Becker herself declared that her ambition was to paint ‘The thing in itself – in the right mood’ (‘Das Ding an sich – in Stimmung’, quoted by Otto Modersohn in Hetsch, 1932, p. 16). Uhde-Stahl comments on the self-contained world of Modersohn-Becker’s painted objects. *Of Stilleben mit Georgienstrasse* (1906, Oil on canvas, 61 x 49.5cm. Privately owned) she says that the painting gives out a self-defining presence: ‘atmet, ausgehend vom Keramikteller, eine neue sinnliche Fülle, eine dingliche Präsenz, die ihre Kraft aus sich heraus bezieht. Die Dinge sprechen sich in ihrem stillen Sein selbst aus’ (1990, p. 87).
The balance of colour is again associated with a pure art which creates the new, authentic ‘existence’ of the object outside the old preconceptions held by the subject and without simply reproducing reality. Rilke associates this new positioning of the subject with the image of fruit. He writes to Dr. Heygrodt of Cézanne positioning himself at the centre of his work, refraining from standing before his objects as a subject who simply receives and processes, and thereby appropriates, them, and of this perspective as the untouched, but exposed, flesh of a fruit:


And in a letter to Sophie Giauque Rilke writes of a possible poetic equivalent to her art — the haiku — in which emotion is balanced in its absorption in images, and in which the visible world is picked like ripe fruit and made weightless and invisible:

l’art de faire cette pilule où entrent des éléments disparates réunis par l’événement, par l’émotion qu’il provoque, mais à la condition que cette émotion soit tout à fait résorbée par le simple bonheur des images. Le visible est pris d’une main sûre, il est cueilli comme un fruit mûr, mais il ne pèse point, car à peine posé, il se voit forcé de signifier l’invisible. (26.11.1925, Briefe II, pp. 489-90)

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31 From Cézanne she derived the idea that space depicted should be severely constructed and that arrangement of picture surface should be well balanced. See Busch (1981) and Uhde-Stahl (1990) for discussions of Modersohn-Becker’s work. See also Perry: ‘In Cézanne’s still lifes she found a new expression of form which had abandoned an impressionist emphasis on atmosphere and transitory impression, in favour of a clear composition’ (1979, p. 119). Modersohn-Becker writes in her journal that beauty results from the strength ‘with which an object is recorded’: ‘Die Stärke, mit der ein Gegenstand erfaßt wird (Stilleben, Porträts oder Phantasiegebilde), das ist die Schönheit in der Kunst’ (Paris 1905, Modersohn-Becker, p. 404).
The signification of fruit for Rilke in both these letters is clearly pointing towards the moment of transformation into an equilibrium and an otherness which is beyond the subjective grasp of both desire and the mind.

Balance and equanimity between subject and object and reality and unreality are the qualities of the work of art Rilke celebrates. On the subject of this equanimity, Rilke mentions later in the *Requiem* the 'Schwere, wie sie nie im Jenseits/beruhigter Bilder ist' (94). The world of images is the transformed, rested world in which the burden of reality and all its associations with literality are lifted and objects can discover the other side of themselves, their many possibilities of meaning. Equanimity is the balance of relation with otherness within 'das Ganze'. Within this balanced whole 'das Schwere', the limited, dead weight of the inarticulate and literal, is transformed into porousness and openness in art.

In the previous chapters I identified 'das Schwere' as the burden of death which Rilke is determined to integrate and thereby transform. This confrontation with death in poetry is the attempt to balance the burden in words in the same way that Modersohn-Becker equalises the reality of her objects in colour. The confrontation with the weightiness of death's negative charge and the confrontation with the oppressiveness of common and literal definitions of reality undertake the same project of poetic transformation. In other words, and as also argued previously, 'das Schwere' is the struggle for a new language, the writing and creating on the boundaries of pre-established definition and meaning, a struggle dramatised in *Requiem für Wolf Graf von Kalckreuth*, a poem for a failed poet:

> Was hast du nicht gewartet, daß die Schwere ganz unerträglich wird: da schlägt sie um und ist so schwer, weil sie so echt ist. (SW I, p. 660: 31)

The achieved work of art produces something which has overcome the pressure of its everyday associations. The balancing of the real and the unreal, of old, dominant language and new, original language, also comes under the title of the 'Bezug'.

32 Eckel says that Rodin and Cézanne offer 'ein gewisses Autonom-Werden der Materialien - hier der Bewegungen und Gebärden, dort der Farben' which is very modern. Eckel also mentions 'Gleichgewicht' where a transposition occurs when movements and colours balance and contradictions in the work are resolved, citing Rilke's praise of Cézanne that where colours are held in balance and not projected forwards ('nirgends herausstehen und vordrängen') the image rests in itself ('diese ruhige, gleichsam samtene Luft', to Clara, 24.10.07, *Cézanne*, p. 46) (1994, pp. 108-9).
discussed in previous chapters. Modersohn-Becker expands the significance of her fruits by placing them outside the specificity and restriction of their conventional associations. In Rilke’s idea of art the real and specific is always remade into the more universal image.

Rilke identifies Modersohn-Becker’s art with the programme of ‘Sachlichkeit’ he derived from Cézanne (to Clara, 13.10.1907, Cézanne, p. 29), seeing in Modersohn-Becker’s nude self-portraits how she saw herself as fruit. Torgersen characterises these paintings as ‘a stripping away of the social self virtually unprecedented among female artists’ (1998, p. 191) and recognises in one particular self-portrait, Selbstbildnis als Halbakt mit Bernsteinkette (see appendix 2), the fruit Rilke is alluding to in the Requiem. Torgersen sees it in the inward, impersonal life force contained within the painting, and he focuses on the eyes which do not look out of the picture: ‘Like the body, like fruit, they simply and radiantly are’. Rilke imagines Modersohn-Becker stepping before the mirror and unpeeling herself like fruit, becoming more and more ‘besitzlos’ (86) as her gaze seeks herself without the curiosity of the ulterior motive, and as she begins relinquishment and de-personalisation:

ließest dich hinein
bis auf dein Schauen; das blieb groß davor
und sagte nicht: das bin ich; nein: dies ist.
So ohne Neugier war zuletzt dein Schauen
und so besitzlos, von so wahrer Armut,
daß es dich selbst nicht mehr begehrt: heilig. (82)\(^3\)

\(^3\) He also says; ‘It is chiefly in the broad modeling of cheeks, neck, hands and arms, especially breasts with various darker tones, all containing an element of red or pink, that the sense of flesh as fruit is summoned and the painting comes to resemble most markedly some of the still lifes of fruit that Modersohn-Becker was painting at the same time. The bright pure red of the lower lip, answered more mutedly in cheeks and nipples, gives the whole a touch of the luscious that is unquestionably erotic but, unlike Manet’s Olympia or even a Matisse odalisque, in a pure, impersonal, asocial way’ (p. 192).


At the artist’s colony in Worpswede Rilke was captivated by Modersohn-Becker’s and Clara’s manner of looking, and he singles out Modersohn-Becker’s eyes: ‘Wieviel lerne ich im Schauen dieser beiden Mädchen, besonders der blonden Malerin, die so braune schauende Augen hat!’ (16.9.1900, ‘Das Schmagendorfer Tagebuch’, TF, p. 238). In ‘Die Fensterrose’ (NG I, SW I, p. 501), ‘Der Panther’ (NG I, SW I, p. 505), ‘Archaischer Torso Apollo’ (NG II, SW I, p. 557) and ‘Schwarze Katze’ (NG II, SW I, p. 595) eye contact is intense, perhaps shocking, transformative but never informative. The eye as literary motif is present in all its charge and paradox in Rilke’s poetry. Eyes are not divine places of insight into the human or world soul or into some fundamental matrix of existence. Eyes do not unriddle but create and transform. They are places of process. The ‘Blick’ is the place and instance of looking for its own sake. The Rilkean figures engaged in ‘Blick’ and ‘Schauen’ experience the inflation and endless inception of their gaze. This infinite sight relinquishes (‘lassen’) its objects for its own sake – that it may go on seeing and seeing. The desire to relinquish and be relinquished in Rilke’s work is always a desire to go on
She regards herself as fruit because she puts herself beyond her own grasp and her need to be within, and to possess, herself as a subject. In referring to herself in the third person she exceeds subjectivity. She does not covet herself, just as the painterly fruits she and Cézanne produce are also placed beyond coveting (her gaze no longer 'desires' herself). Rilke insists that this portrait is an example of supreme art because it is art as fruit, just as Cézanne's apples are fruit as art, and this leads back to the previous chapter's discussion of the conflation of the natural and aesthetic realms and fruit as the absolute work of art. (I will come back to the Requiem's motif of fruit as 'der eigene Tod' made in the work of art later.) Fruit represents the relation to 'das Ganze', and as Modersohn-Becker becomes fruit in the fruit of her work of art she transforms her human limitations, exceeds her personal sphere and enters into the otherness of a universal unity which Rilke calls 'holy' (87). It is worth looking to Torgersen here, who finds in Rilke's introduction to his Worpswede monograph the link between art and nature in Rilke's thinking – mystery, or, as this thesis has been calling it, 'otherness'.

seeing, to see beyond the conventional demarcations of sight. See also 'Das Einhorn' in which the gaze does not end with the literal confrontation of the object: 'Doch seine Blicke, die kein Ding begrenzte/warfen sich Bilder in den Raum/und schlossen einen blauen Sagenkreis' (NG, SW I, pp. 506-7).

35 'From this the poem springs: that we live in a place/That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves' ('Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction IV', Wallace Stevens, Collected Poems, p. 383).

36 The words 'ohne Neugier' (85) imply that Modersohn-Becker's portrait is also devoid of erotic curiosity. Rilke idealises this portrait because it abstains from the carnal coveting he felt hindered the production of art and particularly in Modersohn-Becker's case drew her into a pregnancy which cut short her artistic life. The monkish asceticism of the artist conveyed in these lines implies that Modersohn-Becker was wrong to go back to behaving like a normal woman. The Requiem also reminds Modersohn-Becker later that artists must transform their love: 'und Künstler ahnen manchmal in der Arbeit/daß sie verwandeln müssen, wo sie lieben' (243). On the other hand Rilke criticises the lack of sensuousness in the life of the religious ascetic elsewhere, and even says it produces hard, arid, 'cowardly fruit' (Testament, p. 26).

37 The disappearance of the name in sonnet I, 13 ('Wird euch langsam namenlos im Munde?', SW I, p. 739) gives rise to the taste of fruit, for in the mouth the apple breaks its skin and gives way to this different, sensory perception. For compares the loss of the name with Modersohn-Becker's impersonalisation in the Requiem: 'ihre eigene Person hat sich in die eigene Schöpfungsfigur der Frucht verwandelt' (1998, p. 66). The First Elegy describes how the newly dead must adapt to the otherness of death by relinquishing the significations they are accustomed to and even their own names which will be of no use to them in the impersonal, transcendent realm of death ('den eigenen Namen/gezulassen', SW I, p. 688: 74). Modersohn-Becker had written to Rilke of her new self-confidence in her art which was grounded in a certain degree of reduction in her self-comprehension so that her 'Ich' had become distinct from the name 'Modersohn-Becker Becker': 'und nun weiß ich gar nicht, wie ich mich unterschreiben soll. Ich bin nicht Modersohn und ich bin auch nicht mehr Modersohn-Becker Becker: Ich bin Ich, und hoffe es immer mehr zu werden' (17.2.06, Modersohn-Becker, p. 434).

When Modersohn-Becker announces that she is returning to Worpswede Rilke encourages her to sustain this quest to become ever more herself which he calls 'das Außerste', and this suggests the poetic image of the Requiem which takes the self to the extremity of its being, lending it the permanence of art: 'Ihr Leben hat Kräfte zu ersetzen und nachzuholen und zu sich selbst zu kommen um jeden Preis [...] daß Sie mutig tragen und die Möglichkeit errungen haben, innerhalb des Bestehenden alle Freiheit zu finden, die das in Ihnen, was nicht untergehen darf nötig hat, um das Außerste zu werden, was es werden kann' (to Paula Modersohn-Becker, 17.3.1907, Briefe 1906-07, p. 225).
Torgersen refers to Rilke's discussion of the alienation from nature in adulthood in his essay *Worpswede*, and paraphrases Rilke on the subject of adults:

Most, finally, find their way forward to human society — and the ones who do not, who instead are determined to find their way back to that lost childhood connection to nature, are artists. That landscape painting addresses nature most directly allows Rilke to call it the most vital painting of the day, and to make in passing the fascinating suggestion that to paint a portrait is to treat a face, as a landscape — that the appeal of Rembrandt's portraits is that they treat faces as landscapes. (This is an assertion worth recalling when, in the *Requiem*, Rilke describes Modersohn-Becker as having portrayed her body as fruit in a still life.) The beauty of nature was its "sublime indifference" and so was, or ought to be, the essence of beauty in art: impenetrable, irreducibly mysterious. Near the end of his introduction he encapsulates his thought on art and artists: "The role of the artist is to — love the mystery. That is what all art is: love, that has poured itself over mysteries — and that is what all works of art are, mysteries, surrounded, adorned, engulfed by love." (1998, pp. 131-2, cf. *Worpswede*, p. 33)^^

Torgersen does indeed capture here the spirit of Modersohn-Becker's portrait as Rilke sees it. Fruit is identified in the *Requiem* with landscape ("Und Früchte will ich kaufen, Früchte, drin/das Land noch einmal ist, bis an den Himmel": 72) and Modersohn-Becker regards her body as one might an incomprehensible, 'irreducibly mysterious' landscape or manifestation of nature. It is actually in the recognition of difference and the inapprobriable through art that the human overcomes her alienation from nature.

Mirror space in Rilke's work represents the aesthetic space in which the new relation with otherness is entered into. Modersohn-Becker lets herself into the mirror ("ließt dich hinein": 82) and this is the same translation to a different plane as that which is expressed in the blood imagery and in 'und warst dabei, jeglichen Saft in dir/so umzusetzen in ein starkes Dasein' (121). In 'Dame vor dem Spiegel' a similar transformation is presented through metaphors of flowing and pouring, linking it to the figure of circulation in the *Requiem* and the dissolution and unfamiliar reconvening of memory and language in the poetic blood:

Wie in einem Schlafrunk Spezerein
läßt sie leise in dem flüssigklaren
Spiegel ihr ermüdetes Gebaren;
und sie tut ihr Lächeln ganz hinein.

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38 It is important to note that this love is a transformative love and not the love which Rilke codes banal and emotional in his commentary on Cézanne to Clara: 'die Liebe bleibt außerhalb der Arbeit' (13.10.1907, *Cézanne*, p. 29).
The liquid element symbolises the self-dissolution which characterises Modersohn-Becker’s and Eurydice’s self-transformation and also the death of the beloved in ‘Tod der Geliebten’ (‘leis aus seinen Augen ausgelöst’, SW I, p. 561). It is this rehearsing, or ‘trying out’, of death (‘und tastete es ab für ihre Füße’, SW I, p. 562) in art which Rilke believes is the cultivation of the ‘death of one’s own’. Modersohn-Becker was preparing her own death in her artistic life, venturing beyond the boundaries of conventional human experience and self-experience, giving herself over to the strangeness of death by undoing herself in the mirror. She undergoes a metaphorical death that she might be an artist, recalling Rilke’s words: ‘Denn wer, wenn er einen wahrhaften Kampf auf sich nimmt, hat nicht auch die verschwiegene heilige Freudigkeit, in ihm unterzugehen’ (19.2.1922, Sizzo, p. 22).  

Modersohn-Becker’s distance from herself in her artist’s gaze is described as her dwelling within a mirror-space of unreachable, interior depth and otherness: ‘tief hinein/und fort von allem’ (89). In this gaze she transcends all personal preconception and appropriation and sees herself into an abyss. This interiority is the ‘In-sich-Sein’ or ‘Ding-In-Sich’ which conditions the object newly made in poetic language and art and given to its new circulation in an infinite, unfamiliar unreality. In ‘O Dieses ist das See: ‘A writer must die every day he lives, be reborn, as it is said in the Burial Service, an incorruptible self, that self opposite of all that he has named ‘himself’’ (The Autobiography of William Butler Yeats, p. 307). See also the poem ‘Au fond du miroir’ in which the reflected image belongs to the realm of death in its strange, real unreality (1924, SW II, 642-3). Torgersen observes that in the Requiem the world seen in reflections, a Rilkean motif, becomes a metaphor for an inner world of essences, ‘the immaculate other world of art’ (1998, p. 191).

Albert-Lasard elaborates on this mirroring distance as the transformation of the real into image, saying that ‘in Spiegelungen leben’ is an expression Rilkes repeatedly used, and arguing that in the mirror the human being and the image merge (1952, p. 111). See also: ‘Einige scheinen in euch [mirrors] gegangen’ (SO II, 3, SW I, p. 752).  

The artist’s estrangement in the Requiem is depicted in this image of mirror-space and also in the image of a strip of land:

so wenig kann einer von uns die Frau
anrufen, die uns nicht mehr sieht und die
auf einem schmalen Streifen ihres Daseins
wie durch ein Wunder fortgeht, ohne Unfall. (227)

As Catling argues, this strip of land is ‘an unstable place of change and transition, where one world ends and another begins’ (1986, p. 124). The narrow path which constitutes the border between the worlds of life and art represents the same spatial extremity as the bow of the ship extending into the wind (another symbol of transformation). Catling emphasises that the ‘Streifen’ is a precarious edge and that Rilke celebrates here the female’s ability to tread a balance between life and art. (This section of the Requiem refers to an actual incident narrated by Clara who recalls Otto Modersohn’s account of a stormy day on the North Sea when Modersohn-Becker had walked dangerously out to the end of a jetty: ‘Modersohn-Becker ging auf eine Mole hinaus, ohne sich zurückhalten zu lassen, trotzdem die Mole bei sehr hohem Wellengang kaum aus den Fluten herausassah’ (Hetsch, 1932, p. 46). She had come back unscathed – ‘ohne
Tier, das es nicht gibt' (SO II, 4, SW I, p. 753) the story of the engendering and cultivation of the unreal unicorn is told as the story of a different reality created in art and imaged in mirror-space. The unicorn exists in the collective imagination which gives it the status of ‘ein reines Tier’, just as Modersohn-Becker’s imaginatively transformed self is called ‘heilig’. The ‘pure’ or ‘holy’ existence is simply another possibility of existence in Rilke’s work, one which lies outside the demands and conventions of the real, and which is fed by the imagination’s exploration of the impossible: ‘Sie nährten es mit keinem Korn,/nur immer mit der Möglichkeit, es sei’. Believers in the unicorn can say ‘es sei’, and this subjunctive performs the same transformation as ‘dies ist’ (84), for it gives the unicorn the more authentic ‘Dasein’ of an artistic creation. The unicorn ‘war im Silber-Spiegel’ in the reflected space of a different reality, and it was also ‘in ihr’, in the virgin who has internalised this unreal reality until it has become part of her own, her ‘Blut, Blick und Gebärde’ (Malte, p. 725). The image in the infinite mirror-space of art cannot be exhausted in description or definition. It is characterised by the non-finalisation of ‘das Werk’, the transformative work Rilke describes in the letter to Mimi Romanelli as ‘le travail long, sans fin, sans sort’ (7.12.07, Briefe I, 1950, p. 229). The artistic mirror-world frees the artist from the constrictedness of the ‘real’, ‘fated’ perspective. The real space in front of the mirror

Unfall) As throughout the Requiem Rilke urges Modersohn-Becker’s ghost even beyond this boundary and into the ‘fort von allem’, the transcendent space of the mirror, I think this section celebrates not woman’s ability to balance life and art but, more ambitiously, her ability to get to the point of transformation, to reach that very difficult extremity which, having got beyond the scope of everyday life, is the aesthetic summit of her existence. The female artist has arrived at this extreme and is about to be taken up into the wind and into the mirror. Eurydice in ‘Orpheus. Eurydike. Hermes’ also treads this path towards the transformation of death (‘erschien des einen Weges blasser Streifen’; ‘Er stand und sah/wie auf dem Streifen eines Wiesenpfades [...]’, NG, SW I, p. 545: 89). Neither Modersohn-Becker nor Eurydice can be recalled, and the ‘die uns nicht mehr sieht’ of the Requiem is echoed in Eurydice’s myopic non-recognition of Orpheus: ‘Fern, aber dunkel, vor dem klaren Ausgang/stand irgend jemand, dessen Angesicht/nicht zu erkennen war’ (SW I, p. 545: 87).

Rilke declares in a letter that Modersohn-Becker is ‘pure’, and this belief in the purity of the artistic transformation becomes an attempt to fix the ‘pure’ or ‘holy’ poetic image of the alien in the Requiem: ‘Ah, wie stürzt das alles hin und voraus mit der Herzhaftigkeit des Bergbachs, und wie kommt es rein, rein unter der Stelle hervor, auf die zuerst fremdes Vorverhältnis des Todes fiel’ (copy of a letter to Kurt Becker in a letter to Clara dated Paris, Easter Monday, 1913, Briefe 1907-1914, p. 285).

Lawrence Ryan evokes the other unicorn, ‘Das Einhorn’ (NG I, SW I, pp. 506-7), as a metaphorical realisation which transcends the ineradicable dissonances of the ‘real’ world. As the unicorn approaches the saint’s prayer falls away and there is ‘no more protection from that which surpasses understanding’. Ryan describes the unicorn’s white body as ‘other-worldly’ and an ‘incarnation of purity’ (2001, p. 49). He goes on to argue that the unicorn is a concretisation of a ‘love of things intangible that cannot be substantiated’ (p. 50).

Rilke has in mind here the tapestry ‘La Dame à la Licorne’ which is in Musée de Cluny, Paris. For a pictorial reproduction and a commentary see Erlande (1989).

In ‘O schöner Glanz des scheuen Spiegelbilds!’ the mirror sets up an aesthetic space which grants a vision of an infinite in the ‘unpronounceable’ or ‘indescribable’: ‘Oh tritt, Geliebte, vor das klare Glas/auf das du seist. Daß zwischen dir und dir/die Spannung sich erneue und das Maß/für das, was unaussprechlich ist in ihr’ (‘Drei Gedichte aus dem Umkreis: Spiegelungen I’, 1924, SW II, p. 181).
is the space of conventionally defined reality, dead metaphor and ‘Schicksal’ (99), and
the *Eighth Elegy* characterises ‘fate’ as an existence which is not taken up into relation
with the whole, remaining trapped in one-sidedness and opposition: ‘Dieses heißt
Later in the *Requiem*, when Modersohn-Becker is criticised for abandoning her artistic
perspective, she is described as being whole in front of and opposite the mirror: ‘Nun
war das alles *Du* und ganz *davor*’ (178). When she is successful Modersohn-Becker
makes an image of herself which preserves the relation to death in which death is the
unfamiliar, the indefinable, the impersonal, the absent. Modersohn-Becker creates a
reflection in her art, a self-doubling which sets up a tension or a balance (‘Daß zwischen
dir und dir/die Spannung sich erneue’, ‘O schöner Glanz des scheuen Spiegelbilds!’,
‘Drei Gedichte aus dem Umkreis: Spiegelungen I’, 1924, *SW* II, p. 181), between the
real world and an unreal world, so that she can gaze at her departed self, the possibility
of her unreality and inaccessibility, and thereby achieve completion (‘Sie müssen
doppelt sein, dann sind sie ganz’, ‘O schöner Glanz des scheuen Spiegelbilds!’).46 By
superseding the ego she preserves her unfathomable being.47 To put it in the words of
663: 138), for she has wrested her death away from ‘Schicksal’, the predictable,
impersonal existence of compromise and convention which does not permit new
language, and converted it into poetic image, the language which is new and excessive
or limitless in meaning (‘wie Schicksal in die Verse eingeht/und nicht zurückerkommt,

Like Eurydice, Modersohn-Becker has accomplished namelessness and
unlimitedness ‘tief hinein’ in the inner, intangible, non-literal mirror-space of art. She
has performed a transformation which the *Requiem* describes as ‘reflection’:

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46 See Paul Celan’s ‘Meridian’ speech: ‘Vielleicht – ich frage nur –, vielleicht geht die Dichtung, wie die
Kunst, mit einem selbstvergessenen Ich zu jenem Unheimlichen und Fremden, und setzt sich – doch wo?
47 See:

*Spiegel: noch nie hat man wissend beschrieben,
was ihr in eurem Wesen seid.
[...]
durch eure Unbetretbarkeit.
Manchmal seid ihr voll Malerei. (SO II, 3, SW I, p. 752)

Here the mirror is the indescribable, unapproachable space of art (specifically painting, which links this
sonnet to Modersohn-Becker’s self-portrait in the *Requiem*).
48 See also Konrad who says of *Requiem für eine Freundin* that the ‘I’ extinguishes itself and its ‘fate’ in
the task of poetic transformation, and of *Requiem für Wolf Graf von Kalckreuth*: ‘Schicksal des Dichters
Wir wandeln dieses um; es ist nicht hier, wir spiegeln es herein aus unserm Sein, sobald wir es erkennen. (10)

The mirror shows us ourselves, putting that which can only be experienced from the inside on the outside. It transforms familiar, recognisable experience, sending it out beyond that recognition. Later the *Requiem* describes this transformation into the unrecognisable again:

Wenn irgendwo ein Kindgewesensein
tief in mir aufsteigt, das ich noch nicht kenne, vielleicht das reinste Kindsein meiner Kindheit: ich wills nicht wissen. Einen Engel will ich daraus bilden (205)

Here the desire is to preserve the strangeness of the insight (this is also found in *Requiem für Wolf Graf von Kalckreuth*: 'trugst du sie, sie, die du nicht erkannt hast', SWI, p. 30: 28): 'ich wills nicht wissen'. Transformation into art is desired over a sickly attachment to life. The mirror is an ambiguous space which sends experience back to the subject only after it has already left her. It comes back to her in its disappearance ('es ist nicht hier': 11), reconstituted in relation to the wholeness of being ('Sein') which places things beyond the full grasp of the reality which is 'here'. As Keith-Smith points out, Modersohn-Becker's self-portraits using the mirror bring together for Rilke the self and the still life (1990, p. 93), and this is the first person's self-reflection.
into the third person. It is part of Rilke's programme of 'sachliches Sagen' which outgrows the sentimentality and subjectivity of the Stundenbuch, and renders objects transcendent in the Rilkean sense of emancipated and infinitely open - not in the Christian sense of eternal. The Rilkean artistic transformation is grounded in the other-sidedness and absence which are death, and Modersohn-Becker's fruit and mirror externalise her and take her up into the space of death, transforming her from present, physical being into unreal image.\(^{51}\)

3.3 The Death Seed

Modersohn-Becker cultivates the fruit of her death in her portraits and paintings,\(^{52}\) and a section of the Requiem does bulge with fruit and the transformation of 'Schwere' into newness and otherness. That Modersohn-Becker is depicted as balancing 'Schwere' with colour indicates her integration of 'Schwere' as part of the process of transformation. The 'burden' of the fruit, as argued above, is its weightedness towards the literal world and conventional definition, but it is also the burden of death which is within all transient objects. Modersohn-Becker's transformation of fruit in her paintings into an image beyond the tangible and the comprehensible is a transformation out of the dictates and compulsions of real and transient life (the need to eat) and into an existence independent of death (Rilke calls the transformation the 'bis ins Unzerstorbare hinein gesteigerte Wirklichkeit', to Clara 9.10.1907, Cézanne, p. 21). Yet to reach this state a metaphorical death must take place - the fruit must be drawn out of all its previous association and identity. The 'Schwere' of death must be borne in order to proceed to the world of art which transcends death by enacting it.

The 'vollen Früchte' (74), heavy and ripe for death, are, for Rilke, an image of 'den eigenen Tod' swelling within the artist who has mastered transformation, as is the self-portrait which sees the self as fruit. Modersohn-Becker, in her artistic prime, is pregnant with the Eurydicean death of her own:

\(^{51}\) Por compares Modersohn-Becker's transformation to the transformations of the Neue Gedichte from physical object into poetic image of the imagination. He gives the example of Archaischer Torso Apollos in which the stone torso becomes a 'Licht-Gestalt', drawing its observer into the created world (1998, p. 67). See chapter 2 for a closer examination of this transformation.

\(^{52}\) Modersohn-Becker was a Rilkean artist of death in that she was reconciled to her own death and believed she would be ready for death if she could fulfil herself as an artist. She wrote in her journal: 'Ich weiß, ich werde nicht sehr lange leben. Aber ist das denn traurig? Ist ein Fest schöner, weil es länger ist? Und mein Leben ist ein Fest. Meine Sinneswahrnehmungen werden feiner, als ob ich in den wenigen Jahren, die mir geboten sein werden, alles, alles noch aufnehmen sollte. [...] und wenn ich drei gute Bilder gemalt habe, dann will ich gern scheiden mit Blumen in den Händen und im Haar' (26.7.1900, Modersohn-Becker, p. 230).
Und ihr Gestorbensein
erfüllte sie wie Fülle.
Wie eine Frucht von Süßigkeit und Dunkel,
so war sie voll von ihrem großen Tode,
der also neu war, daß sie nichts begriff. (SW I, p. 544: 63)

The innerness of this death is associated often in Rilke’s work with the internal sweetness of fruit. In ‘Herr: wir sind ärmer denn die armen Tiere’ the ‘death of one’s own’ growing within is permeated with a ripe sweetness (‘Wir stehn in deinem Garten Jahr und Jahr/und sind die Bäume, süßen Tod zu tragen’, SW I, p. 348) and in ‘Der Tod des Dichters’ the tender ‘Innenseite’ of the death-fruit is exposed, just as Modersohn-Becker unpeels herself for her portrait and paints her subjects ‘von innen her’ (78):

und seine Maske, die nun bang verstirbt,
ist zart und offen wie die Innenseite
von einer Frucht, die an der Luft verdürbt. (NG, SW I, p. 496)

In the Requiem Rilke declares that the death internal to Modersohn-Becker was full of the sweet flavour of authentic, artistic inwardness before she turned against it: ‘du: die schon innen in den Sinnen süß war’ (141). The imagery of fruit and pregnancy in the Requiem culminates in the embryonic seed, which I will return to.

Within her art, within mirror and fruit, Modersohn-Becker is within her own death, but as she steps outside the poetic image of self and world she has created and gravitates towards conventional reality again she is undoing the work of art and the work of her death, ravaging her fruit, and exiting the higher circulation and the mirror. Rilke declares that Modersohn-Becker is a fallen mirror image (‘Laß uns zusammen klagen, daß dich einer/aus deinem Spiegel nahm’: 117) and then depicts this shattered image as cannibalism and a violation of the blood, the body turning against itself and its death sadistically (I will return to the aspect of cannibalism shortly). Modersohn-Becker physically abuses her blood, driving it out of its sublimation in art and back into the channels of its entrapment within reality.

Du triebst es an, du stießt es nach vorn,
du zerrst es zur Feuerstelle, wie
man eine Herde Tiere zerrt zum Opfer; (149)

The blood returns from art and 'den eigenen Tod' and enters the placenta in order to
supply the other embryo, the real pregnancy over the metaphorical one. The image of
the lesser circulation of the body ('des Leibes kleinen Kreislauf': 145) recalls 'der
kleine Tod' (SB, SW I, p. 347):

Weißt du, wie dein Blut
aus einem Kreisen ohnegleichen zögernd
und ungern wiederkam, da du es abriefst?
Wie es verwirrt des Leibes kleinen Kreislauf
noch einmal aufnahm; wie es voller Mißtraun
und Staunen eintrat in den Mutterkuchen. (142)

The circulation of motherhood is portrayed as small in relation to the production of a
work of art. The physical imagery of the destruction of Modersohn-Becker's death
continues into self-fragmentation:

da du gingst du hin
und brachst in Brocken dich aus dem Gesetz
mühsam heraus, weil du dich brauchtest. (130)

Modersohn-Becker's self-expulsion from the poetic world is depicted as an act of
vandalism on the work of art, on its perfection and its connectedness to 'das Ganze' or
'das Gesetz'. She breaks herself in pieces out of the aesthetic constellation which is her
own death, and reassembles a diminished version of herself for childbearing in the
literal world. She is torn between art and life and it is life which wins out in the end.
Rilke charges her with amassing in this way so much reality ('Wirklichkeit': 129) that
she is heavy with the weight of the literal and the conventional ('schwer': 129):

Riß dich nicht ganz; riß nur ein Stück zuerst,
doch als um dieses Stück von Tag zu Tag
die Wirklichkeit so zunahm, daß es schwer ward,
da brauchtest du dich ganz: (27)
Unlike in her still lifes of fruit there is an imbalance of ‘Schwere’ and Modersohn-Becker has been dragged down by the uncompromising nature of real life which denies the individual her imaginative life.

The pressure of this reality is its enslavement to the physical (‘riß dich zurück aus deinem fernsten Fortschritt/in eine Welt zurück, wo Säfte wollen’: 125). Modersohn-Becker’s art was able to transform the visceral response to fruit but it cannot transform the sexual and the maternal, cannot progress outside the very literal language of their demands. The increasing weight of reality is the artist’s literal pregnancy growing heavier, supplanting and sapping the life out of the metaphorical embryo of her death. The vandalism of the work of art becomes the devouring of ‘den eigenen Tod’ as the pregnant woman eats her own death-seed:

![Verse](image)

Modersohn-Becker tears her future death-fruit out of its womb, perhaps in the irrepressible craving for food which issues from her real pregnancy. The womb of ‘der eigene Tod’ is conflated with the soil of the death-seed. Modersohn-Becker prematurely unearths her death and eats it, spoiling the death of her own and dying a death created not by herself but by the physical demands of her real pregnancy. Her seeds are green, like ‘der kleine Tod’ of ‘Da leben Menschen, weißerblühte, blasse’ (‘ihr eigener hängt grün und ohne Süße’, SW I, p. 347), in which green and unsweet are characteristics of the unripe death. In the Requiem the lesser, impersonal death’s lack of sweetness becomes the unpleasant aftertaste of a nauseous sweetness. The sweetness Modersohn-Becker tastes is not the sweetness which artists strive for (‘Süße/die du nicht meinstest’: 139), for it is that of unripe, rather than of ripe, fruit, and an unripe sweetness cannot contain anything of the authentic inner, self-made death, for death has

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54 Hermann suggests that this image is taken from Egyptian ritual: ‘Mythisch sieht Rilke ihren Tod von den nachtwarmen Erdreich ihres Herzens aus grünen Körnern aufkeimen: offenbar das ägyptische Bild der ’Kommumie’ des Osiris, einer Art Blumenkasten in Form des Gottesleibes, welcher, mit Erde und Korn angefüllt, das Aufsprießen der Saat als Auferstehung vom Tode zeigte’ (1955, p. 450).

I will come back to why Egypt is the touchstone for this Requiem.
been not matured in the work of art – the taste has not been matured in the fruit of the work of art. Modersohn-Becker has abandoned art in her carnal compulsion to devour the food. Its sweetness is tasted therefore on the lips, a superficial, bodily tasting unlike the transformed, sublimated sense of taste ‘innen in den Sinnen’ (141) inside the work of art. The Requiem becomes the battleground of the ‘alte Feindschaft/zwischen dem Leben und der großen Arbeit’ (267), where sexual lust and frenzied famishment override the artist’s monkish self-denial, and devour art.

If Modersohn-Becker comes under the banner of Eurydice in the transformative art which took her outside her physical and mental contours, she seems to reenact the myth of Persephone in her blasphemous, visceral feeding. Ovid tells how Persephone was forbidden to return to the land of the living because she had tasted food – pomegranate seeds – in the Underworld (see ‘The Rape of Proserpine’, Metamorphoses, pp. 125-31). Modersohn-Becker forfeits her ‘starkes Dasein’ (122) in art when she consumes her death-seed, giving in to the demands of the world, and Catling’s comparison of her with Eve, who gains sexual knowledge and mortality through eating the apple (1986, p. 54, footnote 188), fits here with Rilke’s insistence that the artist must transcend the literality of the carnal world. Persephone implied the seductive sweetness of the pomegranate in her confession to her mother that in spite of herself she had been tempted by the food. She said of Hades: ‘he secretly put in my mouth sweet food, a pomegranate seed, and forced me to taste against my will’ (quoted in Chevalier, 1996, p. 766). The pomegranate has cross-cultural associations with female fertility because its many seeds symbolise innumerable descendants (Chevalier, 1996, p. 766), but in Greek thought the symbol is reversed and the pomegranate seed doomed Persephone to barrenness. It is not clear from the myth whether Persephone was punished for yielding to temptation or for breaking the law of fasting in the underworld but the pomegranate remains related to sin in Greece because as a fertility symbol, it contains the power of drawing souls down into the flesh (Servier, 1962, p. 144). This is particularly interesting as the Requiem is also centred on the contradictory unity of the sacred and the profane in fertility. The strange ‘death of one’s own’ represents a sublimated creativity which is dislodged from the fleeting pleasure of physical reproduction as Rilke sees it. Rilkean creativity is rescued from the banality of the body in art whilst still being couched in the

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55 Proserpina is the Latin form of the Greek Persephone. Persephone was abducted from a garden on earth by Hades, who then married her, and Rilke clearly sees Modersohn-Becker’s impregnation as her husband’s forced subjugation of her: ‘Wo ist ein Mann, der Recht hat auf Besitz?’ (219). In the myth Persephone is permitted to return to the earth for part of the year, and this may also feed into the theme of dividedness and incompleteness in the Requiem.
imagery of the idealised body. Modersohn-Becker’s real foetus represents her subjugation by a banal and constricted reality whereas her metaphorical foetus represents her access to universal wholeness. The origin of the sin in the *Requiem* is not entirely clear, for it may lie in the eating itself or more specifically in the eating of the seed before it has become the full fruit. If the state of unripeness is the sin, the *Requiem* translates this into the non-fruition of Modersohn-Becker’s ‘eigener Tod’. The paradox of the seed as a sugared poison stands at the centre of Persephone’s paradoxicality as the goddess of the Underworld, of death and burial, whose annual return to the earth coincided with the sprouting of the seeds in the spring and therefore brought to her associations of fertility. In the Persephone myth these aspects are not contradictory but mutually fulfilling, whereas in Rilke’s rewriting of the myth into the story of Modersohn-Becker death overrides the sprouting of the seeds, and the unity of life and death is destroyed.

In the first draft of the original ending to *Malte* the organic imagery of soil is used in connection with the creation of one’s own death in the creation of one’s own God:

Wenn Gott *ist*, so ist alles getan und wir sind triste, überzählige Überlebende, für die es gleichgültig ist, mit welcher Scheinhandlung sie sich hinbringen. Sahen wirs nicht? Hat nicht jener große Todesfürchtige, da er immer geiziger einging auf einen seienenden und gemeinsamen Gott, das gesegnete Erdreich seiner Natur zerstört?’ (p. 967)

The individual who does not create her own God destroys the divine soil of her soul, and the parallel with the *Requiem* is clear here, for Modersohn-Becker destroys the seed and the soil of her death by abandoning her artistic pursuit of the individual life and death. In this version of the ending of the novel, Malte attempts to write the story of a writer (Tolstoy) whose work was the recreation or the re-beginning of God in himself, God as ‘seinen einzig möglichen Gott’ (p. 967). This writer originally strove against the idea of God as existing independently of individuals, indeed his power to write was his power to forge his own God. Malte calls this ‘work which is one’s own’ (‘das sein eigenes war’, p. 967), ‘Herzwerk’ (p. 967). The heart, the seat of individuality, becomes the site of transformation and becoming, where God is remade. The

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56 Another reference to the heart as the essence of the self is in Rilke’s legend of the lost son at the end of *Malte* where the son wishes to forge an individual life — and death — for himself, removing himself from the collective (‘das gemeinsame Wesen’, p. 940) which is sustained by the spirit of conformism (‘schwaches Herz’, p. 940). It is implied that he wishes for a strong, individual heart, the ‘starkes Dasein’ (122) of the *Requiem*. 
'gemeinsame Gott' is its antithesis, a God who is the God of the masses – common, literal, familiar and therefore complete and absolute in His definition, outside of human interpretation. As in Requiem für eine Freundin the condition of innerness ('in mir': 273) is the individual creative force:

Einst, da er sich, ringend mit allem, seine verwandelnde Arbeit entdeckte, wie half er da. Begann er nicht in ihr, unter seliger Mühsal, seinen einzig möglichen Gott, und die es in seinen Büchern erlebten, wurden sie nicht von Ungeduld erfüllt, jeder in sich, auch zu beginnen? (My italics) (p. 967)

The organic and physical imagery of 'Erdreich' and 'Herz' provides the life-force and conditions for the cultivation of God. This cultivation defines the work that is art.

Rilke writes to Nanny Wunderly-Volkart of the metaphorical horticulture which produces the internal eternity of language and writing:

So geht es einem oft, daß man mit dem äußerlichen Benehmen der Sprache uneins ist und ihr innerstes meint, oder eine innerste Sprache, ohne Endungen, womöglich, eine Sprache aus Wort-Kernen, eine Sprache, die nicht gepflückt ist, oben, auf Stengeln, sondern im Sprach-Samen erfäßt – ..., ist das reine Schweigen der Liebe nicht wie das Herz-Erdreich um solche Sprach-Kerne? (4.2.1920, Volkart I, p. 143)

This is the language of profound innerness ('von innen her': 78) and otherness which Rilke's favourites of Modersohn-Becker's paintings capture in their commitment to seeing the things of the world differently from the ready-made descriptions scraped off the surface ('oben') of language. Language which is 'plucked' is the language of external convention which prescribes permanent and unambiguous meanings. The plucking suggests the finished nature of the language, the denial of the possibility of growth and transformation into anything else. Modersohn-Becker's seed is the seat of her individuality, which consists of her art, her God and her death. It could be argued that her death-fruit is her 'Sprach-Samen', the internal, other language of art, but just as 'das gesegnete Erdreich seiner Natur' can be destroyed by the wrong kind of art, so Modersohn-Becker throttles her individuality and her death from within, plundering and plucking her seed from its infinite internality ('und grubst aus deines Herzens/nachtwarmen Erdreich die noch grünen Samen': 133). Tolstoy, in the first draft of the original ending to Malte, turns away from his own God and therefore his own

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death, also retarding his seed, for the draft is called ‘die Sage von dem, der fruchtbar war, und unfruchtbar werden wollte’ (p. 970).

A further link to the Requiem is the metaphor of miscarriage:

Und mit einem Entsetzen ohnegleichen ahnte er, daß sein eigener, eingeborener Gott kaum begonnen war; daß er, wenn er jetzt stürbe, nicht lebensfähig sein würde im Jenseits; daß man sich schämen würde für seine rudimentäre Seele und sie in der Ewigkeit verstecken würde wie eine Frühgeburt. (p. 968)

God, the soul and death are identified in the Requiem and this rejected ending of the Malte-novel, and each of these succumb to a premature birth because the writer and Modersohn-Becker turn away from the creative work of their production – they miscarry their deaths. This ‘Frühgeburt’ is a ‘gepflückte Sprache’, a demand for finalised meaning and definition over the cultivation of death and God in art. In the first draft of the Malte-ending the writer possessively pursues this unambiguous, literal language of God and death: he ‘begriff nicht mehr, daß man es nicht verstehen durfte; er wollte es wörtlich nehmen wie einen Text’ (pp. 967-8). But the language of art, as Rilke sees it, is a language ‘ohne Endungen’, never finalised in meaning and always under transformation like the seed in gestation. Modersohn-Becker’s miscarriage of death is presented as the birthing of a premature offspring which is incomplete and cannot survive on its own:

So starbst du, wie die Frauen starben,
altdemisch starbst du in dem warmen Hause
den Tod der Wöchnerinnen, welche wieder
sich schließen wollen und es nicht mehr können,
weil jenes Dunkel, das sie mitgebaren,
och einmal wiederkommt und drängt und eintritt. (182)

The birth of the child is accompanied by that of death (‘jenes Dunkel, das sie mitgebaren’), and if this death were the completed, individual death of the artist it would be the healthy and perfectly formed poetic figure indicated in ‘Schließen’. But Modersohn-Becker’s death is born premature and lacking the self-repleteness of the

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58 Again this may recall the letter to Mimi Romanelli: ‘le travail long, sans fin, sans sort: enfin, le travail’ (7.12.1907, Briefe I, p. 229).
59 Modersohn-Becker died of an embolism, and Rilke may well be imagining air invading her body, translating the physical facts into a metaphor for his concept of the premature and underdeveloped death.
60 Por evokes here the figure of closure in the Neue Gedichte where objects are enclosed in their poetic worlds and plugged into the unity of the creative universe. Modersohn-Becker’s body is unable to form this poetic figure of closure around the infinite because her body has not given itself to art (1998, p. 72).
artistic world represented by Eurydice and the sweet, dark death she will bear. It urgently re-enters her body, refusing to be born, unable to be the death which has achieved the autonomy of art. Because Modersohn-Becker has failed to create her death as the ‘Ding-in-sich’ of her best paintings, it is a death which is afraid of death. Modersohn-Becker is the ghost of that incomplete death pressing to re-enter life now because she failed to close herself off from everyday life in art. Like Persephone, who was condemned to the underworld for one-third of the year and allowed to return to the earth for two-thirds, Modersohn-Becker is divided between life and death.

Rilke demonstrates the restlessness and dependency of this artistically incomplete and untransformed death in his evocation of another of Modersohn-Becker’s self-portraits:

So will ich dich behalten, wie du dich
hinstelltest in den Spiegel, tief hinein
und fort von allem. Warum kommst du anders?
Was widerrufst du dich? Was willst du mir
einreden, daß in jenen Bernsteinkugeln
um deinen Hals noch etwas Schwere war
von jener Schwere, wie sie nie im Jenseits
beruhigter Bilder ist; was zeigst du mir
in deiner Haltung eine böse Ahnung;
was heißt dich die Konturen deines Leibes
auslegen wie die Linie einer Hand,
daß ich sie nicht mehr seh'n kann ohne Schicksal? (88)

This passage refers to Modersohn-Becker’s painting, Selbstbildnis am 6. Hochzeitstag. 25. Mai, 1906 (see appendix 3), in which she wears a necklace of amber beads again and frames her belly with her hands as if expecting a child. The Requiem conveys Rilke’s disappointment with this image, for, as Torgersen puts it:

The body in it is not a fruit, not so essential as to be impersonal; it is one woman’s body, and the painting as a whole says precisely “I am that” – that being, as we have said, woman, artist, human being. [...] It is in this painting and no other that the untransformed weight of human desire – the desire for a child, which to Rilke was in Modersohn-Becker’s case sheer error – is not only unmistakably present, but central. (p. 195)

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61 Modersohn-Becker’s unripe death is foreshadowed in the stillbirth of the embryo, inexperienced and timid, with the non-artistic gaze of the unwillingness to die in ‘Herr: Wir sind ärmer denn die armen Tiere’ (SB, SW I, 348-9).
62 It is highly probable that Rilke saw the painting in Modersohn-Becker’s studio and discussed it with her. See Götte, (1996, p. 134) and a letter from Clara to Rilke (8.2.1906, in the Rilke-Archiv, Gernsbach).
He writes of the ‘unceremonious immediacy with which it conveys the presence of Paula Modersohn-Becker herself,’ arguing that the painting is a personal inscription (the eyes engage the observer with ‘a compellingly human look’) rather than the iconic art Rilke espouses (p. 194). To add to what Torgersen has said, this painting is not like one by Balthus, for instance, who painted women ‘in sich’, locked away in the painting, and in imaginary worlds of their own, for it portrays an enjoyed pregnancy or anticipation of pregnancy.\(^6\) The whole painting conveys an impression of roundness as the hands frame the belly, asking for admiration. Modersohn-Becker’s belly and eyes protrude from the picture, whereas Rilke demands self-containment from art. In this portrait Modersohn-Becker has come back from the mirror of art just as her untransformed death presses back from death, from its birth into death. Modersohn-Becker had given herself over to the mirror, had begun her death, in her painting *Selbstbildnis als Halbakt mit Bernsteinkette* but she cannot reproduce this pattern in death itself – she cannot ‘close’ after the birth of her death and deliver it fully over to itself – because she has since failed to give herself over to art and death, as *Selbstbildnis am 6. Hochzeitstag* shows.

The regression of Modersohn-Becker’s retarded death is the faltering of the unachieved work of art. She returns from the emancipated, enclosed state of art and death as a restless ghost seeking completion after the collapse of her work:

Sieh, wir gleiten so,  
nicht wissend wann, zurück aus unserm Fortschritt  
in irgendwas, was wir nicht meinen; drin  
wie uns verfangen wie in einem Traum  
und drin wir sterben, ohne zu erwachen.  
Keiner ist weiter. Jedem, der sein Blut  
hinaufhob in ein Werk, das lange wird,  
kann es geschehen, daß erset nicht mehr hochhält  
und daß es geht nach seiner Schwere, wertlos. (258)

Modersohn-Becker is sucked back into the literal world by the dominant influence of convention. The domestic life takes hold of her against all her best intentions (she is seduced into ‘irgendwas, was wir nicht meinen’, just as she tastes a sweetness ‘die du nicht meinstest’: 140) and shuts her off (‘drin wir uns verfangen’, recalling Rilke’s letter to Sidonie Nádherný in which he describes Modersohn-Becker’s entrapment in an impersonal death manufactured by influences outside the self as ‘trübe verflochten’,

\(^6\) See Berger for an interpretation of this self-portrait which sees Modersohn-Becker as playing on her virginity with an image of a fake pregnancy (1982).
3.11.1908, Nádherný, p. 89). She dies the soporific death of a dream which has wrested control of her rather than a death forged by herself which ensures her transcendence (‘drin wir uns verfangen wie in einem Traum/und drin wir sterben ohne zu erwachen’). The magnetic pull of the real world comes under the heading of ‘Schwere’, and the artist is depicted as lifting the weight of her blood into the artwork but failing to hold it up. The transformation of the blood is not achieved and the blood retains its weight, dragging the artist down. Modersohn-Becker ‘withdraws’ herself from the mirror (‘Was widerrufst du dich?’: 91) and the higher circulation under the pressure of blood which forces her back down to reality.

Selbstbildnis am 6. Hochzeitstag is laden with the weight of an untransformed art and an untransformed, incomplete, restless self, a weight which cumulates in the amber beads and instills a restless questioning in its audience, Rilke (‘Was widerrufst du dich? Was willst du mir/einreden, daß [...]?’; ‘Was zeigst du mir [...]’; 95). The amber beads, Rilke says, are weighted in the way no artistic image, in its transcendence and equanimity (‘im Jenseits/beruhigter Bilder’: 94), is. A glance at the portrait might reveal something of the impression of heaviness Rilke conveys in the Requiem. The necklace hangs down heavily, its beads thickening towards the bottom, and apparently pulling the head with it. Head and necklace incline towards the stomach and its possible pregnancy, grounding Modersohn-Becker in the gravity of the physical world, and the dark amber of the beads against the light-coloured skin emphasises their density, their non-integration into the picture and Modersohn-Becker’s non-integration into her art. This burden is the anxious disconnectedness of the unachieved work of art, and it threatens the grounded, unsublimated death. The restless dissatisfaction of the unachieved existence also manifests itself as weight at the beginning of the Requiem which announces the presence of the ghost:

daß aus dem Kreislauf, der dich schon empfing,
die stumme Schwerkraft irgend einer Unruh
dich niederzieht zur abgezählten Zeit — : (29)

Here the gravitational pull is one of inarticulacy (‘stumm’), i.e. it is the pull of the unartistic, unprogressive and constricted language of pragmatism. The ghost’s disquiet

64 Por says of the necklace’s weight that it stands outside the closed innerness of the poetic figure, the unifying, universal perspective of the Neue Gedichte, negating ‘die innerliche Geschlossenheit der luftig-visuellen Konstellation’ (1998, p. 67).
Imagery of fragmentation and dividedness accompanies Modersohn-Becker’s anxiety and fear (‘Schrecken’, recalling the petrified death produced by Modersohn-Becker and the tormented death-embryo of ‘Herr: Wir sind ärmer denn die armen Tiere’ which cowers in fear of death: ‘der sich (als ob ihn Schreckliches erschreckte)/die Augenkeime mit den Händen deckte’, SB, SW I, p. 349). Modersohn-Becker’s ghostliness is her failure to achieve an image of death in her art which is committed to death’s difference. She wanders Rilke’s imagination as an undead, unsublimated spirit with a homesickness for the physical world and intimidated by the absence and transformation required of her for otherness and infinite being. Modersohn-Becker had made the infinite being of the things of the earth visible in art (‘ergriift wie hier ein – ‘ergreifen’ suggests the artistic expression in form which unifies the specific with the universal) but the regressive art which preceded her death impeded her relation to the infinite in art and therefore in death (‘den Aufgang der unendlichen Naturen/nicht so ergriffst wie hier ein jedes Ding’), and now she cannot be absorbed into that higher circulation.

This portrait is for Rilke overbearingly bodily, and as such it asks to be read as the body is read in palmistry (‘die Konturen deines Leibes/auslegen wie die Linien einer Hand’: 97), i.e. with the fatedness which obscures the body’s imaginative possibilities (‘daß ich sie nicht mehr seh’n kann ohne Schicksal’: 99). With fate ordaining how the body should be seen, the creative gaze is squandered, and the Rilke of the Requiem cannot see further than the text of the physical, the contours of Modersohn-Becker’s body which suggest pregnancy. He asks the value of this foregrounding of the body (‘was zeigst du mir’: 95) which believes that meaning is pre-inscribed in things and cannot be transformed, but testifies to its power over his perception. Overcome by the fatedness of this portrait, he confers on it the terrible hindsight of Modersohn-Becker’s death soon after childbirth (‘eine böse Ahnung’: 96), and is troubled by Modersohn-Becker’s production of an art which is so embodied and literal that it cannot transcend...
this common, unpoetic death. Rilke turns this self-portrait, in which a woman innocently rejoices in being within her body, into an omen of the unpoetic death. He is haunted by Modersohn-Becker’s ghost because he finds too much real, unfigured presence in her portrait. She cannot be ‘tot bei den Toten’ (271) because she is not held within the picture – she has not achieved an artistic idiom, an existence independent of conventional reality.

So Modersohn-Becker is outside the mirror-world of art by the time she comes to die. If she were to regard her Selbstbildnis am 6. Hochzeitstag she would see it as a mirror replicating, rather than transforming, her image:

Du saßest auf im Kindbett,  
und vor dir stand ein Spiegel, der dir alles  
ganz wiedergab. Nun war das alles Du  
und ganz davor, und drinnen war nur Täuschung,  
die schöne Täuschung jeder Frau, die gern  
Schmuck umnimmt und das Haar kämmt und verändert. (176)

Her commitment to the physical world, having just given birth, is represented by the reproduction of a literal bodiliness in the mirror which is called ‘deception’ (‘Täuschung’) because it is not her authentic, artistic image. Rilke dwells on this preoccupation with the physical, characterising it as a female vanity which seeks affirmation in the external, cosmetic world of appearance and convention rather than in the poetised, universalised image which is the authentic interior of the artistic self. This vanity makes Modersohn-Becker like every other woman in Rilke’s eyes (‘die schöne Täuschung jeder Frau’: 180), overriding her self-distinguishment as an artist. The Requiem is insistent that personal, erotic beauty must be sacrificed to the work, implying that the individual face must retreat into art:

Ach du warst weit von jedem Ruhm. Du warst  
unscheinbar; hattest leise deine Schönheit  
hineingenommen, wie man eine Fahne  
einzieht am grauen Morgen eines Werktags, (247)

Here beauty and conspicuousness is taken down and folded in like a flag and the workday, the artist’s working day, begins. Por argues that the self-replication which

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65 Gass suggests that there may be some correlation between these lines and a journal entry of Modersohn-Becker’s in which she says of death: ‘und wenn ich drei gute Bilder gemalt habe, dann will ich gern scheiden mit Blumen in den Händen und im Haar’ (26.7.1900, Modersohn-Becker, p. 230) (1999, p. 119). It is however more likely that the Requiem is referring to Modersohn-Becker combing and braiding her hair and attaching roses to her dressing gown on leaving the birthing bed.
Modersohn-Becker’s art produces in the superficial image (‘Täuschung’ (179) or the ‘Schein’ contradicted in the ideal artistic quality, ‘unscheinbar’: 248) originates in the self-replication inherent in physical reproduction. Significantly, the mirror stands at the end of the ‘Kindbett’, suggesting that the child is Modersohn-Becker’s mirror image (1998, p. 72). The work of the physical has replaced the work of the imagination.

Rilke regarded Modersohn-Becker’s pregnancy as external to her art because it was a concession to her husband rather than something which was integral to her, her own life, her own death, and which she could take into her art. The Requiem asks her to accept that there was a conflict between her blood (which, as argued in the previous chapter, is the metaphorical material in which the self merges with its art) and the task it was goaded into performing:

Weißt du, wie dein Blut
aus einem Kreisen ohnegleichen zögernd
und ungern wiederkam, da du es abriefst?
Wie es verwirrt des Leibes kleinen Kreislauf
noch einmal aufnahm; wie es voller Mißtraun
und Staunen eintrat in den Mutterkuchen. (142)

Rilke asks Modersohn-Becker to accept here that her inner being was repelled, confused and astonished by the pregnancy. It is indeed Modersohn-Becker herself who recalls her blood from its art-making but Rilke makes it clear that there is a puppeteer at her back:

Doch jetzt klag ich an:
den Einen nicht, der dich aus dir zurückzog,
(ich find ihn nicht heraus, er ist wie alle)
doch alle klag ich in ihm an: den Mann. (201)

He claims that somebody drew Modersohn-Becker out of her authentic, artistic self, pointing the finger at Otto Modersohn and then further at all men who deny the creative, inner life of the woman, forcing her to be untrue to herself and her art.66 Rilke recoils

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66 This accusation may of course also be directed at the man in Rilke himself, the man who married and impregnated a female artist. The Rilke of the Requiem struggles with the ghost of the incomplete, untransformed death but also with the ghosts of the man and the woman in himself and their respective affiliations to practical and artistic life – ‘life’ and ‘the great work’ – as he classifies them. Modersohn-Becker’s journal shows that she was sympathetic to Rilke’s view that marriage is an institution which idealises human relationships. She too felt that human beings are essentially alone: ‘Es ist meine Erfahrung, daß die Ehe nicht glücklicher macht. Sie nimmt die Illusion, die vorher das ganze Wesen trug, daß es eine Schwesterseele gebe. Man fühlt in der Ehe doppelt das Unverständensein, weil das ganze frühere Leben darauf hinausging, ein Wesen zu finden, das versteht. Und ist es vielleicht nicht doch besser ohne diese Illusion, Aug’ in Auge einer großen, einsamen Wahrheit?’ (Easter Sunday, 30.3 1902, Modersohn-Becker, p. 317). Rilke parallels this in his definition of relationship as the preservation
from any idea of marriage which circumscribes and stunts the creativity of either individual involved. In the Requiem he states that the partner who does not support the artistic development and freedom of the other is guilty (‘die Freiheit eines Lieben nicht vermehren/um alle Freiheit, die man in sich aufbringt’) and extols the Orpheus-Eurydice relation of relinquishment (‘Wer kann besitzen, was sich selbst nicht hält’ and ‘Wir haben, wo wir lieben, ja nur dies/einander lassen’), identifying the suffering, solitary artist – who transforms rather than acquiesces in love – with the female sex:

Die Frauen leiden: lieben heißt allein sein,
und Künstler ahnen manchmal in der Arbeit
daß sie verwandeln müssen, wo sie lieben. (242)

But Modersohn-Becker’s pregnancy is not just inauthentic because she did not truly want it. In demanding that the artist never be distracted from her art by the burdens and responsibilities of the human world, Rilke proposes that a female artist should never be divided between her real and her metaphorical womb, that her artistic production should take precedence over physical reproduction. However, Rilke’s statements on motherhood and art outside the Requiem are highly contradictory. Katharina Kippenberg paraphrases what Rilke said to her about Modersohn-Becker’s death:

Von Paula Modersohn-Becker sagte Rilke, sie hätte den großartigen Versuch gemacht, zu einer Einheit zu kommen […] er nahm diesen Tod als die äußerste Antwort auf eine äußerste Frage, grauenvoll bitter, weil diese Frau, die nach doppelter Produktivität langte, der künstlerischen würdig war

of each party’s solitude: ‘Es handelt sich in der Ehe für mein Gefühl nicht darum, durch Niederreigung und Umstürzung aller Grenzen eine rasche Gemeinsamkeit zu schaffen, vielmehr ist die gute Ehe die, in welcher jeder den anderen zum Wächter seiner Einsamkeit bestellt und ihm dieses größte Vertrauen beweist, das er zu verleihen hat’ (to Emanuel von Bodman, 17.8.1901, BTF, pp. 107-8).

See also Storck (1975, 247-85). The Requiem draws on a real event in Modersohn-Becker’s life for an analogy to illustrate the principle of non-possession within love:

Sowenig wie der Feldherr eine Nike
festhalten kann am Vorderbug des Schiffes,
wen das geheime Leichtsein ihrer Gottheit
sie plötzlich weghält in den hellen Meerwind:
so wenig kann einer von uns die Frau
anrufen, die uns nicht mehr sieht und die
auf einem schmalen Streifen ihres Daseins
wie durch ein Wunder fortgeht, ohne Unfall: (223)

See Clara’s retelling of Otto Modersohn’s account of this incident in which Modersohn-Becker’s sense of adventure took her beyond his reach (Hetsch, 1932, p. 46).

A letter on Cézanne reinforces Rilke’s concept of transformative art which goes beyond preconceptions and the pull of feelings: ‘Man merkt auch, von Mai zu Mai besser, wie notwendig es war, auch noch über die Liebe hinauszukommen; es ist ja natürlich, daß man jedes dieser Dinge liebt, wenn man es macht: zeigt man das aber, so macht man es weniger gut; man beurteilt es, statt es zu sagen. Man hört auf, unparteiisch zu sein; und das Beste, die Liebe, bleibt außerhalb der Arbeit, geht nicht in sie ein, restiert unumgesetzt neben ihr’ (to Clara, 13.10.1907, Cézanne, p. 29).
If Rilke was ‘grauenvoll bitter’ about Modersohn-Becker’s death, it highlights the tensions in his programme of the ‘death of one’s own’. In Kippenberg’s account Rilke resents the antagonism of maternity and art, promoting maternity to the same ‘Produktivität’ as art, but in the letter to Sidonie Nádherny, the commitment to family life is described as a curtailment of true productivity.⁶⁹

Elsewhere Rilke defines the feminine as the maternal, locating the superior creativity of the female in her physical capacity to receive reproductive material (from the male) and then transform it in order to give birth to her creation: ‘Es ist so natürlich für mich, Mädchen und Frauen zu verstehen; das tiefste Erleben des Schaffenden ist weiblich —: denn es ist empfangendes und gebärendes Erleben’ (to a young girl, 20.11.04, Briefe I, p. 107). And yet Rilke extends this physical propensity to give birth beyond the womb, for men can also experience physical maternity: ‘denn auch das geistige Schaffen stammt von dem physischen her [...] Und auch im Mann ist Mutterschaft ... leibliche und geistige: sein Zeugen ist auch eine Art Gebären, und Gebären ist es, wenn er schafft aus innerster Fülle’ (B.a.e.j.D., 16.7.1903, pp. 25-6). Artistic creativity appears here to issue simply from the body and so any procreative gesture participates in giving birth to the poetic (the implication for the Requiem is that its address to Modersohn-Becker is at the same time self-referential, and I will come back to this later). It is significant of course, though, that the name given to creativity is still ‘Mutterschaft’, not ‘Vaterschaft’. Rilke identifies his programme of poetic transformation with the feminine, focusing the ‘death of one’s own’ on the womb, as argued in the previous chapter. A journal entry conflates the real and the metaphorical womb so that the production of a child becomes the highest artistic achievement: ‘Die Mütter freilich sind wie die Künstler. Des Künstlers Mühe ist, sich selbst zu finden. Das Weib erfüllt sich im Kinde’ (FTB, p. 101). And: ‘Eine Frau, welche Künstlerin ist, muß nicht mehr schaffen, wenn sie Mutter wurde. Sie hat ihr Ziel aus sich herausgestellt und darf im tiefsten Sinne Kunst leben fortan’ (FTB, pp. 101-2). Here Rilke glorifies the

⁶⁹ I have no evidence that he read it, but Rilke may have taken some of his ideas on the physical creativity of the female from Ellen Key’s Missbrauchte Frauenkraft: ‘Die Frau, welche nicht ihre Geistesfrucht ebensowohl wie ihre Leibesfrucht mit ihrem Blute ernährt, welche nicht ebenso fähig der Entsagung ist, ebenso rücksichtslos gefahren gegenüber wird, wenn es das Leben ihres Werkes gilt als das Leben ihres Kindes, ist nicht berufen, auf geistigem Gebiete zu gebären’ (1905, p. 56).
female as the unproductive but living work of art which inspires the male artist in his productivity.

This determination to stereotype the masculine as acutely conscious and laboriously ambitious, and the feminine as pre-conscious, bodily and generative, is, however, further confused in Rilke’s association elsewhere of feminine pre-consciousness with the non-physical and non-sexual. On meeting Clara Westhoff, the sculptor, and Paula Modersohn-Becker, the painter, for the first time Rilke wrote in his journal that they were ‘halb Wissende, d.h. Maler, halb Unbewuβte, d.h. Mädchens’ (10.9.1900, Schargendorfer, p. 216), idealising the feminine as girlish and virginal. This uncorrupted feminine soul is appropriated for the notion, discussed in the previous chapter, of the artist’s dwelling within, and knowing, the earth by a return to pre-consciousness. As Catling points out, Rilke wrote many poems which associated girlhood and art during the period of the Worpsweder and Schmargendorfer Tagebücher which were eventually incorporated into the Buch der Bilder (Catling, 1986, p. 13). Butler argues that Rilke had pre-selected Modersohn-Becker for one of his virginal maidens and so her pregnancy was an offence (1941, pp. 100-13). Rilke had had a vision of roses on Modersohn-Becker’s hat and flowering from her eyes, which became a fragment in his journal. In it a man regards the dead girl who had never given herself to him, and notices that her face is dead, but her virginal body is untouched by death. The man lays two frosty red rosebuds over her eyes which then blossom into full roses containing her life (27.9.1900, WTB, pp. 259-61). This dying in girlhood before virginity is lost results in a blossoming after death, and Butler points out that the poem ‘Von den Mädchen II’ reinforces this ideal of virginal purity, admonishing the ‘Mädchen’ to resist the ardour of the poet:

Keine darf sich je dem Dichter schenken,
   wenn sein Auge auch um Frauen bat;
   denn er kann euch nur als Mädchen denken:
das Gefühl in euren Handgelenken
   würde brechen von Brokat. (BB I, SW I, p. 375)

The virgin’s death would have been a death of her own, and Butler argues that as Modersohn-Becker’s destiny was to die untouched, her death soon after childbirth is all the more repugnant to Rilke. Rilke’s curious reasoning may have brought him to the conclusion that Otto had brought death upon Modersohn-Becker by making her

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70 Catling points out that loss of virginity in Rilke’s work is often expressed by means of death metaphors, e.g. ‘Mädchen-Klage’ (NG I, SW I, pp. 481-2) (1986, p. 125).
pregnant, a death external to herself and not of her own. Butler claims that in the Requiem Rilke ‘sublimated the tragedy of Modersohn-Becker’s lost girlhood into the tragedy of an artist’s self-mutilation’ (p. 113), elaborating his deep-seated nausea at the idea of childbirth into a tale of an artist’s betrayal of her art.

The requiem poem itself does not, however, fully bear out Butler’s reading. There are some references to women as inappropriable and relinquishing in love, excelling in art because their solitude and suffering motivate transformation, and so the Requiem still premises feminine untouchability, but there is no sense that this is meant literally. Similarly, Eurydice is identified as being ‘in einem neuen Mädelzentum’ (SWI, p. 544: 60), but this is a figurative virginity, which conveys her newfound inwardness. It seems certain that the source of Rilke’s resentment in the Requiem is the loss of an artist before her work (and therefore the death of her own) was complete, and not the loss of virginity. As for the alignment of artist and mother in Rilke’s thinking, the idea of female fulfilment in childbearing is severely ruptured in this Requiem, but it must be borne in mind that it may have been the coincidence of birth and death in Modersohn-Becker’s individual case rather than a fundamental conviction that maternity contradicts creativity which provoked Rilke’s sense of the disruption between life and art.

3.4 ‘Klagen’

The Modersohn-Becker of Selbstbildnis am 6. Hochzeitstag has not enclosed herself as a poetic figure, has not locked her image into the ambivalent mirror and away from the everyday, over-interpreted world (‘auslegen wie die Linien einer Hand’: 118). The

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71 In ‘Orpheus. Eurydike. Hermes’ death has a female body, that of Eurydice, but in ‘Man muß sterben weil man sie kennt’ the inappropriability of the female is taken to its furthest extreme – female presence, or knowledge of the feminine, induces silence and death. Here Rilke returns to the mythological model of woman tempting man to eat from the tree of knowledge and taking him into his mortality. Women draw men towards otherness: ‘Ach, wie sie fremd sind’ (1914, SW II, p. 85). Rilke’s association of the female with the authentic death comes to be grounded in the notion of the female’s willingness to fail and integrate failure, breach and absence, or abyss, as part of a process of development, as expressed in the poem ‘Außer dem Helden ist noch dies: der Kreis’:

Kann sein, wir Ordnen, wir ließen nicht
das Strahlende so nahe an das Bange
(erfahren, wie wir sind, im Untergange.)
Doch Frauen, denen es an Kraft gebracht,
die Kühmsten: sieh: sie nehmen beides lange
und bieten’s uns im wirksamen Gesicht. (1913, SW II, p. 214)
Requiem’s hauntedness is the pressure it evinces to close this circle for her, to fulfil its function as Requiem and lay the spirit to rest who is asking for this service (‘du bittest’: 38). In response to this plea, Rilke takes on Modersohn-Becker’s death in his determination to retain her in the mirror (‘So will ich dich behalten, wie du dich/hinstelltest in den Spiegel’). The Requiem tries to transform Modersohn-Becker by becoming the language of that transformation, the poem which locks Modersohn-Becker away forever in the infinite condition she deserves. The Requiem’s mourning must transcend the conventional mode of mourning, which cannot transform absence and loss, and Requiem für eine Freundin becomes an exercise in the poetry of transformation whereby the dead must be transposed into poetry and therefore into the poet (‘in mir’: 273), for if Rilke can house the dead in language he has already begun his own artistic relationship with death, the death which is his own. The Requiem’s ghost is the dreadful spectre of its own non-achievement, and its determination to mourn Modersohn-Becker properly (‘O laß uns klagen’: 142) is its concern to become the poetic figure in which Modersohn-Becker can be dead – Modersohn-Becker’s begging to be transformed is the poem’s begging Modersohn-Becker to be ‘in mir’, in poetry.

The Requiem enacts a sustained panic about itself as poetry and therefore the poet’s own integration of death. Its concern that Modersohn-Becker has not created and died the death of her own is a projection of its own anxiety that it is unable to transform death into the infinite, other, self-completing side of the self. It begins with an assertion of the success of past poetic attempts to transform the dead:

Ich habe Tote, und ich ließ sie hin
und war erstaunt, sie so getrost zu sehn,
so rasch zuhaus im Totsein, so gerecht,
so anders als ihr Ruf. (1)

In the past, the language of poetry has achieved the voice of otherness, has relinquished any pretension to be able to define death, and has created instead new metaphors, poetic figurations. Death is more adequately housed in such language, which preserves death’s transcendence of the human, its instincts and its conceptualisations. Rilke can say that he ‘has’ the dead because he has released them into a different kind of language (‘ließ sie hin’) and has thereby come to possess them in the strange aspect of their death.

72 Hermann compares Rilke’s Requiem with the ancient Egyptian custom of writing letters to the dead to placate and calm ghosts who haunt the living with their demands, but concedes that Rilke could not have known about this custom in 1908 (1955, p. 450).
Rilke’s reconciliation with their death is translated here into their acclimatisation to a new home. But Modersohn-Becker alone of the dead returns from death and her artistic transformation (‘Nur du, du kehrst/zurück’: 4), lingering on the periphery of the physical world, insufficiently translated into poetry and so insufficiently dead. The Requiem has lost the confidence in transformation that the Neue Gedichte display, repeatedly and nervously invoking the power of ‘Verwandlung’ (e.g. ‘Wir wandeln dieses um’ (10); ‘So will ich dich behalten’ (88); ‘Einen Engel will ich daraus bilden’ (210); ‘Künstler ahnen manchmal in der Arbeit, daß sie verwandeln müssen’: 243; ‘sei/tot bei den Toten’: 270), because suddenly Rilke finds himself struggling to live his ideal of the integrated, individualised and universalised poetic death.

Rilke frames the Requiem with himself, the first word being ‘Ich’ and the last ‘mir’, reinforcing the reading that Modersohn-Becker’s ghost is an externalisation of his internal dividedness over his poetry’s ability to transform death. But within the poem the poet experiences this ghost as something external to himself:

\[
du\ streifst mich, du gehst um, du willst an etwas stoßen, daß es klingt von dir und dich verrät. (5)
\]

The subjective creation has moved outside its fictional boundaries and now haunts its creator and the imagination out of which it sprang. ‘Schwarze Katze’ defines a ghost as a meeting of the inner and outer worlds: ‘Ein Gespenst ist noch wie eine Stelle, dran dein Blick mit einem Klange stößt’ (NG II, SW I, p. 595). As argued previously, Rilke believed that the imagination and its creations are at the core of an individual’s reality, and that this imaginative reality takes shape in poetry.\(^73\) The physicality of the haunting continues into:

\[
Dieses geht mir so bis ins Gebein und querrt wie eine Säge.
\]

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Ein Vorwurf, den du trügst als Gespenst,
nachtrügest mir, wenn ich mich nachts zurückzieh
in meine Lunge, in die Eingeweide,
in meines Herzens letzte ärmste Kammer, -
ein solcher Vorwurf wäre nicht so grausam,
wie dieses Bitten ist. (38)

The disproportionate physicality of the dead Modersohn-Becker manifests itself as acute pain in the marrow of the one she comes to for help. Her superfluous bodiliness is at once ‘cruel’ and pleading – it is a plea for transformation which incises the body and severs the skeleton of the poet, threatening to undo him internally as she herself is divided and defective (‘zerstreut und halb’: 26). Her incompleteness and neediness contradict Rilke’s idealisation of the dead in the First Elegy:

Schließlich brauchen sie uns nicht mehr, die Frühentrückten,
man entwöhnt sich des Irdischen sanft, wie man den Brüsten
milde der Mutter entwächst. (SWI, p. 688: 86)

Modersohn-Becker has not achieved distance and estrangement, the independence and self-repleteness of the dead, coming to Rilke intensely and pleadingly as she does. Rilke must lose this unbearable proximity of Modersohn-Becker in the translation of her into a poetry in which she can exceed the bounds of literal presence and recognition, in which she is released into distance and death. She must be lost and detached in order to be rediscovered: ‘Und es genügt auch noch nicht, daß man Erinnerungen hat. Man muß sie vergessen können, wenn es viele sind, und man muß die große Geduld haben, zu warten, daß sie wiederkommen’ (Malte, p. 724). As it attacks the body, the untransformed death fills Rilke with the mortal terror that human existence cannot be constructed and transformed in art and language, that it is purely physical, destructible and dying. Modersohn-Becker’s agonised plea translates into an excruciating suffering in the poet, less tolerable than the slow asphyxiation of a ghost’s reproach, for on sensing the plea the poet is wracked with doubt in his own poetry. In Modersohn-Becker’s ghost Rilke receives the bad omen of a possible unachieved death of his own.

Inherent, then, in Rilke’s chastisement of the ghost is his own fear of the inadequacy of his poetry. Contradictory statements closely follow one another:

Ich habe recht; du irrst
wenn du gerührt zu irgend einem Ding
ein Heimweh hast. (8)
and ‘O nimm mir nicht, was ich/langsam erlernen’ (7). At the same time as insisting on his belief that death is a state of emancipation and otherness which is not nostalgic for the familiar, physical world, Rilke betrays the vulnerability of his belief in his exhortation to Modersohn-Becker not to undermine it with her untransformed death. The image of Modersohn-Becker as a thief breaking into the poet’s sleep further conveys the fragility of the poetic figure of death in which she was cast, and therefore of the proposed ‘Ruhe’ and separateness of death and the work of art (‘dies weckt mich nachts oft wie ein Dieb, der einbricht’: 32). Modersohn-Becker’s ghost as the untransformed death which comes back to haunt the poet might be anticipated in the following extract from a letter to Lou Andreas-Salomé about the ability to transform, to make a poetic ‘thing’ out of the rash emotion of fear:

Hätte ich Ängste, die ich so erlebte, machen können, hätte ich Dinge bilden können aus ihnen, wirkliche stille Dinge, die zu schaffen Heiterkeit und Freiheit ist und von denen, wenn sie sind, Beruhigung ausgeht, so wäre mir nichts geschehen. Aber diese Ängste, die mir aus jedem Tage zufielen, rührten hundert andere Ängste an und sie standen in mir auf wider mich und vertrugen sich, und ich kam nicht über sie hinaus. Im Bestreben, sie zu formen, wurde ich schöpferisch an ihnen selbst; statt sie zu Dingen meines Willens zu machen, gab ich ihnen nur ein eigenes Leben, das sie wider mich kehrten und mit dem sie mich verfolgten bis weit in die Nacht hinein. Hätte ich es besser gehabt, stiller und freundlicher, hätte meine Stube zu mir gehalten und wäre ich gesund geblieben, vielleicht hätte ich es doch gekonnt: Dinge machen aus Angst. (18.7.1903, LAS, pp. 74-5)

Rilke struggles in the Requiem to make the ‘Kunstding’, the poetic figure which establishes freedom (‘Freiheit’: 234) and equanimity (‘Beruhigung’: 95), out of his fear of death, and so this fear remains untransformed and at large in the shape of a ghost.74 Rilke has been unable to do with it what Clara does with her grief in the earlier Requiem, when she makes the wreath, and what he advises the late Kalckreuth he should have done:

O alter Fluch der Dichter,
die sich beklagen, wo sie sagen sollten,
die immer urteilen über ihr Gefühl

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74 ‘Die Spanische Trilogie I’ proposes making acquaintance with the unfamiliar: ‘aus den Fremden, denn/nicht Einen kenn ich, Herr, und mir und mir/mir/Ding zu machen’ (1913, SW II, p. 44). The suggestion is that fear of the unknown is overcome in the transformation of the unknown element into art, for this transformation unites subject and object. The Ninth Elegy also celebrates the transformation of suffering in artistic form: ‘Zeig ihm, wie glücklich ein Ding sein kann, wie schuldlos und unser/wie selbst das klagende Leid rein zur Gestalt sich entschließt/dient als ein Ding, oder stirbt in ein Ding’ (SW I, p. 719: 60).
Rilke had aspired to the equanimity ('Gleichmut') of art for the dead Modersohn-Becker, calling this in the *Requiem* 'Großmut' (34), 'Überfülle' (34), and associating it with the self-repleteness of childhood ('weil du so sicher bist, so in dir selbst/daß du herumgeheist wie ein Kind, nicht bange': 36). He had believed the transformation was complete and that Modersohn-Becker had transcended all proximity of language and presence ('Ich glaubte dich viel weiter': 13; 'tief hinein und fort von allem': 89). But instead Modersohn-Becker (and the death she represents) have remained too saturated with the instinctive human fear of death and the language of this death which is conventionally defined. Rilke projects his own failure to translate this first creative response to death into the material of art onto Modersohn-Becker in the narrative of the miscarriage of 'der eigene Tod'. The desperate dividedness and confusion which introduce the *Requiem* (this atmosphere is created in the ghost’s half-tangible, disorientating and erring presence culminating in 'Mich verwirrs': 13) are symptoms of the incongruity that an artist whose work is transformation has not achieved a transformed death of her ‘own’:

Mich verwirrs,

daß *du* gerade irrst und kommst, die mehr
verwandelt hat als irgend eine Frau. (13)

But the confusion the ghost introduces is also that of identity, for it blurs the boundaries between speaker and addressee. The Rilke of the *Requiem*, the poet who has transformed the world more than any other, is confronted by the ghost of his own faltering poetry, and by the fear that he will abandon art like Modersohn-Becker.

Rilke announces that Modersohn-Becker’s death was an unhinging interruption and discontinuity which needs ‘work’, the work of art, to say, and therefore integrate, this schism:

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Yet more disconcerting than Modersohn-Becker’s death, however, is the abortive attempt of art to reconcile itself to this otherness, as Rilke states when he laments:

Doch daß du selbst erschrakst und auch noch jetzt
den Schrecken hast, wo Schrecken nicht mehr gilt;
daß du von deiner Ewigkeit ein Stück
verlierst und hier hereintrittst, Freundin, hier,
wo alles noch nicht ist; (21)

Modersohn-Becker is still afraid of death and otherness in death. She is unsettled and unsatisfied with that other side of existence which should be her completion as an artist, and the implication is that poetry must do more work to become the language of death, and the rest of the Requiem will be a quest for a language of requiem and mourning which will be reconciled to the difference of death.

Rilke begins this work by putting the question of whether he should travel to a foreign land to fulfil that artistic longing for otherness which was Modersohn-Becker’s connection to the infinite:

Soll ich in ein Land,
das du nicht sahst, obwohl es dir verwandt
war wie die andre Hälfte deiner Sinne? (48)

This pilgrimage sets out to witness the foreign and the unfamiliar as part of the artistic journey towards the otherness which Modersohn-Becker’s mirror-world represents (‘Ich glaubte dich viel weiter’: 13; ‘fort von allem’: 89), and by the end of the Requiem Rilke is still invoking this distanced, other existence in ‘das Fernste’ (273). If Modersohn-Becker never saw this foreign terrain (‘ein Land./das du nicht sahst’: 48) then Rilke

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76 Being authentically oneself means absorbing the beyond. ‘Kindheit’ celebrates the imaginative acquisition of distances and otherness: children are ‘so mit großen Fernen überladen’ (NG I, SW I, p. 511). A letter to Clara Rilke speaks of the immanence of the infinite in spatial terms as the conflation of distance and proximity: ‘Sie unterschieden damals so krampfhaft zwischen dem Fremden und dem Gewohnten; sie merkten nicht, wie sehr beides überall ist im dichtesten Durchdringen’ (25.2.07, Briefe 1906-07, p. 206). See also sonnet II, 29: ‘Stiller Freund der vielen Fernen, fühle/wie dein Atem noch den Raum vermehrt’ (SW I, p. 770). Again here spatial metaphors are used to convey the imaginative scope.
must see it for her, and yet this is an expedition which only purports to re-acquire for Modersohn-Becker the artistic gaze, the language of defamiliarisation she perfected but did not sustain. The poet undertakes this journey on the pretext that through him Modersohn-Becker regains her capacity to see and transform, but the poetic journey is in fact the poet’s own. He must become a better artist, must acquire the transformative gaze of the Modersohn-Becker who saw herself and the world as fruit, for the transformation of death takes place in the poetry and art of the living. If Modersohn-Becker’s completion is dependent upon Rilke’s artistic work he must write the foreign, defamiliarising language of poetry, which unifies her with that which transcends her senses.

Rilke may be contemplating the same scrutiny of the physical surface of the world which he undertook in the *Neue Gedichte*, but it is probable that the intended journey is an exploration of imaginative space, and that the country is the most foreign country imaginable – the land of the dead, represented by Egypt. Rilke’s ambition may be to make the imaginative journey towards death in Modersohn-Becker’s name, connecting her to her death via himself and his own ‘eigener Tod’. Catling links Egypt and death in the *Requiem’s* allusion to ‘rivers’ in the foreign country (‘Ich will auf seinen Flüssen fahren’: 51), quoting from a letter to Clara after she had written to Rilke of her experiences in Egypt, in which Rilke says of the Nile:

> zum ersten Mal fühle ich einen Fluß so, so wesenhaft, so bis an den Rand der Personifikation heran wirklich, so als ob er ein Schicksal hätte, eine dunkle Geburt und einen großen, ausgebreiteten Tod, und zwischen beiden ein Leben, ein langes... so wenig zu bewältigen. (20.1.07, *Briefe 1906-07*, p. 164)

The Nile, saturated with the abyss of death, is the indefinable ‘Other’, and Rilke’s travelling across the Nile evokes the ancient Egyptian tradition which envisages the progression from the land of the living to the land of the dead on the other shore of the Nile (Catling, 1986, p. 35). Rilke undertakes here an extension of the self into one’s own death, choosing Egypt as the topographical space for a meeting between the living...

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77 Catling discusses the Egyptian imagery in the *Requiem*, arguing that Egypt symbolises the ‘verwandtes Land’ as the extreme, alien, world beyond our world and even the land of the dead (1986, p. 43). The *Requiem* is recognising Modersohn-Becker’s leanings towards an Egyptian aesthetic in her later work. For comments on the influence of Egyptian art on Modersohn-Becker see Busch (1981, p. 80, and *passim*), Hermann (1955, p. 17), Petzet (1957, pp. 49-50, p. 103), von Reinken (1983, p. 82), Schmalenbach (1972), Uhde-Stahl (1990, pp. 111-2). See also Rilke’s letter to Clara which compares her bust of Modersohn-Becker to an Egyptian bust in the Louvre (4.9.1908, *Briefe 1907-14*, pp. 45-6) (a cast of Clara’s bust from 1908 is at Galerie Cohrs-Zirus, Bergstraße 33, Worpswede, or see Pettit, 1983, p. 269, for a photograph of it)
and the dead. This land is the ‘other half’ of Modersohn-Becker’s being, as related
(‘verwandt’) to her as her transformed mirror image.

The journey of the artistic gaze towards death is one which seeks the extremes of
experience and language, travelling as it does under the motto ‘Ans-Ende-Gehen’
(‘Kunstdinge sind ja immer Ergebnisse des In-Gefahr-Gewesen-Seins, des in einer
279-80), and it pushes even further than a surveying of humans and their lives in the
foreign land (their customs, their religion, their work, their society):

Dann aber will ich, wenn ich vieles weiß,
einfach die Tiere anschaun, daß ein Etwas
von ihrer Wendung mir in die Gelenke
herübergleitet; will ein kurzes Dasein
in ihren Augen haben, die mich halten
und langsam lassen, ruhig, ohne Urteil. (61)

The gaze strives even to know what is beyond knowledge as it seeks the animal
kingdom in which it might be transformed. It distils and absorbs what is ineffable in the
beasts (‘ein Etwas von ihrer Wendung’) and loses itself in their eyes. As discussed in
the previous chapters, the Eighth Elegy portrays animals as creatures of the infinite, and
here again in the Requiem, they are the posture and the eyeholes of a different world,
intimating death physically (‘mir in die Gelenke/herübergleitet’) and becoming part of
the life-force of the body. As the Rilke of the Requiem beckons otherness to himself (‘in
mir’) so does he import the ‘turn’, the difference of the animal, which might be its
directedness towards the ‘open’ in the Eighth Elegy, and a state of consciousness which
is beyond the human. The poet’s journey towards outsidedness and death must
comprehend and receive the aura of animals (the Eighth Elegy states: ‘Was drauß en ist,
wir wissens aus des Tiers/ Antlitz’, SW I, p. 714: 5). This receptivity also implies the
self-abandonment which Modersohn-Becker achieved in her art, for the gaze wants to
relinquish its subjectivity and become the object of the animals’ gaze (‘ein kurzes
Dasein/in ihren Augen haben’). This eye contact with animals evokes the cats of the
Neue Gedichte, in whose eyes the observer loses herself. In desiring this ‘kurzes
Dasein’ and objectification, Rilke is assenting to transience. The eyes of the animals
become the artist’s mirror which transforms the artist’s gaze, teaching it relinquishment,
equanimit y and openness (‘langsam lassen, ruhig, ohne Urteil’), i.e. teaching it death

Hermann discusses Egypt’s mythological status as a realm beyond time which hosts the living and the
(the *Eighth Elegy* relates death and openness in the seeing animal: ‘Mit allen Augen sieht die Kreatur/das Offene’; ‘das freie Tier/hat seinen Untergang stets hinter sich’; ‘denn nah am Tod sieht man den Tod nicht mehr/und starst hinaus, vielleicht mit großem Tierblick’, SW I, p. 714: 1-23). The poet takes the gaze (‘Tierblick’) and gesture (‘Wendung’) of the animals into his own gaze and gesture (‘die Gelenke’), so that the essence of the animals becomes ‘Blut [...] Blick und Gebärde’ in him (*Malte*, p. 725). In meeting the gaze of animals, the poet comes to the edge of the abyss.

The *Requiem* here wants to share in the creative potential of the animals’ detachment, their inappropriability and their own disinclination to judge and define. If it can extract this animal-gaze, it can itself see without preconception in the spirit of the *Rodin Monograph*, which refers to the Rodin sculpture in its own space as pregnant with simple being rather than burdened with interpretation (it possesses ‘einen Halt und eine Hoheit, die aus seinem einfachen Dasein, nicht aus seiner Bedeutung kam’, *Rodin*, p. 149). ‘Einfach’ joins ‘rein’ in indicating the sheer, unintelligible force of ‘Dasein’, and is employed in the *Requiem*’s quest for a gaze and a language of the unlimitable ‘Other’: ‘ Dann aber will ich, wenn ich vieles weiß/einfach die Tiere anschaun’ (61). The gaze turns to plants and fruit too in search of a poetic language:

Ich will mir von den Gärt'nern viele Blumen
hersagen lassen, daß ich in den Scherben
der schönen Eigennamen einen Rest
hertüberbringe von den hundert Düften.
Und Früchte will ich kaufen, Früchte, drin
das Land noch einmal ist, bis an den Himmel. (68)

The inner openness of animals is transmitted to the poet, and an essence is distilled from flowers which expresses their indefinability. The extraction of perfume becomes a metaphor for the poetic process, which shatters the restrictive specificity of Adamic language, the naming of plants and animals, and refigures the discharged nouns into a different mode of expression, one which brings forth the unscientific name of the nameless infinite within nature. In preserving their plurality and ambivalence in language the poet discovers the transcendence of the transient flowers, their ‘bis ins Unzerstörbare hinein gesteigerte Wirklichkeit’ (to Clara, 9.10. 1907 *Cézanne*, p. 21).

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79 The impassive gaze of animals is evoked again in these lines from ‘J’ai vu dans l’oeil animal’ from *Vergers*: ‘J’ai vu dans l’oeil animal/la vie paisible qui dure/Je calme impartial/de l’imperturbable nature’ (1924, SW II, p. 551).

80 Catling points out that the production of essences from flower extracts for perfume is a traditional industry in Egypt (1986, p. 39). The *Fifth Elegy* offers a herb to the angel to be praised in a newly-created name (‘Subrisio Saltaf’) as a perfume (SW I, p. 703: 67).
The fruits which microcosmically embody earth and sky also transcend their individual definitions.

It is this ‘increased reality’, exceeding the destructibility of the specific object, which Rilke wants to achieve for Modersohn-Becker (‘So will ich dich behalten [...] tief hinein/und fort von allem’: 88). He learns from the relinquishing gaze of the animals the action of ‘lassen’ (‘die mich halten/und langsam lassen’) which governs the transformation of the dead (‘Ich habe Tote, und ich ließ sie hin’: 1). The letting-go of Modersohn-Becker and the dead is an exercise in learning how to die oneself. Art must transform grief at the loss of a friend into a celebration of that loss of specificity and limitation. A language must be created which can say this relinquishment, and this language of poetry writes the deaths of both its object and its writer. The completion which Rilke seeks for Modersohn-Becker on his imaginative journey to the land of the dead is a language of death which can let go of and rewrite previous definitions, integrating the infinite possibilities of meaning which stand outside the language of nomenclature and designation (‘Eigennamen’). The departure of the dead into a space beyond linguistic fixation is their entry into a language of release which can create for them a new kind of permanence (‘So will ich dich behalten’: 88) as poetic figures.

Rilke is ready to apply this poetic gaze to the ghost of Modersohn-Becker when he says:

Komm her ins Kerzenlicht. Ich bin nicht bang, die Toten anzuschauen. Wenn sie kommen, so haben sie ein Recht, in unserm Blick sich aufzuhalten, wie die andern Dinge. (100)

The poet intends here to transform death in the way objects are transformed in the *Neue Gedichte*. He summons the ghost to him to be ‘seen’ in the inclusive artistic gaze which takes in annihilation and negation as well as beauty and coherence (see again the letter to Jakob Baron Uexküll: ‘Die Kunst nicht für einen Auswahl aus der Welt zu halten [...]’, 19.8.1909, *Briefe 1907-14*, p. 74). But Rilke and Modersohn-Becker are involved in a collaboration of seeing here, for his invitation to her to be seen is simultaneously an invitation to see and transform the rose on the desk:

Komm her; wir wollen eine Weile still sein. Sieh diese Rose an auf meinem Schreibtisch; ist nicht das Licht um sie genau so zaghaft wie über dir: sie dürfte auch nicht hier sein. Im Garten draußen, unvermischt mit mir,
The poet teaches transformation to the artist in order to learn it from her. If Modersohn-Becker can readjust her gaze, it will mean the achievement of her own transformation into death, but of course the work of transformation is actually Rilke’s. The poet invokes the hushed atmosphere in which creativity can take place, and turns with the ghost to the writing desk to begin the poetic work. He implores the rose and Modersohn-Becker to be ‘draußen’ in the autonomous space of art and the abyss, resisting subordination by subjective consciousness (‘Bewuβtsein’), and asserting their poetic identity as alien ‘Dinge-in-sich’. The word ‘unvermischt’ might evoke the ‘trübe verflochten’ of Modersohn-Becker’s marital life (to Sidonie Nádherný, 3.11.08, Nádherný, p. 89), proposing the liberation of the object from too proximate a relation to the human and conventional world. The rose is an image of transformation in Rilke’s poetry (see, for instance, ‘Die Rosenschale’, NG I, SW I, pp. 552-4), and its appearance in this poem may symbolise the transformative possibilities of metaphor, as well as the anonymity and otherness of death (see ‘Rose, oh reiner Widerspruch’, 1925, SW II, p. 185). The rose is encircled in a timid (‘zaghaft’), other-worldly light, renouncing the clarity of definition and perhaps evoking the ‘Kunstdinge’ of the Rodin Monograph, with the play of light on their surface and the sense that they inhabit their own space (‘unvermischt mit mir’). In anticipation of another transformative act of light Rilke asks Modersohn-Becker to step into the candlelight, which, like the flame of ‘Verwandlung’ in sonnet II, 12, seems to suggest the pull of things towards their transformation in art and poetry. This attempt to see Modersohn-Becker in her death as opposed to in her life is the rewriting of the ‘Schicksal’ which came inscribed in the Selbstbildnis am 6. Hochzeitstag:

was heißt dich die Konturen deines Leibes
auslegen wie die Linien einer Hand,
daß ich sie nicht mehr seh’n kann ohne Schicksal? (97)

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82 The First Elegy uses the rose as an example of an object which is heavily signified in human language but can be newly and differently meaningful in death: ‘Rosen, und anderen eigens versprechenden Dingen/nicht die Bedeutung menschlicher Zukunft zu geben’ (SW I, p. 687: 80).
83 ‘Leichen-Wäsche’ is also suffused with the light of metamorphosis:
Doch als
die Küchenlampe kam und unruhig brannte
im dunkeln Luftzug, war der Unbekannte
ganz unbekannt. (SW I, pp. 588-9)
The artistic gaze in candlelight tries to restore to the half-tangible ghost the infinite abyss of her physical absence, to erase the textual lines of the body which commit Modersohn-Becker to a pre-scripted, literal existence. It seeks a new language of the abyss and the otherness of death, inspired by the exploration of death in the landscape of the foreign and the alien glance of the beasts. The Requiem tries to become a language of mourning which affirms loss and the difference of death in the encircling of the dead in poetic refiguration.

The poet invites the artist to re-see herself and her subjects, and he invites her to rearticulate her death in a new language of mourning which completes ‘den eigenen Tod’. The Requiem repeatedly offers to practise with Modersohn-Becker the mourning of her death: ‘Laß uns zusammen klagen, daß dich einer/aus deinem Spiegel nahm’ (117); ‘O laß uns klagen’ (142); ‘So mußt du kommen, tot, und hier mit mir/Klagen nachholen’ (194). The Requiem tries to teach the ghost a mourning which explores the otherness of death rather than lamenting its incomprehensibility and deprivation, in the hope that Modersohn-Becker will feel through this mourning her artistic completion within death. Rilke urges Modersohn-Becker to make the transformation she proved herself capable of in life but did not fully realise. But it is significant that the ghost is invited to mourn with the poet. The poet is himself practising this new writing of death, asserting it insistently precisely because he fears he has not yet achieved it. The perpetual restating of the Requiem’s intention to mourn is the reflection of its anxiety that Modersohn-Becker is stranded between life and death because the mourning for her is deficient, and that it must reform the traditional language of mourning. The ghost’s request for transformation is the poet’s plea to Modersohn-Becker, the artist who represents his own artistic project, to transform death. Rilke is trying to teach himself through his fellow artistic spirit, Modersohn-Becker, how to mourn, how to create the language of death which realises death itself.

Rilke encourages Modersohn-Becker to mourn the deficiency of her death rather than the death itself. Her attempt to re-enter life is an act of conventional mourning for it is a response to the fear of death (‘Doch daß du selbst erschrakst und auch noch jetzt/den Schrecken hast, wo Schrecken nicht mehr gilt’: 21). Her exploration of otherness in her art had been her self-education in death, but then she compromised with life, resulting in a homesickness for the familiar and an urge to retrieve the props which had accompanied her through life (‘du irrst/wenn du gerührt zu irgend einem Ding/ein Heimweh hast’: 8; ‘Hast du irgendwo/ein Ding zurückgelassen, das sich quält/und das dir nachwill?’: 46). But Rilke tries to convert Modersohn-Becker to a mourning for the
state of death rather than the state of life, asking her to lament that she left the mirror, the place of difference and death (‘Laß uns zusammen klagen, daß dich einer/aus deinem Spiegel nahm’: 117), and that she recalled her blood from the higher circulation of art which was her connection to death (‘O laß uns klagen. Weißt du, wie dein Blut/aus einem Kreisen ohnegleichen zögernd/und ungern wiederkam, da du es abriefst?’: 142). Rilke insists that Modersohn-Becker join him in the incantation of a poetics of transformation, believing that in uttering the language of metaphor and translation into otherness, they can both make it their own.

The compulsion to mourn seems to become almost hysterical in the summoning of the professional mourners. The Requiem swells with weeping in its anxiety to over-compensate for inadequate mourning, insisting that Modersohn-Becker and the poet have to ‘catch up’ in their lamentations (‘hier mit mir/Klagen nachholen’: 194):

Ob man dennoch hätte Klagefrauen
auftreiben müssen? Weiber, welche weinen
für Geld, und die man so bezahlen kann,
daß sie die Nacht durch heulen, wenn es still wird.
Gebräuche her! Wir haben nicht genug
Gebräuche. Alles geht und wird verredet.
So mußt du kommen, tot, und hier mit mir
Klagen nachholen. (188)

The professional mourners counteract the repression of death (‘verreden’), defeating the silence with the sounds of grief, and representing the rituals and customs which externalise death. They make death public and therefore interpersonal. The professional mourners do bring an impersonal voice to death, perhaps the impersonal, self-effacing language to which Rilke aspires in his Requiem. This voice is not afflicted with the immediate emotion of grief, not paralysed by the negation of death (a paralysis inherent in ‘still’ and ‘verreden’). Rilke is asking Modersohn-Becker and himself to ‘catch up’ to death, to align themselves with its impersonality and its detachment, and to complete this abyss within their own language and their own deaths. The First Elegy also uses the term ‘Nachholen’ to describe the recently dead adapting to their death:

85 Schäfer reinforces this reading, arguing that the Requiem evokes basic rituals of mourning and demands a reformed, ‘managed’ or transformed grieving which accommodates the estrangement and senselessness of death (1996, pp. 101-3). Hermann however sees ‘Nachholen’ and the death-rituals as attempts to make up for a lack of, rather than the wrong kind of, mourning on Rilke’s part: ‘Weil die Totenklage für sie
Freilich ist es seltsam, die Erde nicht mehr zu bewohnen, kaum erlernte Gebräuche nicht mehr zu üben, Rosen, und andern eigens versprechenden Dingen nicht die Bedeutung menschlicher Zukunft zu geben; das, was man war in unendlich ängstlichen Händen, nicht mehr zu sein, und selbst den eigenen Namen wegzulassen wie ein zerbrochenes Spielzeug. Seltsam, die Wünsche nicht weiterzuwünschen. Seltsam, alles, was sich bezog, so lose im Raume flattern zu sehen. Und das Totsein ist mühsam und voller Nachholn, daß man allmählich ein wenig Ewigkeit spürt. (SW I, pp. 687-8: 70)

The newly dead must wean themselves off life, life’s attribution of meanings, and life’s allocation of names and individuality (the ‘zerbrochenes Spielzeug’ recalls the ‘Scherben/der schönen Eigennamen’: 69). Their entry into death is an excursion into the strange and the dead must make up that distance to the infinite. The word ‘mühsam’ again implies the effort of artistic work. The mourning for Modersohn-Becker becomes, then, an exercise in restoring her to death, in contradistinction to the kind of non-artistic, reflex grieving which craves the return of the loved one to life.

Rilke admits his own compulsion to mourn instinctively but declares that this kind of mourning must be transformed:

Hörst du, daß ich klage?
Ich möchte meine Stimme wie ein Tuch hinwerfen über deines Todes Scherben und zerrn an ihr, bis sie in Fetzen geht, und alles, was ich sage, müßte so zerlumpt in dieser Stimme gehn und frieren; blieb es beim Klagen. Doch jetzt klag ich an: den Einen, der dich aus dir zurückzog, (195)

This image of the mourning voice as masochistic (‘zerrn an ihr’) and self-paralysing (‘frieren’) represents the instinctive grief which dwells only on the destructiveness and fragmentation of death (‘deines Todes Scherben’), and cannot lift itself beyond this bleakness to begin the transformation of the dead. The voice which cannot mourn

unterblieb, kam die Verstorbene wieder.’ He argues that Rilke calls for ‘Gebräuche’, the mourning rituals which aided the ancient Egyptians, but are lacking in the modern world (1955, p. 450).
differently is portrayed as a tattered (‘zerlumpt’) shroud (‘meine Stimme wie ein Tuch/hinwerfen über deines Todes Scherben’), unable to give death its covering, to assent to the concealment and eclipse of its interior otherness. The ‘cloth’ represents the requiem poem itself in its ambition to re-shroud Modersohn-Becker’s riven ‘eigener Tod’, to gather the shattered pieces into wholeness again, into a complete poetic figure, reinstating Modersohn-Becker’s death as art. Rilke is determined that the poetic voice of his *Requiem* will unify language and death, and so he turns from the compulsion to languish in mourning and begins the transformation of mourning with the morphing of the word ‘Klagen’ into ‘Anklagen’ (201). The new mourning will defend the shroudedness and incommensurability of death and art, and attack the quotidian language of literality which perpetually negates the imagination (the language in which Otto Modersohn recalled his wife from her imaginal life).

The *First Elegy* offers the poetic lament as an alternative language which explores and celebrates the space of absence, absorbing the abyss and emptiness of death:

Schließlich brauchen sie uns nicht mehr, die Frühentrückten,  
man entwöhnt sich des Irdischen sanft, wie man den Brüsten  
milde der Mutter enträcht. Aber wir, die so große  
Geheimnisse brauchen, denen aus Trauer so oft  
seliger Fortschritt entspringt - können wir sein ohne sie?  
Ist die Sage umsonst, daß einst in der Klage um Linos  
wagende erste Musik dürre Erstarrung durchdrang;  
daß erst im erschrockenen Raum, dem ein beinah göttlicher Jüngling  
plötzlich für immer entrat, das Leere in jene  
Schwingung geriet, die uns jetzt hinreiβt und trästet und hilft. (SW I, p. 688: 86)

The separateness of the dead, described at the beginning of this stanza, is imperative to the living whose completion is their relation to distance and absence. The proposed lament is one which becomes the language of the empty space of death as the lament for Linus was the musicalisation of his ‘shocked’, ‘paralysed’ vacancy, the transformation of silence and nothingness into the language of art. It is the space of departure which is charged and creative, and in this elegy death and art are mutually inspiring, for the death of Linus brings forth the first music and music re-composes this death as the consolation and completion of the living (‘seliger Fortschritt’; ‘die uns jetzt hinreiβt und trästet und hilft’). The ‘helpfulness’ of death and art’s departedness reverberates at the

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86 The unicorn of the *Sonette an Orpheus* is also an empty space (‘Zwar war es nicht’, *SO* II, 4). The emptiness of this space seems to fertilise itself and grow: ‘Sie ließen immer Raum./Und in dem Raume,
end of the \textit{Requiem}, as Rilke asks the dead artist to help him as the distance, which symbolises the detachment of the work of art, helps him (‘Doch hilf mir so [...] wie mir das Fernste manchmal hilft’: 272).

The function of mourning in the \textit{Requiem} is to reinforce the boundary between the accessible proximity of life and the estranged distance of death in an attempt to make Modersohn-Becker whole, and heal her distractedness (‘zerstreut und halb’: 26) by reaccommodating her to the world of art. As part of this mourning Rilke urges her ghost to detach herself from reality, saying ‘Komm nicht zurück’ and ‘sei/tot bei den Toten’ (270). These words of exorcism attempt to expel Modersohn-Becker both from the literal world and from the intimate, personal consciousness of Rilke the private man. They are intended to perform that transformation which the poet Rilke believes he has not yet accomplished – he must pronounce Modersohn-Becker free of his prolonged emotional appropriation of her, releasing her into death instead of fighting her loss and so prolonging the agony of bereavement. As the end of the \textit{Requiem} invokes ‘das Fernste’ (273), it pushes Modersohn-Becker beyond Rilke the man and into the world which is the creation of the artist. It is the aesthetic programme of defamiliarisation, operative in the \textit{Neue Gedichte}, and invoked here to achieve the poetic transformation of death.\footnote{A letter to Clara describes the method of distancing objects in Cézanne’s work as that of a conscious ‘showing’ of them, whereby their reality and immediacy is effaced: ‘das Nächste schon hat die Töne der Ferne, ist weggenommen und nur gezeigt, nicht wie sonst hingestellt’ (12.10.07, \textit{Cézanne}, p. 26).}

The private man in mourning must turn to the artist within himself for release, and Rilke must detach Modersohn-Becker in the same way as he claims, at the beginning of the \textit{Requiem}, that he has managed to detach himself from other dead

\begin{itemize}
  \item klar und ausgespart/erhob es leicht sein Haupt und brauchte kaum/zu sein' (SW I, p. 753). The Rilkean word ‘aussparen’ (‘to leave blank’, ‘to omit’) appears here alongside ‘klar’, implying that an existence constituted in absence is more potent and real. ‘Aussparung’ is the poetic cultivation of an internalised world, an evocation \textit{ex negativo} which plays an increased role in the abstraction of Rilke’s later poetry but is, as the \textit{Requiem} demonstrates, already at work in his middle period. ‘Archaischer Torso Apollos’ (\textit{NG II}, SW I, p. 557) imaginatively engenders a thing out of the potent possibilities suggested by its absence or deficiency, and in ‘Leichen-Wäsche’ (\textit{NG II}, SW I, pp. 588-9) and ‘Morgue’ (\textit{NG I}, SW I, p. 503), as I have shown, the imaginative presence of the dead is evoked from within their non-presence. De Man says of the chiasmic principle in the \textit{Neue Gedichte}: ‘The absences create the space and the play needed for the reversals and finally lead to a totalization which they seemed, at first, to make possible’ (1979, p. 44). See ‘Sinnend von Legende zu Legende’, (‘Auf den Tod der Gräfin Luise Schwerin I’, 1906, SW II, p. 9) for the poetic refusal to prescribe a language which tries to demarcate and contain the dead woman (‘Unrecht tut an dir Kontur und Mund’) and seeks the language of death instead in expropriation or ‘Aussparung’ (‘dich aus allen Dingen auszusparen’). See also: ‘Damals fiel es mir auf, daß man von einer Frau nichts sagen könne; ich merkte, wenn sie von ihr erzählten, wie sie sie aussparten, wie sie die anderen nannten und beschrieben, die Umgebungen, die Ortlichkeiten, die Gegenstände bis an eine bestimmte Stelle heran, wo das alles aufhörte, sanft und gleichsam vorsichtig aufhörte, mit dem leichten, niemals nachgezogenen Kontur, der sie einschloß’ (\textit{Malte}, pp. 785-6). And see the ‘leaving a blank’ in the following letter: ‘J’ai évoqué surtout des femmes en faisant soigneusement toutes les choses autour d’elles, laissant un blanc qui ne serait qu’un vide, mais qui, contourné avec tendresse et amplement, devient vibrant et lumineux, presque comme un de vos marbres’ (to Auguste Rodin, 29.12.1908, \textit{Briefe 1907-14}, p. 63).
\end{itemize}
friends: 'Ich habe Tote, und ich ließ sie hin' (1). Previously the poet has been able to assimilate the dead through his relinquishment of them, i.e. to assimilate something of their liberation, their liberation both from life and convention and from himself. By releasing Modersohn-Becker into the absence and distance, the ‘otherness’ of death, Rilke believes he can secure her friendship and her transformed presence within him: 'wie mir das Fernste manchmal hilft: in mir' (273). The invitation to her to be ‘hier mit mir’ (194) and ‘tot’ (194) in lament is the aspiration towards that presence through absence, the Rilkean paradox of non-possessive possession. The man may continue to identify with the dead friend on a proximate, personal, conscious level, but the poet must release her and free her from the man. To transform her, he must follow the example of the painter of ‘Der Berg’ who promotes the distance of his subject by painting ‘teilnahmslos und weit und ohne Meinung’ (NG II, SW I, p. 639). Her disappearance from conscious, possessive mind and memory allows her reappearance as transformed, more infinite being, as ‘Blick und Gebärde’, ‘within’ the poet (Malte, p. 725). Schäfer draws the distinction between the figure of the disturbed ghost, forever returning and never moving forwards into transformation, and the rebirth of the dead within the living – their true form of return:


88 See again Rilke’s conflation of ‘Nähe’ and ‘Ferne’ in the letter to Clara (25.2.07, Briefe 1906-07, p. 206). It is anticipated that the inner life of the poet will be transformed by its relation to distance.
89 See also the poem ‘Nicht um-stossen, was steht!’ where ‘verlorener’ is ‘gebundener’ (1924, SW II, p. 175). The poem ‘Du im Voraus/verlome Geliebte’ also suggests that the absence of the companion in the real world is an enriching of its presence in the inner world (1913/14, SW II, p. 79). Blanchot echoes the friendship in death which Rilke hopes to form in the Requiem, identifying ‘infinite distance’ and estrangement as the characteristics of friendship and death. The ‘silence of speech’ that friendship gravitates around is thus a ‘fissure of death’ (Friendship, p. 291). Rilke too comments on the infinite space opened up in a relationship which does not narrow into emotional dependence and suffocation, anticipating the relationship with the dead friend which the Requiem aspires to: ‘Aber, das Bewußtsein vorausgesetzt, daß auch zwischen den nächsten Menschen unendliche Fernen bestehen bleiben, kann ihnen ein wundervolles Nebeneinanderwohnen erwachsen, wenn es ihnen gelingt, die Weite zwischen sich zu lieben, die ihnen die Möglichkeit gibt, einander immer in ganzer Gestalt und vor einem großen Himmel zu sehen!’ (to Emanuel von Bodman, 17.8.1901, BTF, p. 108).
Rilke intends to accept Modersohn-Becker’s premature death as her ‘kurzes Dasein’, to let her go within the relinquishing gaze (‘ein kurzes Dasein/in ihren Augen haben, die mich halten/und langsam lassen’: 65) in order to refiture her as an anonymous, creative force within an achieved artwork.

The unicorn sonnet presences the unicorn within the imagination, achieving the internal presence which the Requiem tries to compose for Modersohn-Becker:

O dieses ist das Tier, das es nicht giebt.  
Sie wußtens nicht und habens jeden Falls 
- sein Wandel, seine Haltung, seinen Hals, 
bis in des stillen Blickes Licht - geliebt.

Zwar war es nicht. Doch weil sie’s liebten, ward 
ein reines Tier. Sie ließ es immer Raum. 
Und in dem Raume, klar und ausgespart, 
erhob es leicht sein Haupt und brauchte kaum 
zu sein. Sie nährten es mit keinem Korn, 
nur immer mit der Möglichkeit, es sei. 
Und die gab solche Stärke an das Tier,
däß es aus sich ein Stirnhorn trieb. Ein Horn. 
Zu einer Jungfrau kam es weiß herbei - 
und war im Silber-Spiegel und in ihr. (SO II, 4, SW I, p. 753)

The Requiem and the unicorn sonnet echo each other in their last two words. The sonnet asserts that the unicorn lives ‘within’ the imaginary realm of art, and the Requiem implores Modersohn-Becker to be ‘within’ its poet. The love out of which the unicorn is created is associated with the imaginative potential of virginity, the non-possessive, non-dependent state of solitude and self-repleteness which characterises artistic creation. The virgin holds the image of the unicorn inside herself (the myth of the virgin and the unicorn is that the virgin can see a unicorn in the mirror but profane people cannot), and the Requiem invites the dead friend to liberate the poet and enable his poetry.  

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90 Malte writes of his attempts to recall a beggar he saw and finds he must construct the beggar himself in his incomprehensibility, as one must ‘image’ the dead: ‘Ich war beschäftigt, ihn mir vorzustellen, ich unternahm die Arbeit ihn einzubilden, und der Schweiß trat mir aus vor Anstrengung. Denn ich mußte ihn mir machen wie man einen Toten macht, für den keine Beweise mehr da sind, keine Bestandteile; der ganz und gar innen zu leisten ist’ (p. 900). ‘Einbilden’, ‘imagining’ or ‘inmaking’ is not about proofs and fitting together component parts to reproduce objective meaning. ‘Leisten’ is the achievement of the work of art, and Modersohn-Becker is constructed throughout the Requiem in metaphor and poetic figure. Modersohn-Becker’s internality within Rilke is a fictional construct which offers a different kind of
Rilke wants the dead, not the living, Modersohn-Becker to reside within him, and the mourning undertaken in the *Requiem* is the kind of mourning which reintegrates death: ‘Was mich angeht, so starb mir, was mir starb, sozusagen in mein eigenes Herz hinein’ (6.1.1923, *Sizzo*, p. 51). Death, via the dead Modersohn-Becker, enters the living, writing poet who pronounces the unity of imagination and reality as loss pervades his poetry. The *Requiem* opens itself up to receive death into language and into life, uniting the poet with the space outside himself, which is paradoxically the space inside himself, and because the dead Modersohn-Becker represents this death-space, the mourning of the *Requiem* must produce and refigure Modersohn-Becker as the presence of her absence. This is a differently presenced Modersohn-Becker and a differently presenced death, the internalisation of death through a lament which does not deny or negate death. And the admission of the presence of absence is anticipated in the *Requiem* as the dead Modersohn-Becker ‘helping’ the poet from ‘within’. Rilke’s attempt at unification with death through unification with his dead friend is an attempt to re-enact the artistic integration of distance and strangeness which Modersohn-Becker briefly achieved in her painting, *Selbstbildnis als Halbakt mit Bernsteinkette*. As Rilke sees it, in relinquishing the ego the artist achieves union with her object, and he desires this full presence of the art-object within him as he invites Modersohn-Becker to be ‘in mir’.

Rilke the man asks Modersohn-Becker to help him mourn her as an artist should. He summons her to rehearse and perfect ‘Klagen’ with him in an effort to complete her death and at the same time be inspired to achieve that same completion in his own art. Conversations and letters between Rilke and Modersohn-Becker suggest

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91 Ariès writes of a psychological theory which proposes that the bereaved must become accustomed to the absence of the other, must transfer the libido, still obstinately fixed on a living person, and must ‘internalise’ the deceased. The consequences of not achieving this are an inhibition or ‘mummification’ of memory (1982, p. 581).

92 Schäfer describes the dead individual’s potential role as that of a present absentee (‘als wahrhaft Abwesender gegenwärtig’) who brings knowledge of death (‘im Wissen um das Totein’). He argues that the command ‘sei/tot bei den Toten’ is an injunction to Modersohn-Becker not to oppress him with death, ‘nicht als Wiedergänger, als Qualgeist, der mich mitnimmt in den Tod, in Leugnung und Verdrängung des Todes’, but to be with him ‘in klarem Abschied und deshalb in warmer, geborgener hilfreicher Gegenwart des Verstorbenen’. He goes on to state that the purpose of mourning or grieving is the ‘Introjektion, Identifikation, Inkorporation, Internalisierung’ of the dead (1996, p. 100).

93 Petzet agrees that the *Requiem* is concerned with its own poetic task: ‘Wozu aber erfreht der Dichter ihrer Hilfe? Was ist es, womit er aus eigenem Vermögen nicht mehr fertigwerden kann, und wodurch fühlt er das Seine gefährdet? Es ist eine Gefahr, die mitten in ihm selbst aufwuchs, stark genug, das Ganze seines dichterischen Daseins zu treffen’ (1957, p. 169).
that she had tried to cure him of his excessive Romantic subjectivity. As Rilke invites Modersohn-Becker to mourn with him (‘So mußt du kommen, tot, und hier mit mir/Klagen nachholen’: 194), he is asking her to co-write her own Requiem. He is asking for the kind of artistic collaboration which will lay her to rest. The voice of both the living and the dead, the recognisable and the unrecognisable, should be given to the lament, inspiring a new kind of utterance, a new ‘Klage’, one which does not attempt to control, but leaves space for the unknowable and strange. Having the distance and death of Modersohn-Becker at the centre of his work is Rilke’s generation of his own work of death in collaboration with the voices of the dead. In ‘Klagen’ and in the requiem form as he rewrites it for his own secular and poetic purposes Rilke rehearses the need for the language of poetry, a language which absorbs the ellipsis of death and thereby completes both life and death, and by asking Modersohn-Becker to help him ‘say’ the opposition between life and art he is asking her to help him say and achieve the ‘other’,

elliptical nature of both art and death:

 Denn irgendwo ist eine alte Feindschaft
zwischen dem Leben und der großen Arbeit.
Daß ich sie einseh und sie sage: hilf mir. (267)

The saying of the incompatibility of life and art is not a surrender to it, but a refusal to lament it. Saying it is actually the poet’s acceptance of the burden (‘Schwere’) of transforming life into art. This prayer to the ghost for the power to ‘say’ is a prayer for a transformative poetry, and the prayer itself – the requiem poem addressed to Modersohn-Becker’s ghost – is the beginning of this poetry. It asks death for language. It is language which opens itself up to the intervention of death. Only in the different language of the poem can the difference of death be said and invoked.

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94 See their correspondence in BTF, Briefe 1902-06, Briefe 1906-07 and Modersohn-Becker. In his journal Rilke records Modersohn-Becker’s observations on how Clara employs the whole of her being when sculpting a single object. He goes on to write of Modersohn-Becker: ‘Ich bin Dein Lauschender, Dein Lehrling, wenn Du so sprichst, und werde Dein Lehrender, jetzt, da ich Dich lehre, daß Du gut und heilig bist’ (BTF, p. 355). The same mutually educative dynamic is employed in the Requiem.


96 Requiem für Wolf Graf von Kalckreuth makes the same commitment, rejecting lamentation of difficulty and encouraging the ‘saying’ of difficulty in poetry. The poetic articulation is always one which conveys its own struggle to come into being: ‘O alter Fluch der Dichter, die sich beklagen, wo sie sagen sollen’ (SW I, p. 663: 123).

97 Petzet also stresses that the Requiem’s message is that the articulation of the opposition between life and poetry is a poetic articulation, and he argues that poetry can resolve this opposition: ‘Die Spannung
The appeal to the ghost to be dead is the poet's appeal to his own poetry to do the work of death and turn Modersohn-Becker into pure language, as she had turned herself into pure art, into portrait. As the objects of the *Neue Gedichte* have become metaphor, translated out of their conventional, comprehended definitions and into others, the *Requiem* seeks to realise death in a language of poetic configuration which it cannot achieve. The pull of the unpoetic, enacted at the centre of the poem as Modersohn-Becker recalls her blood from art, is the requiem's own fallibility. The penultimate section culminates in a lament that Modersohn-Becker's work was not done, and hangs heavily over the final lines of the *Requiem*, the work of poetry which is also 'long' and not quite 'done': 'eine lange Arbeit,- /die nicht getan ist: dennoch nicht getan' (251). The 'dennoch' overtly introduces the *Requiem*'s own sense of failure as it lapses into a cry for help. The poem ends on a sense of the collapse which it had attributed to Modersohn-Becker's work, the untransformed burden of the fear of death which is essentially for Rilke the fear that there can be no adequate language of death. This 'Schwere', which the poet has been unable to sustain, articulate and survive, presses down on him, bringing the *Requiem* to its afflicted, impotent closure, and leaving the poet still begging for death, in the form of the dead Modersohn-Becker, to inspire him. Instead of shrouding Modersohn-Becker in a poetry which seals her in the constructedness and artifice of metaphor – the 'Sagenkreis' of the unicorn – and induces the closure and restedness of death, the poem's ending gapes open as does Modersohn-Becker in, and after, childbirth ('den Tod der Wöchnerinnen, welche wieder/sich schließen wollen und es nicht mehr können': 185), unable to achieve closure, unable to create the autonomous space of art. The *Requiem* gapes into death, imploring Modersohn-Becker's ghost to realise her own closure through her mutual acceptance of death with the other dead ('sei/tot bei den Toten': 270, a desperate tautology) and in the unselfconscious preoccupation of death ('Tote sind beschäftigt': 271). And of course the 'I' of the poem gapes open, still inviting death into itself as the *Requiem* comes to its final, inconclusive full stop.

zwischen dem Leben und dem Werk, der großen Arbeit, soll nicht nur eingesehen, sondern auch ausgetragen, "gesagt" werden. Solches Sagen aber ist die Sprache des Gedichts; nur im Gedicht wird die 'alte Feindschaft' verwunden und aufgehoben werden' (1957, p. 172). The opposition is overcome only in the sense that poetry is made out of it in 'Sagen'. To articulate the difficulty does not dispel it. The most difficult articulation is the articulation of difficulty and paradox, the holding of both things in opposition and not resolving them. I think that Rilke affirms this difficulty throughout the *Requiem*. The resolution does not make poetry any easier to write. What it does is affirm the 'Feindschaft' and the difference which produces poetry.
This *Requiem* struggles deeply with the imperative to transform. It discovers that just as Modersohn-Becker’s life was not adequately transformed into art, neither can it assimilate Modersohn-Becker’s death as otherness into itself as a poem, as a requiem, a work of rest. Although the *Requiem* invokes ‘Bild’ at every turn, this simply serves to offset the ambivalence of poetry’s grip on death, its ability to integrate and contain death’s traumatic otherness. The *Requiem* does not translate the dead Modersohn-Becker into the other world of the poetic figure achieved in the *Neue Gedichte*, in spite of its repeated insistence on the possibility of this aesthetic realm. For the language with which to address the difficulty of death it turns instead – perhaps without knowing it – to a possible articulation of its dilemma:

Denn irgendwo ist eine alte Feindschaft
zwischen dem Leben und der großen Arbeit.
Daß ich sie einseh und sage: hilf mir. (267)

The *Requiem* may be a metaphor of the excruciating difficulty of the poetic transformation of life and death into language, but it finds in this the potential for an articulation of otherness which perhaps goes beyond the refiguration of the *Neue Gedichte*. The *Requiem* does achieve the ‘Sagen’ of the ‘alte Feindschaft’ between life and art, the antithesis which is not just the ambition to figure a transformed life, but also an authentically articulated death, a death which is spoken in all its trauma and difficulty. It achieves this in its authentic acknowledgement of difficulty (‘Schwere’), its cries of pain. It says difficulty in the difficulty of its saying. It is the language caught between faith and disappointment in the poetic, and it is in this extremely exposed and fragile site, on this boundary of the sayable, that Rilke begins the new phase of his attempt to refigure death’s difference and otherness in art.
4. **Requiem für Wolf Graf von Kalckreuth**

Nichts hat das gedicht gemein
mit der auferstehung,
die erde und himmel miteinander verknüpft,
damit der kelch vorübergehe am menschen

Das bild, das den dichter stellt,
stellt infrage, was er weiß

Das gedicht ist zur ruhe gekommene unruhe

(Und das ist alles, was er je an sicherheit bewohnt)

Und das gedicht ist verzichtet
im leben wie in der sprache
Doch im leben zuerst,
und in beidem gleichviel

Nicht mehr an welt,
als du an einsamkeit entbehren kannst

Nicht einmal mehr
an liebe

Abende, an die du den kopf lehnen kannst
damit das am tage verzweifelt gesuchte wort
aufgeht hinter dem schlaf.

Reiner Kunze, ‘Selbstgespräch für andere’

**Introduction**

Rilke wrote of his requiem poems: ‘Die beiden Dichtungen ergänzen und bestärken einander, und die Idee, daß sie vielleicht eine Publikation für sich ausmachen müßten, ist nun […] noch überzeugter in mir’ (6.11.08, Verleger I, p. 55). *Requiem für Wolf Graf von Kalckreuth* (SW I, pp. 657-64) continues the lament for the ‘death of one’s own’, this time directed at a young poet who committed suicide in 1906, unable to face military service.¹ Again the dead addressee oppresses the ‘I’ of the poem because of his failure to bear the heavy burden of being an artist:

Mir ist das Herz
so schwer von dir, wie von zu schwerem Anfang,
den man hinausschiebt. (1)

¹ For biographical details see Kruse (1949, pp. 17-24).
Unlike Modersohn-Becker, Kalckreuth is not a revenant in this poem, but his death remains with the poet as a burden of transformation, a claustrophobic knotting, a death which is not aesthetically distanced, integrated and achieved. In both requiem poems death is not dead enough. It is stranded and unfinished, and *Requiem für Wolf Graf von Kalckreuth* must teach death how to die in its restating of the theory of transformation and in its own capacity to transform.

Whilst *Requiem für eine Freundin* is focused on the artist’s failure to devote herself to the different condition of art, *Requiem für Wolf Graf von Kalckreuth* locates the non-realisation of ‘der eigene Tod’ in the artist’s impatience with the strangeness and difficulty of art. This *Requiem* states again the work of art’s demand for impersonality and the onset of the imagination through a relinquishment of rationalising and totalising language. It argues that Kalckreuth killed himself before he had matured as an artist (implying that his death was not ripe in him when he died), before he had learnt the value of the different and difficult articulation of art by suffering it fully. Kalckreuth had not been able to bear the intensity and extremity of poetic creativity because it was too foreign for him. He had let immediate emotion, the impatience for poetic achievement, get the better of him. Consequently he had produced a tendentious and subjective poetry instead of the impersonal, transcendent poetic image in which the ‘death of one’s own’ is made. But worst of all Kalckreuth had not realised that only his poetry, and never his suicide, could create his authentic death. The *Requiem* laments that Kalckreuth died in a fit of human emotion rather than in the ‘other’ signification of art, having remained a prisoner of his impulses instead of translating these into a language outside the self which would have been the beginning of a language of death.

One and a half years before Rilke wrote *Requiem für Wolf Graf von Kalckreuth* he wrote to Baroness Uexküll, interpreting the suicide of another young poet, Walter Calé, as an expression of impatience and haste:

Abgeschlossene die Aufgaben, in denen ein Werdender langsam Geduld und Liebe und Hingabe nach ihrer Schwere werten lernt. Zu allgemein bleibt er; zu wenig geht seine Liebe auf Einzelnes ein, auf Geringes, auf Unscheinbares, um an ihm die Maßeinheit zu gewinnen, die schon im Nächstgrößeren millionenmal vorkommt. [...] Daß er mehr darauf bestünde zu gehen (wünsche ich innerlich), barfuß zu gehen womöglich, jeden kleinen Stein, die Schneide jedes Grases in sich aufnehmend und dann und wann sich bückend zu einem unscheinbaren Fund. Weil er mir dann begegnete, während er so immer an mir vorüberfährt Ungeduldiger, Ruheloser... (24.2.1907, Briefe 1906-07, pp. 201-2)

In this passage Rilke points to the artistic requirement that the beginning of all understanding is nothingness ('mit nichts anfangenden Beruf des Künstlers'). The artist must proceed from this abyss (perhaps also cognate with death) of utter ignorance (casting off 'die Last des Wissens' and the determination to deny the limits of knowledge and definition) in order to experience existence as incommensurable and wondrous ('Wunder'). Rilke argues that Calé succumbed in his poetry to a tendency to rush into solution and generalisation, producing a language which touches only the surface of things in its pursuit of immediate accomplishment and fulfilment. This, Rilke believes, is a devaluation of 'Schwere', the poetic struggle for the articulation of otherness. As Calé attempts to capture the big ideas in his work he bypasses the authentic stuff of poetry – the potential for the infinite in the inconspicuous minutiae of experience ('Einziges', 'Geringes', 'Unscheinbares'). Central to Rilke's statement of a poetics here is the necessity of difficulty in poetic language; like Calé, Wolf Graf von Kalckreuth is also guilty of an impatience which prevents him going through the authentic process of poetry into a language which is beyond normal human capacity. The Requiem portrays Kalckreuth collapsing under the weight of an insight which can only be kept in balance (recalling Paula Modersohn-Becker's scales which achieve an equilibrium of colour and object), and realised, in a language which, at the time of his suicide, was beyond his poetic capacity.

Wenn du, enttäuscht von Glücklichsein und Unglück,
 dich in dich wühltest und mit einer Einsicht
 mühsam heraufkamst, unter dem Gewicht
 beinah zerbrechend deines dunkeln Fundes:
da trugst du sie, sie, die du nicht erkannt hast,
die Freude trugst du, deines kleinen Heilands
Last trugst du durch dein Blut und holtest über. (24)

The Requiem insists here that the insight which Kalckreuth excavated was one that was foreign to him and beyond his capacity to shape into poetry. The poetic insight's
('Einsicht') strange, burdening force is emitted in 'deines dunkeln Fundes' and 'sie, die du nich erkannt hast'. The heaviness ('Gewicht'; 'Last') and potential destructiveness of poetic insight are emphasised, and in 'mühsam', 'unter dem Gewicht/beinahe zerbrechend', 'Last' and 'holtest über' the insight troubles articulation.² The charge levelled against Kalckreuth is that he could not shoulder the burden and the otherness of the poetic task. Kalckreuth, like Calé, was seeking an immediate apprehension of the 'Einsicht' as something consciously and instantly reproducible in language, but the Requiem insists that this cannot be the artist’s approach to understanding, and the Calé letter echoes this: 'Ob nicht hier - so geht es mir flüchtig vorbei - ein rasch an Einsamkeit und Zweifel Reifgewordener die Berufung zur Einsicht mit der Aufgabe des Künstlerums verwechselt hat?'

Kalckreuth is depicted as a 'Ruheloser, Ungeduldiger', like Calé, desperately impatient to organise the world into poetry, but this all too human impatience is seen in the Requiem as the source of his undoing as a poet:

Blöcke lagen da,
und in der Luft um sie war schon der Rhythmus von einem Bauwerk, kaum mehr zu verhalten;
du gingst herum und sahst nicht ihre Ordnung,
einer verdeckte dir den andern; jeder schien dir zu wurzeln, wenn du im Vorbeigehn an ihm versuchtest, ohne rechtes Zutraun, daß du ihn hübest. Und du hobst sie alle in der Verzweiflung, aber nur, um sie zurückzuschleudem in den klaffen Steinbruch, in den sie, ausgedehnt von deinem Herzen, nicht mehr hineingehn. (56)

Kalckreuth struggles frantically to construct an edifice from the blocks of words he finds at the metaphorical quarry of poetry. These blocks need to be combined in a way that is consonant with the different order ('Ordnung') that is art; but Kalckreuth proves deaf to this 'other' rhythm of art, although it has already begun to make itself strongly felt ('kaum mehr zu verhalten'). He is blind to that poetic order (or 'law', as termed in previous chapters) which is not rational or willed, and which exceeds any regular notions of organisation. The suggestion is that the true 'rhythm' of poetry is pre-verbal;

² In a letter to Franz Xaver Kappus Rilke writes of the inpenetrable secret of the earth's connectedness to a greater whole, and the need for humans to be able to bear this profundity: 'O daß der Mensch dieses Geheimnis, dessen die Erde voll ist bis in ihre kleinsten Dinge, demütiger empfinde und ernster trüge, ertrüge und fühlte, wie schrecklich schwer es ist, statt es leicht zu nehmen' (16.7.1903, B.a.e.j.D., pp. 24-5). See also: 'Fürchtet euch nicht zu leiden, die Schwere' (SO 1, 4, SW I, p. 733).
its function is to order words in such a way as to defeat prior methods of comprehension in their strange completion. But Kalckreuth fails to discern this order because he will not wait for this strangeness to set in in his language. His failure to endure and satisfy the demand for a different language of otherness in poetry is read by the Requiem as his failure as an artist and the cause of his suicide. The elusiveness of poetic achievement instils in Kalckreuth an impatience which causes him to abandon the poetic task, to hurl the language back into the quarry from which it came (‘in den klaffen Steinbruch’), to discharge himself from poetry and from life. These emotions – frustration and impatience – bring about his suicide, swelling his poetry into something wholly disproportionate in its passion (‘ausgedehnt von deinem Herzen’). This over-personal language can neither stand on its own nor go back into obscurity (it will not fit back into the quarry), failing as it has to achieve the poetic voice of the ‘other’, infinite order of ‘Being’, the ‘Being’ which is receptive to what lies outside itself and remains strange. Stranded between the quarry of language and the achieved articulation, Kalckreuth’s poetry is the textual sign of his non-integration into the difficulty of the artistic existence; a suicide note left for the Requiem to take up.

Another link to the Calé letter is the appeal to recognise the profundity of the minutiae, the ‘other’ face of the world. The Requiem regrets that Kalckreuth did not develop the kind of inclusiveness which would have allowed him to see something as small and as apparently insignificant as a beetle, and find space for it within his poetry:

\[
\text{wär in deinem vollen Blick} \\
\text{nur so viel Raum gewesen, daß das Abbild} \\
\text{von einem Käfer, der sich müht, hineinging}, (75)
\]

In this case the insight relayed from the minute details of the world is one of perseverance, of staying with the poetic task and its inherent compulsion for new metaphors, a language outside of conventional and obvious associations. The beetle’s message is a reassertion of the rhythm which Kalckreuth failed to discern on the building site of the work of art, and it is a message which Walter Calé would also have missed. Calé’s work did not get across for Rilke any of the difference and difficulty of poetic saying, the enormous effort of transformation. The poet, Rilke argues, must take on the burden of the strange, the burden of that which cannot be subjugated. Painting in Paula Modersohn-Becker’s case, and poetry in Wolf Graf von Kalckreuth’s, must enter into a new space through an idiom which is adequate to it, working through and beyond the encumbrances of prejudice and sentimentality equally:
Kalckreuth had not achieved the transformation of the banal and conventional into the higher valency of art.

This requiem poem, however, does not reproach the dead addressee for artistic failure. As a poem, it is not addressed to the biographical person of Wolf Graf von Kalckreuth, rather to a fictionalisation of the real Kalckreuth who is a figure of the Rilkean struggle between 'Leben' and the 'große[n] Arbeit' (*Requiem F: SW* I, p. 656: 268). In making an image of Kalckreuth, Rilke's *Requiem* offers Kalckreuth's death a different language in which it might be more at home in the difference that is death. In the transformation of Kalckreuth into a figure of the poet's dilemma, Rilke invokes his own reconciliation with death and otherness in the survival of his language, and therefore in his own survival as a poet ('Überstehn': 156), within and beyond such confrontation with the difference and difficulty of death.

### 4.1 The Burden of Poetry

The Calé letter stresses Calé's inattention to the possibility of an 'unobtrusive discovery' ('deines unscheinbaren Fundes'), echoing Kalckreuth's 'dark find' ('deines dunkeln Fundes': 27) in the *Requiem*. Calé's preoccupation with converting reality into a language of clarity takes him outside the scope of the imagination where more elusive and estranging images are made, and so he fails to find, or produce, the poetic language of otherness. Kalckreuth does reach the linguistic depths of himself as a poet which begin to elude his control, depths in which he can make discoveries instead of merely recycling the trite language of old metaphors, but he cannot sustain this relation to the darker, unchartered realm of the new.³ He founders under the immensity of this poetic

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³ The 'dunkler Fund' retains its darkness in that we are not told what this insight is. It could be a self-discovery or a glimpse of death. Rilke said that for a long time he could think of *Malte* as 'eine eigentümlich dunkle Himmelfahrt in eine vernachlässigte abgelegene Stelle des Himmels' (to Lou
demand on his blood ('trugst du durch dein Blut und holtest iiber': 30), recalling how
Modersohn-Becker’s blood gives way under the burden of transformation in Requiem für eine Freundin. The physical image of blood is more peripheral to Requiem für Wolf Graf von Kalckreuth, but it points again to the artist’s intimate relation to the work of art produced, and the phenomenon of ‘der eigene Tod’ as a self-made death for the self. Kalckreuth’s physical suicide becomes the objective correlative of his inner poetic world, just as the stillbirth of Modersohn-Becker’s art is extrapolated from her death soon after childbirth. In each case the task of art-making is described in metaphors of difficulty and heaviness.⁴

Requiem für Wolf Graf von Kalckreuth makes the reader feel the difficulty and heaviness of poetic transformation:

Was hast du nicht gewartet, daß die Schwere

ganz unerträglich wird: da schlägt sie um

und ist so schwer, weil sie so echt ist. (31)⁵

Andreas-Salomé, 28.12.1911, Briefe 1907-14, p. 148). The ‘dunkle Himmelfahrt’ into the unknown resembles Kalckreuth’s journey to the centre of himself to unearth the ‘dunkler Fund’, the burden of the other under which he, like Malte, falters. In Malte the lost son is able to confront his own childhood without being bound to convention, and Kalckreuth’s inner digging suggests a similar quest to unite himself with a self which is long gone and buried deep within his imagination. Malte notes observations on what seems to be the unconscious: ‘Leben, von denen man nie erfahren hatte, tauchen empor und

mischen sich unter das, was wirklich gewesen ist, und verdrängen Vergangenes, das man zu kennen glaubte: denn in dem, was aufsteigt, ist eine ausgeruhte, neue Kraft, das aber, was immer da war, ist müde von zu oftem Erinnern’ (p. 766). This assertion invites comparison with ‘Und es genügt auch noch nicht, daß man Erinnerungen hat. Man muß sie vergessen können, wenn es viele sind, und man muß die große Geduld haben, zu warten, daß sie wiederkommen’ (Malte, p. 724). Memory in Malte has the potential to be part of a process of renewal and to break with its conventional function of reinforcing old patterns and meanings. Memory in Malte integrates the possibility of forgetting and forging new, previously unthought, untrammelled definitions. The Rilkean memory contradicts memory as we understand it - it puts something there which has never been there before. This is the burden for Malte and Kalckreuth – they must accept and write what is alien and contradictory. Krumme refers to the blue gentian in the Ninth Elegy as representing the liberated language of oneness with the earth and the universe obtained by the wanderer who leaves his familiar relation (‘Bezug’) and enters another, more expansive relation (1988, p. 218): ‘Bringt doch der Wanderer auch vom Hang des Bergrands/ nicht eine Hand voll Erde ins Tal, die Allen unsagliche, sondern/ein erworbenes Wort, reines, den gelben und blau/en Enzian’ (SW I, p. 718: 29). The blue flower which represents the word fetched back from an encounter with otherness might be compared to Kalckreuth’s and Malte’s quest for a different, subconscious language. Another occurrence of the term ‘Fund’ is sonnet I, 13 where fruit’s transformation into taste is the articulation of life and death at once: ‘Alles dieses spricht/Tod und Leben in den Mund’. This sonnet anticipates the lifting of the burden of word and flesh: ‘Wird euch langsam namenlos im Munde?/Wo sonst Worte waren, fließen

Funde/aus dem Fruchtfleisch überrascht befreit’ (SW I, p. 739). Definition is dispersed in the sensuous experience, body and language destabilised. Life and death are simultaneous in the experience of the fruit’s disappearance into the body as nourishment and flavour, and words retreat as the pure instinct briefly surfaces in the sensation of fruit. Life and death, habitually polarised in language and words, can now be rediscovered as ‘Funde’, elements in excess of conscious classification.

⁴ Graff looks upon transformation in the Duineser Elegien as a burden which has to be ‘endured until it is no longer felt’ but he goes only so far as to say that the transformation is that of the visible into the invisible, interior world, and does not say that this transformation is at its heart the creation of a new language which can say the otherness of existence (1956, pp. 249-50).

⁵ I would like to recall here the following quotation: ‘Und jetzt, Lou, ich weiß nicht wie viel Höllen, du weißt wie ich den Schmerz, den physischen, den wirklich großen in meine Ordnungen untergebracht
These lines recall Rilke’s assertion that the cruelty of death transforms itself into ‘Milde’ (8.11.1915, Sizzo, p. 53) and also ‘Kunstdinge sind ja immer Ergebnisse des In-Gefahr-Gewesen-Seins, des in einer Erfahrung Bis-ans-Ende-gegangen-Seins, bis wo kein Mensch mehr weiter kann’ (to Clara, 24.6.1907, Briefe 1906-07, pp. 279-80). Art probes the boundaries of human capability—specifically human capability in language. It is difficulty which makes art, for the poet takes on the burden of art’s otherness and finds a way into new possibilities of language from there. In a letter to his publisher, anticipating that Kalckreuth’s mother may be offended by the Requiem when she reads it, Rilke writes of the recklessness of the work of art: ‘Ein Kunstding ist rücksichtslos und muß es sein’ (to Anton Kippenberg, 27.1.1909, Verleger I, p. 69). The work of art is determined by its confrontation with difficulty. In ‘Leichen-Wäsche’ the night stares impersonally and inconsiderately through the curtailless window (‘die. Nacht. im vorhanglosen Fensterrahmen war rücksichtslos’, NG II, SW I, p. 589) in its absolute otherness, and the removal of the curtain recalls another event of brutal confrontation with the abyss—the panther opening its eye (‘nur manchmal schiebt der Vorhang der Pupille/sich lautlos auf’, NG I, SW I, p. 505). Elsewhere Rilke writes that people engage with their existence ‘(mit Hilfe von Konventionen) alles nach dem Leichten hin gelöst und nach des Leichten leichtester Seite; es ist aber klar, daß wir uns an das Schwere halten müssen’ (quoted in Nolte, 1934, p. 36). And Walter Calé is criticised for his tendency to devalue difficulty in poetry: ‘Zu schnell und zu leicht für einen Künstler bewältigt dieser Abgeschlossene die Aufgaben, in denen ein Werdender langsam Geduld und Liebe und Hingabe nach ihrer Schwere werten lernt.’ Rilke is pointing here to a humility in the poet which recalls the monkish asceticism of Paula Modersohn-Becker’s ‘holy’, artistic projection beyond the ego (‘So ohne Neugier war zuletzt dein Schau/[...] daß es dich selbst nicht mehr begehre: heilig’, SW I, p. 649: 85). The poet habe, es sei denn als Ausnahme und schon wieder Rückweg ins Freie’ (13.12.1926, LAS, p. 483). This is the ‘Umschlag’, the journey through suffering and the difficulty of articulation which leads to poetic achievement.

6 See Judith Ryan: ‘Voraussetzung eines solchen Umschlags ist aber eine “Unermüdlichkeit” des Leidens, aus de

must ‘become’ (‘ein Werdender’) as the language of the poem ‘becomes’, willing to be changed by language rather than assuming total and conscious control over it. This is the difficult part of poetry as Rilke sees it – that it must be committed to enduring the onset of the elusive and unknowable imagination within it. The Requiem invokes the ‘turn’ or ‘change’ in language (‘da schlägt sie um’: 32) which takes poet and reader into that different place which is the site of poetry, and it is this difference which is unbearable to Kalckreuth as he emerges with his ‘dark find’. The descent into the unconscious and the language of the imagination yields the promise of salvation in poetic achievement (‘die Freude trugst du, deines kleinen Heilands/Last’: 29), but the joy of redemption (St. Christopher, carrying the boy Jesus, is evoked here) can barely be perceived in the midst of the labour towards otherness that is the artist’s lot (‘da trugst du sie, sie, die du nicht erkannt hast’: 28), and so Kalckreuth is unable to estimate its true worth.\footnote{He is guilty of rejecting his suffering. In contrast Malte recognises the poetic obligation to put himself through a full confrontation with the harshness of existence, and I believe this harshness also includes the extreme demand of writing: ‘Was sollte er tun, da ihm das widerfuhr? Es war seine Aufgabe, in diesem Schrecklichen, scheinbar nur Widerwärigen das Seiende zu sehen, das unter allem Seienden gilt. Auswahl und Ablehnung giebt es nicht’ (p. 775). This section of the Requiem shares something with the lost son of Malte: ‘Er war wie einer, der eine herrliche Sprache hort und fiebemd sich vomimmt, in ihr zu dichten. Noch stand ihm die Bestiirzung bevor, zu erfahren, wie schwer diese Sprache sei; er wollte es nicht glauben zuerst, dap ein langes Leben dariiber hingen könne, die ersten, kurzen Scheinsatze zu bilden, die ohne Sinn sind. Er stürzte sich ins Erlernen wie ein Läufer in die Wette; aber die Dichte dessen, was zu überwinden war, verlangsamte ihn. Es war nichts auszudenken, was demütiger sein konnte, als diese Anfängerschaft’ (pp. 943-4). Neither Kalckreuth nor the lost son can accept the struggling ‘Dichte’ of language which cannot be resolved in clarity and definition of meaning. The parable of the lost son goes on: ‘Er hatte den Stein der Weisen gefunden, und nun zwang man ihn, das rasch gemachte Gold seines Glücks unaufhörlich zu verwandeln in das klumpige Blei der Geduld’ (p. 944). Here again is a parallel with the Requiem and its demand for the patience of transformation.}

A letter to Franz Xaver Kappus captures the spirit of the poetic ‘turn’ whereby language begins to say what is beyond conventional and expository saying:

Ich möchte Sie, so gut ich es kann, bitten, lieber Herr, Geduld zu haben gegen alles Ungeloste in Ihrem Herzen und zu versuchen, die Fragen selbst liebzuhaben wie verschlossene Stuben und wie Bücher, die in einer sehr fremden Sprache geschrieben sind. Forschen Sie jetzt nicht nach den Antworten, die Ihnen nicht gegeben werden können, weil Sie sie nicht leben könnten. Und es handelt sich darum, alles zu leben. Leben Sie jetzt die Fragen. Vielleicht leben Sie dann allmählich, ohne es zu merken, eines fernen Tages in die Antwort hinein. (16.7.1903, B.a.e.j.D., p. 23)

The poet’s concern should be the difficult foreignness of the questions, not the relieving familiarity of solutions, and poetry should not be impatient for definitions but should linger in the nuances and unexplored metaphorical planes of language. The achieved
poetic articulation is then not a clarified and clarifying language but an expression less consciously acquired in the poet’s dwelling within ambiguity and metaphorical potential. It is not an intellectual calculation of language but a 'lived' eloquence, a voice which has been constituted in the ‘Blut [...] Blick und Gebärde’ (Malte, p. 725), the imaginative depths of experience. The ‘turn’ towards a liberated, achieved language comes ‘ohne es zu merken’, on the fringes of that difficulty which has been fully lived, and it recalls the letter in which Rilke describes the production of the work of art as a turning away from consciousness and towards an ‘outsidedness’ which excludes subjective control:

Das Anschauen ist eine so wunderbare Sache, von der wir noch so wenig wissen; wir sind mit ihm ganz nach außen gekehrt, aber gerade wenn wirs am meisten sind, scheinen in uns Dinge vor sich zu gehen, die auf das Unbeobachtetsein sehnsüchtig gewartet haben, und während sie sich, intakt und seltsam anonym, in uns vollziehen, ohne uns, - wächst in dem Gegenstand draußen ihre Bedeutung heran, ein überzeugender, starker, - ihr einzig möglicher Name, in dem wir das Geschehnis in unserem Innern selig und eherbietig erkennen, ohne selbst daran heranzureichen, es nur ganz leise, ganz von fern, unter dem Zeichen eines eben noch fremden und schon im nächsten Augenblick aufs neue entfremdenden Dinges begreifend. (To Clara, 8.3.1907, Briefe 1906-07, p. 214)

In ceasing to keep watch over the self and language the poet can actually realise these in their fundamental inappropriability. They emerge in a ‘sign’ (‘Zeichen’: 79), a hieroglyph which encodes rather than discloses meaning, and therefore preserves their distance and difference. This kind of artistic distancing, which is linked to the dissolution of memories in order to regain them differently, is the subject of the late dedicatory poem, ‘Für Robert Faesi und Frau Jenny Faesi’:

Wo sich langsam aus dem Schon-Vergessen
einst Erfahernes uns entgegenhebt,
rein gemeistert, milde, unermessen
und im Unantastbaren erlebt:

Dort beginnt das Wort, wie wir es meinen;
seine Geltung übertrifft uns still.
Denn der Geist, der uns vereinsamt, will
völlig sicher sein, uns zu vereinen. (1924, SW II, p. 258)

It is not conscious interpretation which brings forth poetry; the poem has its locus in forgetting, estrangement and involuntary memory. But involuntary memory is memory which has been perfectly formed by art (‘rein gemeistert’). The past which is translated
into the purity of the poem is preserved and experienced in a medium which is untouchable in the sense that it is beyond change; this refigured past is strange and unfamiliar in the sense that it is figured in a language which is incommensurable (‘unermessen’) and impersonal (‘seine Geltung übertrifft uns still’). The spirit of art (‘Geist’) isolates the artist, who takes up its burden, from his everyday, biographical self; yet in the achieved artwork the private self and the poetic self are fused and reintegrated. The suggestion is that all of this involves humility and patience on the part of the artist. Kalckreuth lacks these qualities, and he fails to achieve the kind of poetry in which he could discover the satisfaction of completion, or wholeness, in difference.

Rilke refers again to what could be the ‘turn’ from the difficulty of being an artist to permanent self-realisation in language, in the achieved artwork:

> Unsere Sicherheit muß irgendwie ein Verhältnis zum Ganzen werden, zu einer Vollzähligkeit; Sicherein heißt für uns die Unschuld des Unrechts gewahren und die Gestalthaftigkeit des Leidens zugeben; heißt Namen ablehnen, um dahinter die einzigen Bildungen und Verbindungen des Schicksals wie Gäste zu ehrwürdigen; heißt zu Nahrung und Entbehrung, bis weit ins Geistige hinein, unbeirrt bleiben, wie zu Brot und Stein -, heißt, nichts verdächtigen, hinausdrängen, nichts für das Andere halten, heißt über allen Begriff des Eigentums hinaus in Aneignungen leben, nicht in besitzenden, aber in gleichnishaften -, und schließlich, ob es gleich bürgerlich nicht zutrifft, sich über diese gewagte Sicherheit verständigen: sie ist ja doch die letzte grundgiebige Gemeinsamkeit unserer Aufstiege und Untergänge. Die Unsicherheit ganz groß nehmen -: in einer unendlichen wird auch die Sicherheit unendlich.’ (Quoted in Hermann, 1955, p. 446)

Kalckreuth’s burden, in the language of this passage, would be a dwelling within the foreign possibilities of poetry in order to approach integration into the totality of existence which includes the ‘Other’. Poetic language should not possessively impose names, nor should it exclude strange and paradoxical meaning. The instability which exists between signifier and signified should be tolerated, indeed drawn on and preserved, in order to achieve a different order of saying. For argues, though, that the instability of language is lamented in this Requiem, and not affirmed or harnessed in any way. The closest the Requiem comes to harmony, he says, is in the perspective of the angel (‘Dein Engel lautet jetzt noch und betont/denselben Wort anders, und mir bricht/der Jubel aus bei seiner Art zu sagen’) which the poet does not share and which is only the harmony of the recognition of ‘Bruch’, a harmony which is not sustained (1998, p. 93). I cannot agree entirely with this. I do not think that Rilke denies the difficulty of poetry in this poem. I think he insists that Kalckreuth should have subjected himself fully to poetic difficulty (the instability of language) as part of the journey to a final harmony which incorporates this.

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('echt': 33) of poetry’s reaching out beyond the immediate satisfaction of the conventional speaker and into the non-possessive relation of the artist with that which eludes the immediate grasp. The reaching into new possibilities of language is a reaching out of the human and into the inhuman.

Bollnow, in discussing the Neue Gedichte, describes the burden ('Last') which is the artist’s assignment to transform. It is the task of opening oneself up to an unknown wholeness of being ('die ganze unabsehbare Menge des Wirklichen'). The poet must give herself wholly to this outsidedness ('sich daran hingeben') and to its potential to topple all intact, yet limiting, subjectivity ('sich selbst dabei zu verlieren'):

Jedes andre Wesen kann für sich allein sein eigenes Leben und nur dieses leben. Der Dichter aber (und in ihm der Mensch überhaupt) ist dadurch herausgegeben aus allen andern Wesen, daß seine Aufgabe ihn zwingt, darüber hinaus das Ganze des Seins in sich hineinzunehmen [...]. Darum liegt diese sehr viel größere Last auf ihm. Er hat die Verantwortung für das Ganze des Seienden. (1951, p. 132)

The image of the shepherd exposed to 'strange things' in 'Die Spanische Trilogie II' gives an impression of the difficulty of confrontation with the 'Other':

Warum muß einer gehn und fremde Dinge so auf sich nehmen [...] 

Warum muß einer dastehn wie ein Hirt, so ausgesetzt dem Übermaß von Einfluß. (1913, SW II, pp. 44-5)

The poet, as the shepherd of 'Being', must struggle, bear and transform the weight of this overwhelming otherness. The image of the shepherd with the constellations above him and the meadows beneath his feet in ‘Aus dem Nachlaß des Grafen C.W. I, V’ is used to illustrate this unification between the poet and the world soul:

stünd ich wie ein Hirt

manchmal nächtens da und hätte diesen, diesen Himmel über meinem Haupt -, unten, unter meinem Fuß, die Wiesen – (beide Dinge hast auch du geglaubt)

stünde nur und ließ es mir gewähren, - ob es nun für uns ist, oder nicht - und die Sterne in dem Großen Bären spannten mir das wache Angesicht. (1920, SW II, p. 116)
The poetic insight ('Einsicht': 25), it must be stressed, is the opening up of the self to 'das Ganze' in the explorations of 'other' and metaphorical meaning in language. The Rilkean encounter with 'wholeness' or 'world soul' is always the achievement of the poetic figure, the language of otherness. The unification of the self and the unknown takes place — is produced — in the creation of the art 'thing': 'aus vielen Ungenaun und immer mir./aus nichts als mir und dem, was ich nicht kenn./das Ding zu machen, Herr Herr Herr, das Ding' ('Die Spanische Trilogie I', 1913, SW II, p. 44).

To return to the concept of poet as 'ein Werdender' in the Calé letter, there is the suggestion in Requiem für Wolf Graf von Kalckreuth that the 'Schwere' is the burden of the self's 'becoming' in a language which is in process. This language proceeds without a prescribed programme of interpretation, submitting instead to the painful process of developing a new metaphoric which will exceed any pre-existent articulations, and which will still point beyond itself to other possible metamorphoses of meaning. The image of the workshop ('wache[n] Werkstatt': 73) in the Requiem, where work builds things into being, suggests the production of meaning in the hands of the poet as a process in which the poem takes shape, as opposed to the shape of the poem being set in advance of the making. Poems produce new meaning, meaning which can not be imagined previous to the poem. Rilke proposes again in this Requiem the designing of a new reality through a new language. The image of craftsmen 'hammering' (74) suggests that it is the work — the process of becoming — and not the product of the work, which is foregrounded. Rilke associated the artist's task with a return to a beginning, and he located that beginning, the beginning of the work, in a kind of pre-reflexive innocence, as a letter to Baladine Klossowska shows:

Toujours au commencement du travail, il faut se refaire cette innocence première, il faut revenir à l'endroit naïf où l'Ange vous a découvert quand il vous rapportait le premier message engageant; […] si l'Ange daigne venir, ce sera parce que vous l'aurez convaincu, non pas avec vos pleurs, mais par votre humble décision de commencer toujours : ein Anfänger zu sein!' (18.11.1920, Merline, p. 92)

Adrian Stevens comments on this quotation, indicating that to begin means to begin again with the familiar world in its unfamiliarity:

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10 Reed writes that Rilke's 'life and work would always be incomplete, he was forever beginning, each new poem was an arrival point at a point of departure' (1989, p. 44).

The ‘Schwere’ in the Requiem is associated with the humble return to the non-appropriative, unprejudiced beginning of the artistic gaze, set out in a letter about a Cézanne self-portrait: ‘daß er sich selbst, ohne im entferntesten seinen Ausdruck auszulegen oder überlegen anzusehen, mit so viel demütiger Objektivität wiederholte’ (to Clara, 23.10.07, Cézanne, p. 45). The angel in the letter to Merline recalls the different, angelic perspective in Requiem für eine Freundin and in the Duineser Elegien. Art creates the multi-faceted and impersonal, always in excess of scrutiny – even that of its own creator.

At the quarry Kalckreuth lacks the patience to endure the building of the work which is not immediately apparent to him in its design. Every block resists Kalckreuth’s manhandling ('jeder/schien dir zu wurzeln': 60), heavy with the strain that is the pure beginning, the task which does not know its final constellation in advance. But the Fifth Elegy promises the eventual ‘turn’ of the work through its laborious beginnings in the abyss or the ‘nowhere’ towards fulfilment in the achievement of an articulation which can reach into an infinite otherness:

\begin{itemize}
\item[1] Malte has to begin re-seeing the modern world outside the old schemes of perception. He must design a new subjectivity which relegates the traditional concept of rational autonomy in order to open itself to the modern world in its dissonances. Malte writes: ‘Eine veränderte Welt. Ein neues Leben voll neuer Bedeutungen. Ich habe es augenblicklich schwer, weil alles zu neu ist. Ich bin ein Anfänger in meinen eigenen Verhältnissen’ (p. 775). This new subjectivity is the ‘Zeit der anderen Auslegung’ (p. 796). And of the Lost Son he writes: ‘Er stürzte sich ins Erlernen wie ein Läufer in die Wette; aber die Dichte dessen, was zu überwinden war, verlangsamt ihn. Es war nichts auszudenken, was demütiger sein konnte als diese Anfängerschaft’ (p. 944). The new beginning for Malte and for Kalckreuth is the possibility of a different aesthetic gaze.
\item[12] In the Ninth Elegy the poet addresses the difficulty of poetry to the angel who represents ‘the other relation’:
\begin{quote}
Ach, in den andern Bezug, 
wehe, was nimmt man hinüber? Nicht das Anschauen, das hier 
langsam erlernte, und kein hier Ereignetes. Keins. 
Also die Schmerzen. Also vor allem das Schwersein, 
also der Liebe lange Erfahrung, - also 
lauter Unsagliches. (SW I, pp. 717-8: 22)
\end{quote}
\item In his short essay ‘Kunstwerke’ Rilke writes: ‘das, was Kunstwerke unterscheidet von allen anderen Dingen, ist der Umstand, daß sie gleichsam zukünftige Dinge sind, Dinge, deren Zeit noch nicht gekommen ist’ (SW V, 634-5, p. 634).
\end{itemize}
Und plötzlich in diesem mühsamen Nirgends, plötzlich
die unsagliche Stelle, wo sich das reine Zuwenig
unbegreiflich verwandelt – umspringt
in jenes leere Zuviel. (SW I, p. 704: 82)

The ‘turn’ enacted here is also envisaged in a letter in which Rilke rejects suicide as the
route out of a desperate situation:

Ich muß gestehen, es sind alle diese unerhörten Verhältnisse, die mir, hier
zu sein, bei allem Schmerz, köstlich machen –, und je weiter ich lebe, desto
nötiger scheint es mir, auszuhalten, das ganze Diktat des Daseins bis zum
Schluß nachzuschreiben; denn es möchte sein, daß erst der letzte Satz jenes
kleine, vielleicht unscheinbare Wort enthält, durch welches alles mühsam
Erlerte und Unbegriffene sich gegen einen herrlichen Sinn hinüberkehrt.
(To Ilse Erdmann, 21.12.1913, Briefe I, p. 454)

The ‘Diktat des Daseins’ points to the onset of the unconscious, which Rilke never
believed could be given back in rational language. The image of the determined beetle
also conveys that element of work and ‘bilden’ (126) which must be present if the angel
– the poetic unconscious, as I argued earlier – is to come and take over. This cooperation
of conscious work and unconscious dictation is seen again in the line: ‘von Zeit zu Zeit
versuchend, ob ein Satz/dabei sich bilde’ (81). Kalkreuth was proceeding correctly in
that he was ‘trying’ to let a sentence form ‘itself’. The reflexive subjunctive here is
important because it indicates the unconscious condition. Kalkreuth began with the
right intentions but he lost patience too soon, and the readiness to be open to the more
opaque side of meaning turned into a drive to dispel this. He does not sustain the artist’s
gaze which invites in spaciousness of meaning (‘war in deinem vollen Blick/nur so viel
Raum gewesen’: 75).

‘Sankt Sebastian’ offers an image of the ‘Schwere’ which has ‘turned’, or
transformed, itself. The saint is already associated with the holiness of the work of art

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14 But as Engel points out, it is of course impossible for this relinquishment of control to be total, and
what is sought by Rilke is a modification of self-control (1986, p. 158). Rilke writes elsewhere of an
artistic method which follows a course less regulated than that of convention and preconception: ‘Diese
Arbeit (die Arbeit am Modelé) war die gleiche bei allem was man machte, und sie mußte so demütig, so
dienend, so hingeegeben getan sein, so ohne Wahl an Gesicht und Hand und Leib, daß nichts Benanntes
mehr da war, daß man nur formte, ohne zu wissen, was gerade entstand, wie der Wurm, der seinen Gang
macht im Dunkel von Stelle zu Stelle. Denn wer ist noch unbefangen Formen gegenüber, die einen
Namen haben? Wer wählt nicht schon aus, wenn er etwas Gesicht nennt? Der Schaffende aber hat nicht
das Recht, zu wählen. Seine Arbeit muß von gleichmäßigem Gehorsam durchdrungen sein. Uneröffnet
gleichsam, wie Anvertrautes, müssen die Formen durch seine Finger gehen, um rein und heil in seinem
Werke zu sein’ (Rodin, p. 217). See also Macleod’s article which traces Malte’s shift from an
oppositional to a paradoxical framework of writing in the novel: ‘From a preoccupation with writing as a
form of mastery and possession, he is eventually brought to a state where it functions analogously to the
concept of love, a state where the writer is both master and servant at the same time’ (1992, p. 404).
‘daß es dich selbst nicht mehr begehrte: heilig’, Requiem F, p. 649: 87), but he also demonstrates the principles of the transcendent poetic world. He is self-disregarding, i.e. his point of view comes not from within his suffering but from outside it, for he perceives himself as ‘a beautiful thing’, rather like Modersohn-Becker’s ‘dies ist’ (Requiem F, SW I, p. 649: 84), and this comprises ‘Hingehalten-’ and ‘Weitentrücktsein’, self-distancing and orientation towards a beyond. He also appears at the point where he no longer feels pain or injury, smiling in response to the piercing arrows. Perhaps he is an image of difficulty borne out under the broader vision that there might be a possibility of something else. He is an image of the artist persevering with the unsuccessful creative process until, as Rilke suggests in Requiem für Wolf Graf von Kalckreuth, it is so unbearable that something is born.¹⁵

When Kalckreuth collapses under the burden of poetic transformation he aborts the work of art, slamming the door on life just as the moment of poetic achievement, symbolised by the laurel wreath, approaches – just as his life is about to be refigured as art:

Siehst du,
dies war vielleicht dein nächster Augenblick;
er rücket sich vielleicht vor deiner Tür
den Kranz im Haar zurecht, da du sie zuwarfst. (33)

The prematurely terminated, incomplete and distorting work of art wounds the universe, sterilising the seed in the ground and awakening the murder instinct in tamed animals:

Wer kann beschwören, daß nicht in der Erde
ein Sprung sich hinzieht durch gesunde Samen,
er hat erforscht, ob in gezähmten Tieren
nicht eine Lust zu töten geilig aufzuckt,
wenng dieser Ruck ein Blitzlicht in ihr Hirn wirft. (40)

The collapse of the work is not just the collapse of Kalckreuth’s world. In Rilke’s world of the imagination the work of art is the universe, for reality is constructed in the idiom of art. The impatient termination of the work, the wrecking of the creation, therefore breaches the unity of the universe and subverts that order of existence which is complete in death and otherness.

¹⁵ Sebastian seems to embody the Rilkean artistic death: ‘Denn wer, wenn er einen wahrhaften Kampf auf sich nimmt, hat nicht auch die Freudigkeit, in ihm unterzugehen’ (19.2.1922, Sizzo, p. 22).
In contrast, a potential poetic hero in Kalckreuth is evoked who could have been possessed enough (‘rasend’: 53) and honest enough to expose and bear the difficulty of transformation in the face of abyss and death:

Daß du zerstört hast. Daß man dies von dir
wird sagen müssen bis in alle Zeiten.
Und wenn ein Held bevorsteht, der den Sinn,
den wir für das Gesicht der Dinge nehmen,
wie eine Maske abreisst und uns rasend
Gesichter aufdeckt, deren Augen längst
uns lautlos durch verstellte Löcher anschauen:
dies ist Gesicht und wird sich nicht verwandeln:
daß du zerstört hast. (48)

The hero is ‘rasend’ but inspired, and he can be compared with the dark hero of the Sixth Elegy, permanently close to death and change. What the poet-hero exposes is that the image of the world (‘das Gesicht der Dinge’), which is normally assumed to be reality, is a distortion of reality. The image of the hero unmasking appearances conveys the courage needed by the poet to get beneath and beyond conventional modes of interpretation. The poet-hero’s destructive work is creative, whereas Kalckreuth slams the door on this act of unmasking the repressed negative and is guilty of a destruction which debases his calling. The hero, operating under the informing conviction of the First Elegy (‘daß wir nicht sehr verläßlich zu Haus sind/in der gedeuteten Welt’, SW I, p. 685: 12) tears away the facile, comforting veneer of conventional interpretation, revealing the face of the strange beneath the distorting mask of the familiar. The ‘other’ face of reality is composed of features of absence – holes, silence and shapelessness – and Kalckreuth cannot stare out the true face of reality. The letter to Lotte Hepner suggests that these are the eyes of death and otherness: ‘[…] und überall um uns ist der Tod noch zu Haus und aus den Ritzen der Dinge sieht er uns zu ’ (8.11.1915, Briefe 1914-21, p. 90). Kalckreuth represses all this gaping otherness in the suicidal act which relieves him of the poetic injunction to transform, to find the poetic language for, what evades language. The hero anticipates a new interpretation which will not deny but acknowledge the unknowable, unclassifiable stare of the strange. This is the work of transformation and it must go through the negative in order to affirm it (in order to reach the point of ‘Umschlag’). Kalckreuth cannot endure the task of saying the inverse of the familiar in a difficult, poetic language. He aborts his own poetry: ‘daß du zerstört hast’. 
4.2 ‘Nichts als Bild’: The Poetic Image

Jedem, der sein Blut
hinaufhob in ein Werk, das lange wird,
kann es geschehen, daß ers nicht mehr hochhält. (Requiem F, SW I, p. 655: 263)

The burden at the centre of Requiem für eine Freundin is the difficulty of the translation of the self into poetry, and Requiem für Wolf Graf von Kalckreuth laments the curse which has passed to Kalckreuth, the curse of the poet who cannot transcend the subjective:

O alter Fluch der Dichter,
die sich beklagen, wo sie sagen sollten,
die immer urteilen über ihr Gefühl
statt es zu bilden; die noch immer meinen,
was traurig ist in ihnen oder froh,
das wüßten sie und dürfens im Gedicht
bedauern oder rühmen. (123)

Here prejudice and intense emotion combine to simplify existence in the outworn clichés of rhetoric. But Rilkean poetry goes beyond the limited, appropriative perspective of the human in her subjectivity:

und die findigen Tiere merken es schon,
daß wir nicht sehr verläßlich zu Haus sind
in der gedeuteten Welt. (SW I, p. 685: 11)

The curse of the unreliably interpreted world is one of the informing themes of the Requiem:

Wie die Kranken
gebrauchen sie die Sprache voller Wehleid,
um zu beschreiben, wo es ihnen weh tut,
statt hart sich in die Worte zu verwandeln,
wie sich der Steinmetz einer Kathedrale
verbissen umsetzt in des Steines Gleichmut. (129)

Instead of presuming to know what is positive and what is negative – the definition of things – under the guidance of subjective feeling, the stonemason works towards the obliteration of this whimsicality in the equipoise of the stone. In stone the selfhood of the stonemason is transformed; it becomes image (‘bilden’: 126) and language
entering the indifference which is different in its indifference to narrow, personal concerns. It is within this indifference that the burden of neurosis 'turns', or is lifted, and the perspective is extended. In the stonework emotion is aestheticised, drawn away from its immediate reality like Paula Modersohn-Becker’s fruit. *Requiem für Wolf Graf von Kalckreuth* makes the point that art finds a different, impersonal language which inscribes reality in a way the overbearing, limited force of emotion cannot. The equanimity of art is coded female in the woman who could have restored balance to Kalckreuth’s furious impatience ('Hätte eine Frau/die leichte Hand gelegt auf dieses Zornes/noch zarten Anfang': 6716). And the example of the patient, concentrated artist recalls the gaze turned out from the self and towards a preoccupation beyond it ('Das Anschauen ist eine so wunderbare Sache, von der wir noch so wenig wissen; wir sind mit ihm ganz nach außen gekehrt, aber gerade wenn wirs am meisten sind, scheinen in uns Dinge vor sich zu gehen', to Clara, 8.3.1907, *Brieef 1906-07*, p. 214):

war eine, der
beschäftigt war, im Innersten beschäftigt,
der still begegnet, (69)

The inner occupation referred to in these lines is the production of distance and strangeness within poetic figure or image ('bilden'). But Kalckreuth is one of those poets cursed by his inability to forge that distance from his private self within his artistic self; he cannot translate his personal self into the permanence and durability of the poetic word ('hart sich in die Worte zu verwandeln': 132). He cannot refigure his immediate feelings as poetic image ('die immer urteilen über ihr Gefühl/statt es zu bilden': 125).17 He cannot achieve the artist's objectification of the self, the balance of

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16 The woman appears in this *Requiem* as part of Rilke’s idealisation of the feminine. Women represent the non-acquisitiveness and the self-repleteness Rilke aspires to for poetry and death.

17 See again *Die weiße Fürstin* where the 'Bild' is offered as the authentic vision which can accept paradox without imposing meaning on it:

Sieh, so ist Tod im Leben. Beides läuft
so durcheinander, wie in einem Teppich
die Fäden laufen; und daraus entsteht
für einen, der vorübergeht, ein Bild.

[...]

Leid und Freude sind
nur Farben für den Fremden, der uns schaut.
Darum bedeutet es für uns so viel,
den Schauenden zu finden, ihn, der sieht,
der uns zusammenfaßt in seinem Schauen
und einfach sagt: ich sehe das und das,
wo andere nur raten oder lügen. (*SW I*, p. 225: 663)
selfhood and the non-self, the ‘dies ist’ of Paula Modersohn-Becker’s best work, as Rilke sees it, in *Selbstbildnis als Halbakt mit Bernsteinkette*.18

*Requiem für Wolf Graf von Kalckreuth* tries to affirm the same image (‘Bild’) as *Requiem für eine Freundin* whilst acknowledging the difficulty of this image-making. The imagery of the *Kunstwerk* and the unrealised or disabled work of art is as prominent in this second *Requiem* as it is in the first. ‘Bild’ (138) as the product of poetic work, the work which transforms first-hand experience into something of wider and different signification, is anticipated in the architectural creation (‘Bauwerk’: 58), the realised creativity in the workshop (‘Werkstatt’: 73), the written creation (‘Schrift’: 79), the successful poetic articulation (‘mir bricht/der Jubel aus bei seiner Art zu sagen’: 61), the monument to the divine (‘Kathedrale’: 133), the permanent translation of life into poetry (‘wie Schicksal in die Verse eingeht/und nicht zurückkommt’: 136), the self-containedness of the life figured as poetic image (‘wie es drinnen Bild wird’: 137) and the man-made death (‘Tod von guter Arbeit’: 115). The failure of this translation or transformation, this construction of an intact imaginal world, manifests itself as destruction: as cracking (‘Sprung’: 41), shock (‘Ruck’: 44), perversion (‘geilig’: 43), murderousness (‘eine Lust zu töten’: 43), madness (‘Blitzlicht in ihr Hirn’: 44), destruction (‘Daß du zerstört hast’: 48), incoherence (‘du sahst nicht ihre Ordnung’: 59), resistance and inflexibility (‘jeder schein dir zu wurzeln’: 60), ill-fittingness (‘nicht mehr hineingehen’: 67), abyss (‘klaffen Steinbruch’: 65), eclipse (‘die Flamme losch’: 87), and sickness (‘wie die Kranken/gebrauchen sie die Sprache’: 129). The *Requiem* hinges on the theme of the production of the *Werk* – poetry – an artefact which stands up on its own and in which the real world is refigured and reknown.

The fusion of ‘Bild’ and ‘Worte’ creates something which is not closed and biased interpretation.19 They transform emotional prejudice and interpretative cliché into artifice, into a different dimension of valency. In the ‘Bild’ and ‘Worte’ of artistic

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18 ‘Er hatte den Stein der Weisen gefunden, und nun zwang man ihn, das rasch gemachte Gold seines Glücks unaufhörlich zu verwandeln in das klumpige Blei der Geduld’ (Malte, p. 944). Neither Kalckreuth nor the lost son of *Malte* can accept the humble, disciplined, attitude necessary for transformation out of immediate emotion (here ‘Glück’) and into art (here ‘das klumpige Blei der Geduld’). The ‘Stein der Weisen’ can be compared to Kalckreuth’s ‘Einsicht’ or ‘Fund’ which is the beginnings of his life and his death. He must transform these in writing just as Rilke’s lost son must transform his love. The ‘Gewicht’ under which Kalckreuth staggers and collapses is the imperative of work.

19 Kalckreuth is fixated on successful reading but Uwe Steiner suggests a glimpse of infinity only occurs when reading fails. Malte sees God when he tries to read the existence of a beggar: ‘Gott als Schöpfer von Dissonanzen. Aber eben darin, die Wahrnehmung nicht durch die homogenisierende Funktion des Denkens zu trüben, liegt der didaktische Auftrag von Gottes instabiler Schöpfung: “Daß wir doch lernten, vor allem aushalten und nicht urteilen”’ (Malte, p. 903) (Steiner, 1996, p. 377). The poetic gaze should reveal the inapprobriability of things.
transformation is created something not yet known. Art does not recycle what has already been said – it creates new possibility. The poem as ‘Bild’ is always one step ahead of the poet, taking on a life of its own in the instance of its creation by the poet. Rilke writes of the different ‘law’ of the aesthetic in which the artist goes beyond previous boundaries and vocabularies and things come into being for the first time:

Kunstdinge sind ja immer Ergebnisse des In-Gefahr-gewesen-Seins, des in einer Erfahrung Bis-ans-Ende-gegangen-Seins, bis wo kein Mensch mehr weiter kann. Je weiter man geht, desto eigener, desto persönlicher, desto einziger wird ja ein Erlebnis, und das Kunstding endlich ist die notwendige, ununterdrückbare, möglichst endgültige Aussprache dieser Einzigkeit. [...] Wir sind also sicher darauf angewiesen, uns am Äußersten zu prüfen und zu erproben, aber auch wahrscheinlich gebunden, dieses Äußerste nicht vor dem Eingang in das Kunstwerk auszusprechen, zu teilen, mitzuteilen: denn als Einziges, was kein anderer verstehen würde und dürfte, als persönlicher Wahnsinn sozusagen hat es einzutreten in das Werk, um drin gültig zu werden und das Gesetz zu zeigen, wie eine angeborene Zeichnung, die erst in der Transparenz des Künstlerischen sichtbar wird. (To Clara, 24.6.1907, Cézanne, p. 6)

The achieved text of death is the text in which ‘sagen’ (124) and ‘bilden’ (126) coalesce; it is a writing of oneself out of the immediate presence and blind limitation of personal tendency, partiality and affliction and into the ‘Hiersein’ (‘Wie war sie hier zuhause’: 22) of ‘die ernste Freude deiner strengen Sehnsucht’ (23), the presence of death’s infinite possibility in the achieved work of art here and now. Emotion - and in Kalckreuth’s case, depression – frustrate Kalckreuth’s attempts to read, or realise, the ‘Zeichen’ (79) and the ‘Satz’ (81), the ‘Inschrift’ (85) or the poetic word which might give expression to his being in the world. His impatience for language is the source of his failure as a poet, for poetry is won through a very difficult struggle to hold the poem open, and a patient relinquishment of the kind of linguistic control which expresses itself in the imposition of preconceived meaning. This secular requiem advances a poetic argument for the construction of one’s own secular salvation within poetry (‘Dies war deine Rettung’: 135), recalling perhaps the ‘erlösendes Gleichnis’, a redemption which Rilke argues is constructed in art and set against human ‘Schicksal’, the fatedness of language and life (Landschaft, p. 520). Poetry opens language out into ‘Bild’ and the ‘Worte’ (or ‘Gleichnis’) of transformation, non-propositional and non-programmatic possibilities of meaning, always inviting renewal and rewriting. It forges moments of openness to the infinite within writing.
The Requiem conceives of salvation in ‘Worte’: ‘Dies war deine Rettung’ (135). Art offers equanimity (‘Gleichmut’: 134), a space which transcends the imbalance of emotion and reality, a different plane of vision and signification. And ‘Gleichmut’ goes beyond limitation because it can include contradiction – it is ambivalent, open to the imagination. The Requiem rearticulates ‘Gleichmut’ in ‘gleichen’:

Dies war deine Rettung. Hättest du nur ein Mal
gesehen, wie Schicksal in die Verse eingeht
und nicht zurückkommt, wie es drinnen Bild wird
und nichts als Bild, nicht anders als ein Ahnherr,
der dir im Rahmen, wenn du manchmal aufsiehst,
zu gleichen scheint und wieder nicht zu gleichen -:
du hättest ausgeharrt. (135)

Art’s balancing of multiple meanings is demonstrated in the portrait of the ancestor resembling and then not resembling the descendent. Art makes its subject impersonal and ambiguous, offering and then withdrawing relation and interpretation so that nothing can be fully confirmed or identified in it. The shift from ‘gleichen’ to ‘nicht gleichen’ shows art’s capacity for change, process and balance, and its resistance to definition. Perhaps a further significance of the ancestor is his condition as a deceased person. In the work of art his death is conveyed in its full ambivalence – the ambivalence which can suggest both death and life at the same time (the living descendent can feel identity with the subject of the painting so that briefly the deceased is alive within the observer). The portrait also hangs as a figure of poetic achievement both for Kalckreuth and for Rilke, an encouragement to the artist to transform himself into ‘Bild’. ‘Bilder’ represent a transcendence attainable in art and poetry and this art-world is characterised by a lack of the pressures on our real and emotional selves omnipresent in the everyday world outside art. In the creation which is ‘nichts als Bild’ there is a distancing of feeling (‘Raum um dein Gefühl’: 109), a distancing of personal desires and interests (‘das Anschaun/das nichts begehrt’: 110) and the self-disregard of Modersohn-Becker’s greatest works.

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The Second Elegy asks us to regard the Attic stelae on which human feeling and gesture is transformed into stone and thus attains equanimity:

Erstaunte euch nicht auf attischen Stelen die Vorsicht
menschlicher Geste? war nicht Liebe und Abschied
so leicht auf die Schultern gelegt, als wär es aus anderm
Stoffe gemacht als bei uns? (SW1, pp. 691-2: 56)

They treat love and separation alike whereas humans are creatures of stress.
This capacity of art as ‘Bild’ to open reality up into endless difference and unfamiliarity is seen again in the Requiem’s proposal to look to Kalckreuth’s best poems — as the other Requiem looked to Paula Modersohn-Becker’s best self-portrait for inspiration:

Nur den Gedichten sehen wir zu, die noch
über die Neigung deines Fühlens abwärts
die Worte tragen, die du wählttest. (93)²¹

Rilke admires that potential in Kalckreuth to speak that which is not of limited emotional bias. His words are brought over the emotional mood, or ‘Neigung’, as if it were a curve, and they slide ‘downwards’ out of the range of manipulation and predetermination and into a space where they can mean less narrowly. The words exceed and transform the emotion by following its shape and then coming out at the other side. The angel appears to articulate this same, subtle movement away from a singular meaning by staying with the articulation (‘denselben Wortlaut’: 101) but giving it a different emphasis: ‘Dein Engel lautet jetzt noch und betont/denselben Wortlaut anders, und mir bricht/der Jubel aus bei seiner Art zu sagen’ (100). The angel too, therefore, is a figure of the ‘Umschlag’ which initiates the change from within the burden of art. The angel is celebrated as that which speaks the difficulty and ambivalence of language and the Kunstwerk, that which includes the space which transforms feeling and opens up the ‘other’ possibilities of art.²² Rilke celebrates here Kalckreuth’s potential as a poet of ‘das Offene’, of the ambivalence and unlimitedness of the imagination.

The Requiem goes on:

Nein,
nicht alle wählttest du; oft ward ein Anfang
dir auferlegt als Ganzes, den du nachsprachst
wie einen Auftrag. Und er schien dir traurig. (95)

Kalckreuth’s best poetry is completed despite himself, beyond the ‘Neigung’ (94) of his emotion and character, and this is emphasised in ‘nicht alle wählttest du’. The words of

²¹ This could be a willingness to be positive about Kalckreuth and therefore true to Niels Lyhne: ‘Don’t think of who is right or how great the wrong is, and don’t treat him according to his deserts – how would even the best of us fare if we got our deserts! No, think of him as he was in the hour when you loved him most; believe me, he is worthy of it’ (Jacobsen, Niehls Lyhne, pp. 193-4).
²² The use of the word ‘noch’ in this section is interesting (‘die noch/über die Neigung’: 93; ‘Dein Engel lautet jetzt noch’: 100). One aspect of the angel seems to be its representation of what is more permanent in Kalckreuth’s work – the taking on of difficulty and the coming through it.
his poems were not always deliberate and elected but were sometimes like a received dictation (to be distinguished, however, from the received narratives of conscious language which poetic metaphor attempts to rewrite). ‘Und er schien dir traurig’ indicates the burden of the beginning which is placed on the poet, recalling the ‘Last’ of the unsayable insight Kalckreuth unearths and cannot sustain. ‘Ganzes’ also points to this overbearing heaviness, the difficulty of the orientation towards the imagination with its strange significations at one remove from the poet’s grasp. Kalckreuth experiences his difficult, non-subjective writing as pain, but the angel and Rilke affirm it as ‘Jubel’ (102). The angel speaks ‘anders’ (102), i.e. outside the conventions of interpretation. The strangeness of this speech is not negative (‘traurig’), but the essence of good poetry.

The angel therefore represents a writing that is in excess of preconceived definition. Kalckreuth’s sadness, it must also be stressed, is the human sadness of the artist at relinquishing (‘Verzicht’: 105) linguistic and emotional control and bias (‘Daβ jedes Liebe wieder von dir abfiel’: 104). Rilke celebrates with the angel the potential in turning the self outwards and away from private neuroses - finding the self by losing the self (‘daβ du im Sehendwerden den Verzicht/erkannt hast’: 105). Such renunciation is inevitably a painful turning-away from that which is comfortably familiar. But Kalckreuth cannot sustain his best poetry, for his gaze became overloaded again with consciousness and prejudice, and he is unable to persevere and perceive more deeply. He has not sustained the ability to read and write what is outside the self and unbekannt (‘da trugst du sie, sie, die du nicht erkannt hast/die Freude trugst du, deines kleinen Heilands/Last’: 28 - here it is posited that the unknowable can become a source of joy and that Kalckreuth did not endure it long enough to experience this). Kalckreuth’s over-passionate, desperately impatient reading is an attempt on Rilke’s part to banish any such excessiveness within himself. Kalckreuth’s compulsiveness is conveyed in the quivering of the hand which holds and puts out the candle (87), his poetic impulse becoming destructive rather than creative (‘Schlag [...] durch das Weltall’: 37). The Requiem reiterates at this point its call to poets to read and write differently, from outside of their emotion: ‘Wir aber wagen nicht./zu lesen durch den Schmerz’ (91). Parallel to Kalckreuth’s candle extinguished in a fit of raw alarm is the Orpheus myth and Orpheus’s premature turning towards Eurydice. He loses her forever when he fails to rise as a poet above his private anxiety and emotion.
The work of art as the work which creates the language and images of ambivalence is evoked in the ‘three open forms’ which symbolise art’s shaping of the raw material of emotion into the art-object:

Dieses war dein, du, Künstler, diese drei offenen Formen. Sieh, hier ist der Ausguß der ersten: Raum um dein Gefühl; und da aus jener zweiten schlag ich dir das Anschaun das nichts begehrt, des großen Künstlers Anschaun; und in der dritten, die du selbst zu früh zerbrochen hast, da kaum der erste Schuß bebender Speise aus des Herzens Weiβglut hineinfuhr - , war ein Tod von guter Arbeit (107)

In this section the unfilled, hollow mould is a poetological metaphor. Rilke calls the mould ‘open’, and triples it into the three aspects of the poetry of death. I would like to briefly examine the possible poetological significance of the empty moulds. Stahl states: ‘Das Bild von Form und Ausguß gebraucht Rilke häufig, um das Verhältnis von Forderung und Leistung, Erwartung und Erfüllung darzustellen. Der Ausguß ist das Ziel, um dessentwillen die Form hergestellt wird’ (Stahl, 1978, p. 250). Stahl seems to be suggesting here a Rortyan or de Manean reading of the poem, which would recognise in the mould the new form of the poem as shaping meaning and casting an imaginative reality – imaging in art the strange death that is one’s own. The Tenth Elegy, however, employs the motif of the mould as a form which produces an inauthentic death as part of the cheap ‘Trostmarkt’, the false consciousness which dominates the discourse of death (SW I, p. 721: 18). An alternative reading of the moulds in the Requiem might be that they represent a poem as the space into which the subject matter must move. ‘Gefühl’ (109) must leave its origin in the poet and enter the other vessel of art in which it can take on a new definition. In the work which the mould performs feeling is distanced from the self and the self’s desires are estranged from, or evacuated from, the gaze. A change takes place which draws the poet out and beyond the bounds of subjectivity. The moulds present Kalckreuth with empty space – ‘Raum’ – and it is this space which intimidates the poet:

dann aber hat
das Hohle jener Formen dich geschreckt,
du griffst hinein und schöpftest Leere und beklagtest dich. (120)
Within poetry a space must be created for the other side of immediate emotion and a space must be imagined which is beyond the restrictions imposed by conventional naming. The hollowness of the moulds invites the poet into relation with the ‘other’ side of himself, into relation with the self-relinquishment demanded by his art: ‘daß du im Sehendwerden den Verzicht/erkannt hast’ (105). Kalckreuth cannot tolerate this confrontation with absence, with the space of death, and so his writing becomes the place of his lament rather than a celebration of the release from the confinement of habitual language and thinking into an infinite possibility. Elsewhere Rilke elaborates on the significance of the moulds, imagining that they invite the poet into an experience of cavity and negativity which, if it is endured and explored, will produce the authentic work of art:

Ich habe schon einmal, vor Jahren, über den Malte jemandem, den dieses Buch erschreckt hatte, zu schreiben versucht, daß ich es selbst manchmal wie eine hohe Form, wie ein Negativ empfände, dessen alle Mulden und Vertiefungen Schmerz sind, Trostlosigkeiten und weheste Einsicht, der Ausguß davon aber, wenn es möglich wäre einen herzustellen (wie bei einer Bronze die positive Figur, die man daraus gewonne) wäre vielleicht Glück, Zustimmung; - genaueste und sicherste Seligkeit. (To Lotte Hepner, 8.11.1915, Briefe 1914-21, pp. 86-7)

That a positive creation can be achieved through working with the negative is another image of the double-sidedness of life and death (6.1.1923, Sizzo, p. 53), the implication for Kalckreuth being that suffering and emptiness can undergo a reversal (‘Umschlag’) into meaningfulness. Rilke writes in a letter about an unidentified person called ‘F.H.’ who seems to have been in the same predicament as Kalckreuth:

Lebensmüdigkeit, in seinen Jahren, ist ja nur das Negativ einer großen Einschätzung des Lebens, die so ständig enttäuscht worden ist, daß die Aufmerksamkeit schließlich an der Hohlform haften blieb, weil die Kräfte gehemmt waren, die den “Ausguß” dieses Negatifs versuchen sollten. Auch ist man nie näher an einer “Wendung”, als wenn sich das Dasein, bis ins Kleinste und Täglichste hinein, für “unerträglich” ausgibt - gerade dann noch eine Weile zu warten, müßte eine Aufgabe mindestens – der Neugierde sein. (To Alwina von Keller, 26.01.22, Muzot, p. 103)

Like Kalckreuth he is unable to transform and gain from the significations of death by exposing himself to them and harnessing them for his work, moving from the ‘negative’ of the mould to the affirmation and achievement of the cast (‘Ausguß’), the completed artwork.
Going back to ‘die Schrift gelesen, deren Zeichen du/seit deiner Kindheit langsam in dich eingrubst’ (79), the poet is depicted in his drive to write the summation of his life, and his power to write clearly has its source in another ‘hollow mould’ – that of childhood. Childhood is distance, forgetting and the unconscious, but that unconscious is scripted, written in a code which can only be expressed in the poetic language which relinquishes willed and deliberate control. Childhood must be deciphered and constructed anew in that it must be understood to be a part of the present. That which has been repressed must be brought out again and what is negative or in comprehensible about it must be written in all its indefinability. Childhood must be worked back into the artist in poetry, in a language which does not take possession of it in rational exposition. One of Malte’s notes is concerned with the unreadability of childhood. Reading books is associated with reading childhood. Malte expected reading to become easier with age, once ‘das Leben gewissermaßen umschlug und nur noch von außen kam, so wie früher von innen’ (p. 891), imagining reading to be an occupation rather than an inner necessity:

In der Kindheit kam mir das Lesen vor wie ein Beruf, den man auf sich nehmen würde, später einmal, wenn alle Berufe kamen, einer nach dem andern [...] Dann würde man mit Büchern umgehen wie mit Bekannten, es würde Zeit dafür sein, eine bestimmte, gleichmäßig und gefällig vergehende Zeit, gerade so viel, als einem eben paßte [...]. Daß sich einem das Haar verbog und verwirrte, als ob man darauf gelegen hätte, daß man glühende Ohren bekam und Hände kalt wie Metall, daß eine lange Kerze neben einem herunterbrannte, und in den Leuchter hinein, das würde dann, Gott sei Dank, völlig ausgeschlossen sein. (pp. 891-2)

The sketch goes on to demonstrate that, contrary to Malte’s expectations as a child, reading does not introduce stability but instability. Childhood too has this elusive ‘Innerlichkeit’ ('so wie früher von innen'): ‘Das eigentümlich Unbegrenzte der Kindheit, das Unverhältnismäßige, das Nie-recht-Absehbare’ (p. 891). If we read this Malte note alongside the Kalckreuth-requiem we might recognise the common theme of difficulty of interpretation. That which is our own, our childhood and our death, can never be fully described or comprehended, and so it is only this inability to possess childhood and death which can be described. Malte manages to do this:

In denselben Maße aber, [...] gingen mir auch für die unendliche Realität meines Kindseins die Augen auf. Ich wußte, daß es nicht aufhören würde, so wenig wie das andere erst begann. Ich sagte mir, daß es natürlich jedem freistand, Abschnitte zu machen, aber sie waren erfunden. Und es erwies
sich, daß ich zu ungeschickt war, mir welche auszudenken. Sooft ich es versuchte, gab mir das Leben zu verstehen, daß es nichts von ihnen wußte. Bestand ich aber darauf, daß meine Kindheit vorüber sei, so war in demselben Augenblick auch alles Kommende fort, und mir blieb nur genau so viel wie ein Bleisoldat unter sich hat, um stehen zu können. (pp. 892-3)

Malte realises that his infinitely inscrutable and mysterious childhood is the stuff of him, is past, present and future, and all his reading and writing should proceed in the manner of the reading of childhood. He must read himself and books, as ‘unbekannt’, as inappropriable phenomena.

In his essay Über Kunst Rilke argues that the artist sustains his childhood in adulthood whereas the non-artist represses it:

Das heißt das Kind wird entweder älter und verständigter im bürgerlichen Sinn, als Keim eines brauchbaren Staatsbürgers, es tritt in den Orden seiner Zeit ein und empfängt ihre Weihen, oder es reift einfach ruhig weiter von tief innen, aus seinem eigenen Kindsein heraus, und das bedeutet, es wird Mensch im Geiste aller Zeiten: Künstler.

In diesen Tiefen und nicht in den Tagen und Erfahrungen der Schule verbreiten sich die Wurzeln des wahren Künstlerums. Sie wohnen in dieser wärmeren Erde, in der niegestörten Stille dunkler Entwicklungen, die nichts wissen von dem Maß der Zeit. Möglich, daß andere Stämme, die aus der Erziehung, aus dem kühleren, von den Veränderungen der Oberfläche beeinflußten Boden ihre Kräfte heben, höher in den Himmel wachsen als so ein tiefgründiger Künstlerbaum. Dieser streckt nicht seine vergänglichen Äste, durch welche die Herbsts und Frühlings ziehen, zu Gott, dem Ewigfremden, hin; er breitet ruhig seine Wurzeln aus, und sie umrahmen den Gott, der hinter den Dingen ist, dort, wo es ganz warm und dunkel wird.

Darum, weil die Künstler viel weiter in die Wärme alles Werdens hinabreichen, steigen andere Säfte in ihnen zu den Früchten auf. Sie sind die Einzigen, die Geständnisse tun können, wo die Anderen verhüllte Fragen haben. Niemand kann die Grenzen ihres Seins erkennen. (pp. 430-1)

The artist sustains relation with the incommensurable side of the self – the imagination which takes her outside of her conscious and subjective boundaries. (Note also the reference to ‘the further circulation’ of art, the reaching out into a space of distance and difference which Rilke celebrates in the imagery of blood in Requiem für eine Freundin.) Kalckreuth’s attempt to write poetry is also an attempt to write himself, for the journey into poetic language is the journey towards an existence for the self which is not contained but released into an infinite experience. The Requiem places the poetic sign (‘Zeichen’) at the centre of the poet’s existence – within his childhood.
4.3 The Death which is not one’s Own – Committing Artistic Suicide

In Rilke’s poetics of death the infinite space of the poet’s relation to death is forged within poetic language. Poetry moves towards an outer place, the metaphorical space of death, and the Requiem is centrally concerned with the construction of the ‘death of one’s own’ within writing. Kalckreuth’s writing of himself within his poetry is also the writing of his death. His failure to write as a poet is therefore his failure to die an authentic death. His suicide is a writing of himself out of both life and death. The ‘open mould’ of the ‘death of one’s own’ – the different shape or figure offered by the poem when it is cast or fully formed – is broken because it is shattered (‘zerbrochen’: 113) by an intense, imbalanced, trembling emotion (recalling the anxious, quivering hand which snuffs out the light of poetry):

und in der dritten, die du selbst zu früh
zerbrochen hast, da kaum der erste Schuß
bebender Speise aus des Herzens Weißglut
hineinführt -., (112)

Kalckreuth’s inability to commit to, and bear the burden of, the extra-personal condition of poetry shatters the text of the death that could and should have been his own (and this shattering reverberates through the Requiem in the dramatic metaphors ‘Sprung’, ‘Ruck’ and ‘Blitzlicht’: 41-4). Unable to enter the different space of art, Kalckreuth fails to achieve an authentic relation with his death. He is unable to sustain that struggle with the ‘Other’, the possibility of the poetic self’s absence described by Rilke in a letter:

Ich meine, es müßte ein großes gewaltiges Gebet geben des einen Flehens, es möchte jeder nur sein Schweres auf seinem Weg finden, ich will sagen das, das zu den einmal eingesehenen und leidenschaftlich bejahten Aufgaben seines Lebens immerhin in einer gewissen Proportionalität stünde -: dieses dürfte dann groß, ja außerordentlich übermächtig, es dürfte sogar tödlich sein. Denn wer, wenn er einen wahrhaften Kampf auf sich nimmt, hat nicht auch die verschwiegene heilige Freudigkeit, in ihm unterzugehen. (19.2.22, Sizzo, p. 22)

Kalckreuth is the obverse of the artist who prays to encounter ‘sein Schweres’ because he sees it as the precondition of artistic achievement, and so he cannot perceive the
joyfulness ('Freudigkeit') of the encounter with death in art, death's potential for a different connotation, and in this he fails to affirm either poetry or death.

The formative encounter with death which Kalckreuth foregoes in his rejection of the burden of art is perhaps elucidated in Blanchot's identification of the difficulty of poetry and the economics of sacrifice: 'Whoever wants to take on the ability to communicate must lose himself in what he transmits, yet feel himself incommunicable' ('The “Sacred” Speech of Hölderlin', *The Work of Fire*, pp. 129-130). As argued earlier, the two artists of the requiem poems are shown to have had the potential for the artistic translation of selfhood into language and death through a metaphorical losing, shedding, or sacrificing of the self's limitations. As Kalckreuth struggles with this 'Fund', the key to his poetry and his life, he is struggling towards 'den eigenen Tod' itself. When he fails in the 'transmission', the death which might have been his own - made within himself - fails to emerge. The death which ensues is not 'ein Tod von guter Arbeit/vertieft gebildet' (115), a death fashioned from the depths of the artistic imagination, but one which is inauthentic in that it comes from outside the difficult mode of art and writing.

Kalckreuth, the *Requiem* laments, was deluded in thinking that death lay outside the parameters of his poetry and that it might offer him a release from the torments of writing:

> War das so erleichternd wie du meinstest, oder war das Nichtmehrleben doch noch weit vom Totsein? Du wätestest, besser zu besitzen dort, wo keiner Wert legt auf Besitz. Dir schien, dort drüben wärest du innen in der Landschaft, die wie ein Bild hier immer vor dir zugezogen, und kämst von innen her in die Geliebte und gingst hin durch alles, stark und schwingend. O daß du nun die Täuschung nicht zu lang Nachträgest deinem knabenhaften Irrtum. Daß du, gelöst in einer Strömung Wehmut und hingerissen, halb nur bei Bewußtsein

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23 Blanchot converges with Rilke's poetry again here, for the *First Elegy* announces:

> Denn das Schöne ist nichts als des Schrecklichen Anfang, den wir noch grade ertragen, und wir bewundern es so, weil es gelassen verschmäht, uns zu zerstören. (SW I, p. 685: 4)
Kalckreuth's death wish is the classic escapist fantasy of death as an alleviation of the pain of living and writing. 'Landschaft' and 'Geliebte' are metaphors for the kind of death Kalckreuth desires, alluding to his being in love with a false, childish dream ('Träume') of death in which the dead person soars confidently through, and is at home in, the environment. It is a projection of the self out of the difficulty of life. This death is a short-circuited imagination pervaded by Romantic images, and it evokes nothing of the otherness of death ('von innen her' conveys the sentimental orientation towards the inside, as opposed to the expropriation and outsidedness required for the 'death of one's own'). The Requiem denies that this longing for death can produce an authentic death. It juxtaposes 'Nichtmehrleben' and 'Totsein' as negative, insufficient half-state and achieved dead, 'other' existence (the oxymoron of 'dead being' suggests the achievement of paradox, the going beyond conventional notions of death as non-identity) respectively. The longing which projects and postpones death beyond the present living moment projects it out of its capacity to be whole and a thing in itself, a thing realisable here and now, in life, and not just a dream of difference.

Such longing for future fulfilment also smacks of the Christianity Rilke rejects. Rilke writes much later of the poetic injunction to transform what we have 'here' in our mortal condition ('Gestaltungen des Hiesigen'):


This transformation invests the things of the earth with greater meaning ('jene überlegenen Bedeutungen), yet these significations are not Christian, rather they are part of an earthly consciousness which projects into the most intense and extreme meaning. Such expansive movement however is not orientated away from the things themselves towards an other-worldliness ('Jenseits'). Kalckreuth is guilty of wrecking this 'wholeness of Being' ('das Ganze') in his desire for a beyond which negates the mortal
condition rather than experiences it. Rilke is scolding here his own early poetry which proffered this same dream of death as dislocated from the dying process within the 'here': 'Leben ist nur so der Traum eines Traumes,/aber Wachsein ist anderswo' ('Requiem (Clara Westhoff gewidmet)', *BB II, SW I*, p. 472). He states elsewhere the necessity to exist fully within the nexus of relation available to the imagination as it is, and to put aside the dream of another state of being elsewhere:

Aber wie sehr ist, was uns begegnet, aus einem Stück, in welcher Verwandtschaft steht eines zum anderen, hat sich geboren und wächst heran und wird erzogen zu sich selbst, und wir haben Gründe nur dazusein, aber schlicht, aber inständig wie die Erde da ist, den Jahreszeiten zustimmend, hell und dunkel und ganz im Raum, nicht verlangend, in anderem aufzurufen als in dem Netz von Einflüssen und Kräften, in dem die Sterne sicher fühlen' (19.10.1907, *Cézanne*, p. 35).

Death, the *Requiem* declares, can only be realised within the language produced within life:

Wie nahe warst du, Lieber, hier an ihr.
Wie war sie hier zuhause, die, die du meinst,
die ernste Freude deiner strengen Sehnsucht. (21)

The true joy ('Freude') of death is 'hier' – is the here of one's present incarnation and the here of the poem, the *Requiem* referring to itself as text on the page. 'Hier' is the presence and process of writing, and Kalckreuth was not aware that he was closest to creative fulfilment when he was engaged in the process of it. The authentic, creative, created death is located in the 'hier' of the text, as the *Requiem* insists again later:

\[ \text{ein Tod von guter Arbeit} \\
\text{vertieft gebildet, jener eigne Tod,} \\
\text{der uns so nötig hat, weil wir ihn leben,} \\
\text{und dem wir nirgends näher sind als hier. (115)} ^24 \]

These lines emphasise the importance of living the 'death of one's own' in the artwork in which life is refigured. In other words, in living a poeticised life the poet is already inviting the otherness of death into the proximity of the present, already including death in life's language. Kalckreuth's folly was to locate his death outside the difficulty of his

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24 Konrad quotes 'nirgends näher als hier', but does not associate 'hier' with the text: 'der Tod gibt dem Dasein seinen Sinn, indem er, eindeutig auf das Hiesige bezogen, immanent und zielsetzend dem Leben innenwohnt' (1947, p. 199).
art. The ‘Hiersein’ of death repeated here as death needing the artist to live it, to give it energy, recalls the blood imagery of *Requiem für eine Freundin*, locating it in the lifeblood so that it takes on the ‘Blut’, ‘Blick’ and ‘Gebärde’ of life (*Malte*, p. 725).

The term ‘Nichtmehrleben’ evokes a half-death, the mere negation of life which is the act of suicide. This self-destructive death contradicts the constructive, creative, self-made and meaningful ‘Totsein’, the writing of death in its fullness as a positive, self-substantiating, self-replete condition. The achievement of death as birth – as the production of an entity with its own identity and integrity – is conditional on the integration of its difficulty, as the *First Elegy* suggests: ‘das Totsein ist mühsam und voller Nachholn’ (*SW I*, p. 688: 78).25 The poet’s production of death as a positive cast or construction is paradoxically grounded in an experience and language of death which remains behind and in the shadow and difficulty of death rather than in front and in control of it. This difficulty is rehearsed in the difficult transformations of art. Kalckreuth’s suicide is presented as a non-artistic gesture and therefore an inauthentic death which does not bear out the difficulty of death within art.26 The sound of Kalckreuth’s suicide rings out in the requiem poem in the ‘Schlag’ (37) which may well echo the shotgun which Kalckreuth turned on himself. In suicide his death is born by destruction, not invention: ‘Daß du zerstört hast. Daß man dies von dir/wird sagen müssen bis in alle Zeiten’ (48). Suicide nullifies ‘den eigenen Tod’ which might have been engendered in the poet and the creative word.

The ‘death of one’s own’ is not configured as fruit in *Requiem für Wolf Graf von Kalckreuth*, but the destructive blow to authentic death and the work of art is traced

25 In the *First Elegy* ‘Nachholen’ is that drive, which we meet in both requiem poems, to work and transform raw material into art. In Rilke’s rewriting of the legend of the Prodigal Son we read: ‘Er ging ganz darin auf, zu bewältigen, was sein Binnenleben ausmachte, er wollte nichts überspringen, denn er zweifelte nicht, daß in alledem seine Liebe war und zunahm. Ja, seine innere Fassung ging so weit, daß er beschloß, das Wichtigste von dem, was er früher nicht hatte leisten können, was einfach nur durchwassert worden war, nachzuholen. Er dachte vor allem an die Kindheit, sie kam ihm, je ruhiger er sich besann, desto ungetaner vor; alle ihre Erinnerungen hatten das Vage von Ahnungen an sich, und daß sie als vergangen galten, machte sie nahezu zukünftig’ (*Malte*, pp. 944-5). Rilke’s lost son and Kalckreuth must write their own life, death, love and childhood. None of these are defined in advance of the individuals who live them, and if ‘das Totsein’ is ‘voller Nachholn’ the artist’s death of her own is the ultimate state of creativity, a language which does not impose and homogenise meaning.

26 On Tolstoy Rilke writes: ‘Dieser Mensch hat an sich und an anderen viele Arten von Todesangst beobachtet, denn auch noch seiner eigenen Furcht Beobachter zu sein, war ihm durch seine natürliche Fassung gegeben, und sein Verhältnis zum Tode wird bis zuletzt eine großartig durchdungene Angst gewesen sein, eine Fuge von Angst gleichsam, ein riesiger Bau, ein Angst-Turm mit Gängen und Treppen und geländerlosen Vorsprüngen und Abstürzen nach allen Seiten – nur, daß die Kraft, mit der er auch noch den Aufwand seiner Angst erfuhr und zugab, im letzten Augenblick vielleicht, wer weiß es, in unnahbare Wirklichkeit umschlug, plötzlich dieses Turmes sicherer Boden, Landschaft und Himmel war und der Wind und ein Flug Vogel um ihn’ (to Lotte Hepner, 8.11.1915, *Briefe 1914-21*, p. 93). Rilke insists that Tolstoy had the potential to transform his fear of death if only he had stayed with it and integrated it in the aesthetic ‘turn’.
through the seeds in the earth: ‘Wer kann beschwören, daß nicht in der Erde/ein Sprung
sich hinzieht durch gesunde Samen’ (40). This recalls the violation of the death-seed in
Requiem für eine Freundin, and although the ‘gesunde Samen’ are not directly
associated with Kalckreuth’s death, they certainly do point to the gestation of the work
of art which has been breached. But Kalckreuth does mirror Paula Modersohn-Becker’s
exhumation of her death-seed when he digs into himself for the ‘insight’ that is located
within the ‘dark find’. As I argued earlier, Kalckreuth’s ‘dark find’ is the death of his
own which he cannot live up to. He fetches it out from within himself and destroys it
just as Modersohn-Becker removes the seeds of the artistic death of her own and
destroys them. Kalckreuth is destroyed by the demands of his poetry and his death (he
collapses under the burden), and this in turn is his destruction of them.

There are also some hints in the verb ‘eingraben’ and in the evocation of
childhood that the ‘Zeichen’ might be the ‘eigener Tod’, buried in the artist since birth:

du hätttest jäh bei einem hellen Einsehn
die Schrift gelesen, deren Zeichen du
seit deiner Kindheit langsam in dich eingrubst,
von Zeit zu Zeit versuchend, ob ein Satz
dabei sich bilde (78)

The term ‘Zeichen’ points to the imagination out of which Kalckreuth tries to create a
language (‘Schrift’ and ‘Satz’), and the attempt to express the indefinable at the centre
of human life is also formative in the realisation of the ‘death of one’s own’. The
individual death is deep within the imagination. So if Kalckreuth is trying to decipher
the meaning of his life he will fail unless he creates meaning in creating his own death,
a death not known in advance of the creation, a death which is not descriptive but yields
a ‘sign’, the poetic sign which testifies to the infinitely indeterminate nature of life and
death, the sign which goes beyond the boundaries of conventional speech and sentence.
To read and say the ‘Zeichen’ means to find one’s inner secret, the inner self which is
one’s own poetic voice, and it is this voice which shapes the inner death. The
connection between the poet realising himself in his art and in the construction of the
death of his own is reinforced further by the evocation of the text on the gravestone:

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27 In the last poem of ‘Buch von der Pilgerschaft’ a pilgrim digs for the divine as treasure and then raises
his hands to the sky in a bid for God. He imagines God falling like rain on the earth to meet his
exhumation (SB, SW I, pp. 339-40), enacting the same convergence of ascent and descent which promises
new birth in relation with ‘the infinitely dead’ at the end of the Tenth Elegy (SW I, p. 725: 105).
Kalckreuth’s excavation of the ‘dark find’ and the ‘sign’ are attempts to birth himself through a
metaphorical death, a descent into the unconscious or the imagination.
Ich weiß; ich weiß, du lagst davor und griffst
die Rillen ab, wie man auf einem Grabstein
die Inschrift abfühlt. (83)

Kalckreuth’s journey to the centre of himself through the achievement of a poetry which
is his own is also a journey towards his death in the achievement of a language of death.
The poetry he seeks is the text of his death.

4.4 Rilke and the ‘Figure’ of Kalckreuth

The Requiem states its intention to ‘say’ the dead poet: ‘Daß ich dich begänne/zu sagen,
Toter, der du bist’ (3). This saying is crucial to the poet of ‘der eigene Tod’, for, as is
the case in Requiem für eine Freundin, the death of the artist is bound up with the death
of the requiem poet. Rilke is determined to rewrite the unachieved deaths of the
unsuccessful artists in his art, to repair in his work the breach which their work made in
the unity of art and death. When Requiem für Wolf Graf von Kalckreuth announces that
Kalckreuth’s death was closest to him in the work of poetry (‘Wie nahe warst du,
Lieber, hier an ihr’: 21; ‘und dem wir nirgends näher sind als hier’: 118) it does not just
foreground itself in the ‘hier’ as an example of poetic text – it insists that Kalckreuth’s
death is in the making in this present and specific poem, this requiem to his death. The
poem’s looping back to itself mirrors the requiem poet’s self-referential turn to his own
death which he is inscribing in the text of the poem. If Rilke can write Kalckreuth into
an artist’s death he can affirm the ‘death of one’s own’ and mould and cast the death of
his own in art. ‘Saying’ the dead poet becomes, then, a kind of ghost writing, a writing
which is offered on behalf of the named author. Rilke attempts to say the essence of
Modersohn-Becker’s and Kalckreuth’s best work, to rearticulate it so that it might go
into their own œuvre. He attempts to achieve for them what they did not achieve
themselves.

The Requiem becomes therefore an attempt to realise the transformation
Kalckreuth had begun in his own work, taking up the potential Kalckreuth showed and
asserting it over his negative output. This reading might also be supported by the
evocation of Kalckreuth’s angel who pronounces his best poetry after his death (‘lautet
jetzt noch und betont/denselben Wortlaut anders’: 100). In addition to the interpretation
of the angel I have already offered (the angel as the voice of the artistic and the ‘Other’),
Rilke may be Kalckreuth’s angel, his spirit or messenger, continuing and completing his
poetry into what it could have been, commemorating and celebrating its quality. The line ‘daß du im Sehendwerden den Verzicht/erkannt hast’ (105) is an almost direct quotation from Kalckreuth himself: ‘Denn sehend werden heißt verzichten’. The full text of the poem by Kalckreuth, in which this line occurs as a refrain, is:

Der Kreislauf der erblichen Stunden
Drückt dich mit schwerer Müdigkeit;
Mit Ketten ist dein Fuß gebunden,
Die dich umschließen allezeit,
Bis sie mit leiser Traurigkeit
Die Stärke deines Selbst vernichten:
Die Hand sinkt lahm, der Blick wird weit,
Denn sehend werden heißt verzichten.

Der Ton, den andere gefunden,
Dem deine Seele Leben leihst,
Blüht in der Öde deiner Wunden
Mit seltsam fahler Farbigkeit.
Er gibt dir flüsternnd das Geleit,
Wohin sich deine Schritte richten.
Du fühlst nur fremdes Glück und Leid;
Denn sehend werden heißt verzichten.

Du denkst der Zeiten, die entschwunden,
Verlorner Tage Herrlichkeit.
 Doch fehlt die Kraft dir zu gesunden,
Es flammt kein Strahl, der dich befreit.
 Die Liebe, der du einst geweiht,
Dünk dir ein lästiges Verpflichten –
 Ein Schauspiel voller Seltsamkeit –
 Denn sehend werden heißt verzichten.

Ihr Glücklichen, sei euch geweiht
Mein traurig Sinnen und mein Dichten ...
Lebt fort in blinder Seligkeit –
Denn sehend werden heißt verzichten. (‘Der Kreislauf der erblichen Stunden’,
Wolf Graf von Kalckreuth. Gedichte, p. 12)

This poem (see also ‘Ich darf mein Herz an niemand Liebes hängen’, p. 13) demonstrates Kalckreuth’s entrapment in the Romantic discourse of death as relief from life, a discourse which, as argued earlier, Rilke wishes to overcome in his own work. Rilke does indeed ‘pronounce the same word differently’, for Kalckreuth uses this line as a melancholic refrain and a death wish (that in death, the ‘giving up’ of life, he may escape the stark glare of consciousness), whereas Rilke gives it a positive emphasis –

28 Pointed out by Kruse (1949, p. 150).
29 For an analysis of Kalckreuth’s death-fixation see Kruse (1949, pp. 25-42).
'Verzicht' for Rilke means a turning away from internal and personal obsessions, a going beyond all that is already known ('Das Anschauen ist eine so wunderbare Sache, von der wir so wenig wissen; wir sind mit ihm ganz nach außen gekehrt', to Clara, 8.3.1907, *Briefe 1906-07*, p. 214). When Rilke quotes Kalckreuth he does something different with Kalckreuth's words. The refrain as something recurring and familiar comes to take on new and unfamiliar meaning – Kalckreuth's potential relinquishment of reflex melancholic responses in his poem. Rilke shows him the optimism inherent in such relinquishment – he 'betont/denselben Wortlaut anders' (100). The words 'dies war dein' (103) can be interpreted as Rilke's acknowledgment of the intertext. He may be saying: 'these are your words', showing how they can be rewritten and his death can be rewritten. Rilke here is quoting from Kalckreuth as he quotes from Modersohn-Becker's work in *Requiem für eine Freundin*. He comes to Modersohn-Becker through her requiem poems, not through her person, and he is doing the same here. It is texts, not people, which form the backdrop to each *Requiem*.

But 'Daß ich dich begänne/zu sagen' (3) has further significance. On this second *Requiem* Rilke writes,


And Rilke declares again in the *Requiem* itself how Kalckreuth's suicide has affected him: 'Sah ich dich wirklich nie? Mir ist das Herz/so schwer von dir wie von zu schwerem Anfang'(1). Rilke never met Kalckreuth, but Kalckreuth's troubles as a poet strike a chord with him. The two requiem poems are self-reflexive works which explore the relation between the personal and the poetic response, and 'Herz' in the opening line of *Requiem für Wolf Graf von Kalckreuth* names the immediacy and urgency of an emotional anxiety which Rilke will try to overcome through poetic speech ('sagen') in the rest of the poem: 'Daß ich dich begänne/zu sagen, Toter, der du bist'. Bearing in mind that Rilke's criticism of Kalckreuth throughout the *Requiem* focuses on his inability to break the influence of the personal, or private, self, Rilke opens his poem with a declaration of his own heaviness of heart. Kalckreuth, who represents for Rilke the emotionally burdened poet, has become a figure of Rilke's own emotional and

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30 Kruse argues that *Requiem für Wolf Graf von Kalckreuth* is a requiem for poetry, not for an individual (1949, p. 146).
artistic burden: ‘Mir ist das Herz so schwer von dir’. In Kalckreuth Rilke is figuring his own entrapment within the personal, his own sense of being intimidated by the burden of achieving an impersonal ‘saying’, a language of otherness. Kalckreuth bears down heavily (‘schwer’) on Rilke because Rilke must confront in Kalckreuth’s suicide his own possible failure as an artist and consequently in death, and find the patience to orientate himself towards the difference in language which constitutes the achieved work and an achieved death. (His anxiety is heard in the shattering of the text of Kalckreuth’s death which reverberates through the Requiem as if threatening the Requiem itself.) He must confront and transcend the oppressive confines of his selfhood in order to produce a language which can get to the other side of these. Kalckreuth is a figure of Rilke’s own difficulties in beginning this process of poetic, non-subjective and non-impulsive saying: ‘Daß ich dich begänne/zu sagen’.

To begin the ‘saying’ is to begin the transformation of the poet’s personal oppressions. Rilke must take the anxiety, impatience and sense of inadequacy which his poetic calling instils in him and turn these into a positive and productive engagement with the extremities of his own powers as an artist. He immediately turns from the ‘ich’ to the ‘du’, beginning the saying of the ‘I’ in the saying of the ‘you’, and this represents an attempt to move out of the subjective world of his private anxiety and into the supra-personal world of poetry. This is where the nature of Rilke’s intimacy with Kalckreuth in this poem must be defined further. The ‘du’ to whom Rilke turns is not the real, biographical, personal Kalckreuth as he was, but the poetic ‘you’ which figures the poetic ‘I’ as a poet whose mission is common to his own. In a letter to Anton Kippenberg asking him to send the Requiem to Kalckreuth’s mother Rilke writes:

Ein Kunstding ist rücksichtslos und muß es sein; mir läge daran, daß die Gräfin von vornherein nicht im leisesten gebunden sei, mir persönlich zu antworten. Irgend eine Wendung des Gedichts, die vielleicht ihrem Gefühl nicht wohltun kann, müßte solche Verpflichtung ihr über die Maßen lästig und schmerzhaft machen. (27.1.1909, Verleger I, p. 69)

The letter expresses an awareness that the poem may cause personal offence because of the apparent fierceness of its condemnation. In stating that art must be unsparing, Rilke attempts to convey that as a poem his Requiem is not a poem of consolation and must therefore disregard the conventional niceties in dealing with its subject. The ‘du’ of the Requiem therefore represents the Rilkean ‘I’ turning rigorously towards itself as an artist.
Taken in this sense, 'Daß ich dich begänne/zu sagen' expresses the ambition to exceed and transform the personal aspect of both addressee and speaker, to articulate as poetry both the 'selves' in question. This is the kind of language which can really transform death, for it is a language which utters death in its orientation away from the familiar language of the ethical and the psychological and towards the irreducibility of 'die Figur'. The poetic 'saying' of the personally-entangled, undead death of an underachieving poet harbours within it the realisation of language, and therefore the realisation of death, as otherness. The poetic word institutes an impersonality and an impersonal, inhuman, incomprehensible death which extends to both speaker and addressee in its disregard for individuality. The requiem poem seeks to become the site of death, where human beings become 'nichts als Bild' (138) – pure poetic figure.

The determination to 'say' resembles the plea made in Requiem für eine Freundin:

Denn irgendwo ist eine alte Feindschaft
zwischen dem Leben und der großen Arbeit.
Daß ich sie einseh und sie sage: hilf mir. (SW I, pp. 655-6: 267)

In the poetic articulation of the artist's predicament, the near-impossible crossing which the artist, the one who is given to a different or 'other' world, must make, Rilke begins the movement towards that very outer place. If the requiem poet can make his own plight reverberate through poetic, impersonal figure ('O alter Fluch der Dichter,/die sich beklagen, wo sie sagen sollten': 123), he has begun the poetic achievement which is the achievement of difficulty and difference. Both requiem poems are patient prayers to themselves for the strength to write the language of requiem, of fulfilment and rest in the poetic otherness of death.

Thus the traditional requiem's task – that of commemorating the dead in a celebratory form – becomes a theme in Rilke's requiem poems. The order of the Catholic requiem mass, with its prayer for the souls of the dead, puts its faith in a higher, Christian power to rest the dead and reconcile the living to death. Requiem für Wolf Graf von Kalckreuth, however, begins with a 'schwere[m] Anfang', with a lack of confidence in the performative function of language. In conventional prayer there is a belief that God answers, but secular poetry must seek that transformative power within itself and perform its own redemption. It has the much more difficult (and, Rilke believes, authentic) task of 'saying' the dead, speaking the language of a different world, speaking a different language.
Was hast du nicht gewartet, daß die Schwere
ganz unerträglich wird: da schlägt sie um
und ist so schwer, weil sie so echt ist. (31)

The *Requiem* identifies the ‘Schwere’ of achieving the strange ‘death of one’s own’ within poetry, but affirms the authenticity of this confrontation with death. As a poet, then, Rilke enjoins himself to remain patient as he refigures this difficulty, turning it into liberation and fulfilment in the composition of poetry. He hopes to exorcise the dead Kalckreuth, to dispel the burden of an artist’s suicide, by taking on the same burden under which Kalckreuth broke, and producing a language for it. The result is not a traditional requiem but a requiem poem which lays bare the difficult relation between the poet, death, human frailty and the language of poetry.

Throughout the *Requiem* Rilke can be heard struggling with the same ‘Einsicht’ as Kalckreuth – the potential of poetic language. Rilke identifies with Kalckreuth’s efforts to transform personal disposition into a richer art in the repetition of ‘ich weiß’ in:

> Ich weiß; ich weiß, du lagst davor und griffst
die Rillen ab, wie man auf einem Grabstein
die Inschrift abfühlt. (83)

But by the end of the *Requiem*, Rilke’s work of art, the desired ‘Umschlag’ seems to have taken place in Rilke’s difficult achievement of Kalckreuth as ‘Bild’ or ‘Figur’. The difficulty of poetic transformation, which is also the difficulty of death, has been endured, and it has resulted in a language which can say what it is beyond the confines of ordinary language to say. This transformation, or ‘Umschlag’, into the impersonal, unlimited and infinite mode of image and figure, is won in the journey through the complexity of metaphor to the extremities of language – to language at its heaviest and most difficult:

> Was hast du nicht gewartet, daß die Schwere
ganz unerträglich wird: da schlägt sie um
und ist so schwer, weil sie so echt ist. (31)

The following lines offer a commentary on the idea of the poem as pure image (‘nichts als Bild’), while attempting to direct and control the reception of the *Requiem*:

> Doch dies ist kleinlich,
zu denken, was nicht war. Auch ist ein Schein
von Vorwurf im Vergleich, der dich nicht trifft.
Das, was geschieht, hat einen solchen Vorsprung vor unserm Meinen, daß wirs niemals einholn und nie erfahren, wie es wirklich aussah. (142)

Rilke comments from an artistic perspective on the relationship between art and life in general, and art and biography in particular. He insists that his account of Kalckreuth’s suicide is to be read figuratively, as fiction; as fiction, an image of his own making, the Requiem deals with something which never happened (‘was nicht war’) in the way in which he presents it. Rilke’s figuring of Kalckreuth in his poem has nothing to do with any interest in biographical fact; if it did, it would be petty (‘kleinlich’), no more than the expression of a deluded opinion (‘Meinen’) in that it would never be able to latch on to the complexity of reality (‘wie es wirklich aussah’). The truth of the poem as pure image is general and impersonal. The commemoration of Kalckreuth is not intended as a commemoration of the man who really lived and died; the Requiem as fiction, an image of Rilke’s making, is distinguished by its refusal to be confined to the specific obsessions and neuroses of the private man. The image of Kalckreuth, cast in the Requiem from the mould of the traumas and anxieties inherent in Rilke’s own life as an artist, is not, then, narrowly biographical; it is not intended to discredit a dead man or define the precise circumstances of his suicide, but to articulate in an impersonal way the struggle for art, and to take on this struggle in finding a different, unconventional language to validate, in the non-opinionated form of a poem, the supreme importance of poetry as an alternative mode of expression and creation.

Rilke appears to bless Kalckreuth in death, exorcising the shame he may have engendered in him through his lament for his unachieved poetry:

Sei nicht beschämt, wenn dich die Toten streifen,
die andern Toten, welche bis ans Ende aushielten. (Was will Ende sagen?) Tausche den Blick mit ihnen, ruhig, wie es Brauch ist, und fürchte nicht, daß unser Trauern dich seltsam belädt, so daß du ihnen auffällt. (148)

This prayer asks and urges Kalckreuth to merge with the dead, in a way which is similar to the ‘sei/tot bei den Toten’ of the first Requiem (SW I, p. 656: 270). In both requiem poems the imperative ‘sei’ is used, which can also be read as a subjunctive, conveying the status of death as conditional upon poetic figure and the imagination – the non-literal, fictional consolation of art. Kalckreuth’s integration into otherness is therefore
conditional upon language, and, more specifically, on the language of death which is addressed to him – the language of mourning which is the central concern of Requiem für eine Freundin. Lament (‘Trauern’) should not burden the dead (‘fürchte nicht, daß unser Trauern dich/seitsem belädt’), i.e. lament should be poetic and impersonal, releasing and relinquishing the dead into death rather than willing and weighting them back into the familiarity and recognisability of their former selves. Again here, Rilke demonstrates that death itself is made in language. The prayer is directed towards the imaginal, aesthetic power of the poem rather than towards an external divinity, towards the poem’s potential to rewrite Kalckreuth’s death by producing its own language of death.\(^{31}\) In Rilke’s rewriting of Christian requiem the embedded scripture on the gravestone (‘wie man auf einem Grabstein/die Inschrift abfüllt’: 84) becomes the writing of oneself into a different material and a different, more balanced condition (‘des Steines Gleichmut’: 134), whereby the law is not carved by an absolute, Catholic God, but the writing is carried out anew by the poet who can access the eternal through writing. The secular blessing at the end of the Requiem has turned towards the indefinable, other power of poetry to produce the miracle of the transformed death for Kalckreuth. The poem has become a figure of incantation, and it is perhaps in finding its way to the ‘other’ language of incantation that it has achieved its own language of death.

These last lines call for an equilibrium to counterbalance the preceding weight of distress and evokes again the composure and equanimity of the work of art (‘des Steines Gleichmut’), and this transformation into a different condition figures Kalckreuth’s integration into the different condition of death. The equanimity and indifference sought

\(^{31}\)Por’s article on the requiem poems interprets Requiem für Wolf Graf von Kalckreuth as an expression of the poet’s inability to transform experience into ‘Bild’ or ‘Wort’, arguing that Kalckreuth fails to write the poem of his suffering and Rilke fails to write the requiem, of Kalckreuth’s death. He writes: ‘der Sprung, der den Kosmos und jedes Seiende in ihm verzeichnet, eröffnet eine Leere, die die Kunst nicht mehr besiegen kann’ (1998, p. 56). Por argues that the text ends with ‘Nicht-Dichten, ‘Selbst-Zerstören’ and silence, and that the renunciation of ‘Siegen’ signifies ‘eine Zeit des Verlusts der beschwörenden Allmacht des Worts’, the dawn of Expressionism. Por compares the imagery of destruction and breach in the Requiem with the motif of absence and ellipsis in the Neue Gedichte. In the latter, incompleteness is appropriated for the poem, indeed the poem is constructed around this lack. The Neue Gedichte can create new worlds in which fictions come into existence. Por argues that Rilke’s Requiem is self-deconstructing: ‘löst sich von innen her selbst und verschwindet spürlos im nichts’. He argues that the poem pronounces its own invalidity as a work of art in the face of non-being: ‘der Text aus Worten beklagt die Erfahrung, daß Worte diese Zerstörung nicht mehr sagen oder gar besiegen können’ (pp. 80-96). I cannot read the Requiem in the entirely deconstructive way Por does. Even at the end of Requiem für eine Freundin, when a call for help is sent out, the poet has not lost his belief in art and is determined to continue on that course. I sense the threat of dissolution which the Requiem is under, the difficulty it sustains, but I do read in the Requiem’s acceptance of the burden an integration of the empty space of death and the meaning which is in excess of pre-existent language.
for the work of death is expressed throughout the *Requiem* in the metaphor of space ('Raum'). The requiem poem tries to gain a new space of rearticulation for death, and the exhortation to Kalckreuth to be unashamed ('Sei nicht beschämt': 148) and inconspicuous ('daß du ihnen auffällst': 153) in death is crucial to Rilke's poetics of death, for the spaciousness implied in anonymity and ambiguity are the essence of poetry and death.

The 'Ruhe' of this final section evokes an interesting parallel between the two requiem poems. The figure of Kalckreuth exchanging glances with the authentically dead is suggested as a method of transformation, a method for achieving Kalckreuth's integration into death, his inconspicuousness amongst the dead. But this transformation does not merely take place in the eye-contact. The approach to the exchange of glances must be 'calm' ('ruhig, wie es Brauch ist': 151). Calmness is the custom of the dead, and Kalckreuth is enjoined to be calm since this equanimity in death, this accepting integration into absolute otherness, is essential to the making, the pure imaging of his authentic death. Kalckreuth's achieved death is figured in Rilke's poem in the calm, patient acceptance of difficulty. In *Requiem für eine Freundin* death is met in the exchange of glances with animals whereby the gazing subject becomes the gazed upon object and a new perspective is solicited ('will ein kurzes Dasein/ in ihren Augen haben': *SW* I, p. 65). The subject assents to this reversal which enacts a metaphorical death and contributes to the preparation of the written death. The eye as the place of the transformative encounter in Rilke's work becomes in the requiem poems the possibility of seeing one's way into the absolute transformation of death.

The Kalckreuth who practises 'Ruhe', who is refigured in a poem which is 'pure image' ('nichts als Bild': 138), is accommodated to rest and death. Rilke's refiguration of Kalckreuth's death is his secular prayer to Kalckreuth and to himself to go into 'image'. It is an admonition to Kalckreuth and himself to go into the work of art, the text, a space and a community of mutually-reinforcing difference (Kalckreuth is encouraged to blend into this difference, i.e. not to be different to it: 'so daß du ihnen nicht auffällst': 153). Ultimately Rilke is asking Kalckreuth to go into the requiem he is writing, into the poetic space he has created for him, the space which can say the difficulty of poetic creation and the entry into death. In this space Kalckreuth can be the image of poetry, the writing of death. But this poetry is not the language of mastery and definition ('Siegen': 156) which overcomes death's otherness by disciplining it in familiar, liturgical metaphors. It is rather a language of ongoing process and definition ('Überstehn': 156) which puts Rilkean space around and into words. 'Überstehen' itself
is an ambivalent, spacious term in this *Requiem*. As the final noun it has a non-finality. It suggests a condition without specifying the content of this condition. It is as invisible as the metaphysical certainty of former times was visible (‘sichtbar’: 155) – it was in place and unambiguous in contrast to the abstraction which characterises the modern condition (Stahl reads these last lines of the *Requiem* and recognises the alienating abstractions of modernity as the ’Unanschaulichkeit’ of experience which the *Ninth Elegy* laments and calls ‘Tun ohne Bild’, *SW* I, p. 718: 46, Stahl, 1978, p. 251). The ‘grand words’ (154) of the past, words such as those of the Catholic requiem mass with their triumphant consolatory message of resurrection which claim to be totally transparent on reality, have lost their validity in a post-Nietzschean age in which God is dead. There is no victory over death in the Catholic sense of an afterlife for the modern artist to proclaim. Neither is there a victory of language over death – there may only be the encounter with death and its inappropriability within language. Rolleston quotes the last line of the *Requiem* in his discussion of ‘Der Schauende’ (*BB* II, *SW* I, pp. 459-60) (Rolleston, 2001, pp. 61-2), arguing that Rilke’s art takes shape in the poet’s defeat by the ultimate force of the world represented by the angel. In *Requiem für Wolf Graf von Kalckreuth* poetic language is formed in the acceptance of the burden of otherness in life and death, an acceptance which turns language’s burden and defeat into a balanced, achieved articulation. ‘Überstehn’ is also echoed in the following lines which speak of the achieved, the ‘lasting’ existence as one which is not understood:

> Gekonnt hats keiner; denn das Leben währt,  
> weil’s keiner konnte. Aber der Versuche  
> Unendlichkeit.  
> [...]  
> Weils keiner meistert, bleibt das Leben rein. (‘Aus dem Nachlaß des Grafen C.W.  
> II, VI’, 1921, *SW* II, 126)

Rilke’s requiem poems manage to say the difficulty of poetry and death from within that difficulty.\(^\text{32}\)

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I believe that in this Requiem the poet is certainly threatened by the failure of the other poet to reinforce the work of art, but just as there is still hope at the end of Requiem für eine Freundin in the cry for help there is hope at the end of this Requiem that a language of death can be achieved in the foregrounding of ‘survival’ and ‘das Schwere’. This survival points to a continued commitment to life even in the face of death, a surviving the prospect of death within life, an integration of death into life which does not force it into neat definition but does hold it open and accept it in its indefinability and difficulty. ‘Überstehn’ essentially means survival for the poet of the Requiem. He must survive Kalckreuth’s non-achievement of death by producing the poetic figure which does achieve death, and the hope expressed tacitly is that if Rilke can survive it then so can Kalckreuth, for Kalckreuth is a fictional construct in Rilke’s text, a figure deprived of all personality and individuality and endowed with a representative function. – he represents all poets and poetry itself. The requiem poet takes on the failure of the dead poet in order to redeem them both. If Rilke can create a language of death in his text, he can give this death to Kalckreuth, for the Kalckreuth of the poem is this language. This may be the reason for the invocation of ‘Ruhe’ in the final lines when Rilke exhorts Kalckreuth to be rested in death, to exchange glances of death calmly with the dead. Rilke tries to incant the repose of the soul of the dead in the word ‘requiem’ from the requiem mass. In alluding to ‘requiem’ in the word ‘ruhig’ Rilke makes his contribution to the text of death, writing his own poem of requiem. It is only within the words invoked and created by the living that the dead have any reality in their unreality at all, and if the poem can achieve a state of rest and equilibrium with death then this rest is bestowed on the dead who reside within the language of the poet and therefore within the poet. If the poet of the Requiem can become a requiem poet, can produce a language for death which lets death be in its difference, a language which survives the difficulty of the transformation of death and has come to be at rest in the prospect of death, then the dead can rest in this language.
Conclusion

I have tried to show that whereas Rilke’s early poetry errs into a polarisation of life and death which privileges the latter over the former in a false, theologically-conditioned discourse (see: ‘Leben ist nur der Traum eines Traumes, aber Wachsein ist anderswo’, Requiem (Clara Westhoff gewidmet), BB II, SW I, p. 472), his work then develops in the direction of a unification of life and death within poetic writing. In the language of poetic figure Rilke forges a space for, and lends a voice to, death as that which exceeds ordinary language. The poetic figure becomes the anonymous, impersonal, ambiguous, inhuman articulation which is orientated towards the empty, unidentifiable category of death, and it is within such irreducible, poetic speech that death enters into life. Throughout his work Rilke seeks to unite his private self and his personal life with the poetic figuring of death which stands outside these. As Rilke sees it, it is the language of art as opposed to liturgical and conventional discourse which can truly reach into this dimension of otherness because art does not play down this otherness by imposing order on it.

In chapter 1, I introduce the Rilkean death-in-life, which recurs as the ‘death of one’s own’, as a dimension of excess and difference integrated into, though — and this is crucial — not disguised by, or subsumed within, the familiar discourses of life. I explore Rilke’s metaphors of the double-sidedness of existence to show that Rilke’s work tries to operate on a poetic axis from which the dimensions of life and death can be held in the balance of their difference. In this chapter I argue that the Rilkean unity of life and death is one in which the two are, paradoxically, never unified, for it is the recognition of their unresolvable difference which constitutes the Rilkean ‘whole’ (‘das Ganze’), the equivocality and infinity of ‘Being’ (‘Dasein’). In chapter 2, I focus the discussion on the search for that axis between the ordinary and the ‘Other’ within language, within the potential of poetic language which can reach beyond the familiar and the literal into other modes of signification, i.e. metaphor. I use the Neue Gedichte to illustrate Rilke’s poetics of the ‘other’, imagined, created world of language and art which figures the outer place of death. I argue that in Rilke’s work the ‘death of one’s own’ is created in the writing of the poetic figure, in the phenomenon of a language which cannot be reduced, reproduced or paraphrased, and that in the excessiveness of this language there lies the possibility that what is ‘other’ can paradoxically belong to us in the sense that it can complete us. The ‘death of one’s own’ is not possessed, but becomes ours in the
language which we use to de-possess and depersonalise it, to grant it its excess. In this chapter, I identify the indefinability of the poetic figure as the space of death and examine the Rilkean concepts of ‘Raum’ and ‘Bild’ associated with this. I also identify the metaphor of the body and bodily space as significant for Rilke’s language of the ‘Other’ within ourselves.

In chapter 3, I turn to the Rilkean poetic figure as a language of requiem which seeks to reconcile its author and its dead addressee to the otherness of death. The title Requiem für eine Freundin testifies to a friendship between author and ghost, a relation between the death of the friend and the poet’s own. The poem communicates poetry in crisis, wavering in its own demand to transform – to find a language for – life and death in art. The dead artist at the centre of the poem is an image of the unachieved work of death – a language which fails to give expression to the otherness of death in poetic figure – which threatens to deny Rilke the poet the figuring of his ‘own’, artistic death. The painter-friend is accused of bearing a false death in her lack of commitment to art and the possibility of difference it offers, and this accusation is a projection of the poet’s sense of being haunted by the difficulty of his own artistic transformations. Central to this difficulty is the specific transformation of the death of a personal friend. To ‘achieve’ death, by figuring it in his poem, Rilke must transform his friend into the distanced, impersonal, non-specific force of death within the language of poetic figure. But whereas this transformation might have been possible in the impersonal ‘things’ (‘Dinge’) of the Neue Gedichte, the divergence of object and word intensifies in the struggle to transform the emotional burden of the death of a friend. The difficulty of the assent to absence and absolute otherness comes to the fore in the drama of this requiem-poem which persistently invokes the ‘Bild’ of the poetic figure but does not actually manage to make an image of Modersohn-Becker’s death in the manner of the Neue Gedichte and their closed, infinitely inappropriable constellations. The poem turns instead to an articulation of this struggle as a way of expressing the superior and supreme otherness of death, hoping that such an articulation might recognise and produce the strangeness of the ‘death of one’s own’. In the wake of the first requiem poem’s demonstration that the death of the poet-author is implicated in the death of the addressee, Requiem für Wolf Graf von Kalckreuth, the subject of chapter 4, continues to explore the dynamic of requiem poetry in its refiguration of the specific death of an individual into the impersonal, anonymous otherness which is conceived as death’s only possible authentic relation to ourselves. This requiem poem too is insistent on the poetic task of refiguration without actually producing that figure itself within its text, but by
this point the ‘Bild’ has definitely gone beyond the definition of ‘Bild’ within the *Neue Gedichte*. It is now purely a question of refiguring the personal into the impersonal, and again, the extremity and suffering inherent in this project are depicted as its essence. De Man has already pointed out that ‘Orpheus. Eurydike. Hermes’ and the *Duineser Elegien* present a *philosophy*, rather than a *figure*, of renunciation (and, for the purposes of this thesis, death), whilst the *Neue Gedichte*, and other poems which form purely rhetorical constellations and recur throughout Rilke’s work from the *Neue Gedichte* onwards, present the poetic figure in their very constitution (1979, pp. 48-9). My thesis highlights how the discourse of figuration sets in in the requiem poems, where the principle of the difficulty of death and its twin-principle of the difficulty of art are most clearly brought to bear on the poetry.

It is the requiem poems which relay the real trauma of death, whilst the *Neue Gedichte* apparently transform agony and suffering into remarkable distillations. The requiem poems discover that the fastidious craftsmanship of the *Neue Gedichte* can come apart, and that disintegration and upheaval continue to reassert themselves within the specificity of death. The requiem poems communicate more of the pain which afflicts the axis between the personal and the poetic approach to death. It is also rare that death in its repellent, disgusting aspect takes shape in Rilke’s poetry (‘Der Tod’, 1915, SW I, pp. 103-4, is one of the few examples, with its image of death as the abject— as poisonous, blue dregs in the bottom of a cup), for the relation to death is mostly abstracted into a dynamic of presence and absence. Whilst the possibility of Christian redemption is completely erased from Rilke’s work, there is still a sense that death as the imperceptible, as rift and otherness, is purified of the reality of its brutality. Blanchot rightly points out that if: ‘death is the extreme, then it must be said that it is a very accommodating extreme, not threatening our faith in the oneness of being, our sense of the whole and even our fear of death, for this death disappears, discreetly, into itself’ (*Space*, p. 154). Death still offers the promise of unity and a higher understanding in Rilke’s work, and in this sense the terror and ordeal of death can often strike the reader as over-refined. But Rilke’s work of death is persistently interested in such abstraction as a truer representation of death in its invisibility and indefinability, and it could be argued that in this he does achieve the ‘saying’ of death as abyss.

My thesis stops at the analysis of the requiem poems, but throughout I have tried to indicate that Rilke’s early and middle periods do the groundwork for a poetics of death which then becomes the hymn of transience to the external, distant, poetic angel in the *Duineser Elegien* and the paradoxical, expropriated song of living death and
dying life in the *Sonette an Orpheus*. The *Tenth Elegy*, with its aestheticised, hieroglyphic landscape of lament, is a work of death which I have not discussed in my thesis. The poetological aspect of this elegy can perhaps be integrated into a broader study of 'der eigene Tod' as the written difference of death.
Ein Brief von Rilke.

Am 1. Juni 1909

Darauf hörte ich, die Zeit, in der mein Leben und meine Gedanken gewogen wurden.

In der Art, die ich wahrnehmte, in der ich sie sah, war die Zeit, in der mein Leben sich veränderte.

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Appendix 2: Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Selbstbildnis als Halbakt mit Bernsteinkette* (1906, Oil on board, 62.2 x 48.2cm. Privately owned)
Appendix 3: Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Selbstbildnis am 6. Hochzeitstag. 25. Mai. 1906* (1906, Board on parqueted plywood, 101.8 x 70.2cm. Ludwig-Roselius Collection, Böttcherstraße, Bremen)
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