Conceiving Unity of Being:
The Environmental Modernism of R. M. Rilke and W. B. Yeats

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0. INTRODUCTION

Two poets will be at the heart of this thesis, two modernists whose poetic strategies, images and topoi are similar but who, beyond that, share an ontological outlook on the relation of humanity and the environment. This thesis will investigate the ways in which Modernist texts relate to environments or conceive of human-nature relations the texts of two poets, showing great affinity in the ways in which they pursue a poetic environmental ontology. The exploration of the similarities between the works of William Butler Yeats and Rainer Maria Rilke will proceed by way of a systematic investigation of their poetic modes of utterance, and textual strategies and the ways in which they are shaped by a shared heritage through the reception of the Romantics and the German mystic Jacob Boehme.

The comparison of Yeats and Rilke has mostly been realised in scholarly articles and is limited to reading single poems in direct comparison. Likewise, there is no study addressing the environmental imagination of the Modernists or other turn-of-the-century movements such as Symbolism and pre-Raphaelitism. This thesis will therefore have to develop its own procedures and approaches hoping to offer an access point for future studies in environmental Modernism. To show the systematic nature of the affinity between the environmental imagination of Rilke and Yeats, no comparison of single poems can suffice. It appears necessary to understand the poets’ works in their own right and in the context of their artistic evolution. However, the affinities will become all the more recognisable when emerging out of the context of the same question applied to the two oeuvres, individually.

Especially the early works are of interest to the first part of this project. The proximity between Yeats and pre-Raphaelitism, Rilke and *Jugendstil* will provide insight into how this shared context inspired their poetic and poetological conception of human-nature relations. Rilke’s and Yeats’s environmental poetics are rooted in an ongoing engagement with the nexus of humanity, language and earth. These negotiations are shaped by resistances to inherited modes of understanding the human self and its roles and entitlements. Their shared rejection of Platono-Christian as well as Cartesian dualisms forms a basis for their “making new” of the relationship between humanity and the earth within poetry.

This thesis will argue that Yeats and Rilke conceived visions of Being in terms of unity. This unity, however, does not exclude but rather encompass apparent antinomies and disparities and consequently conceives visions of unity to which destruction, death and transformation are central. Creating awareness for a continuity of beings within living textures of environments is crucial to readers in our own age in which consciousness of human-environment dependencies, continuities and contingencies disappear behind virtual screens and economic abstraction.

Neither Rilke’s nor Yeats’s works have so far been considered as having an inherent environmental concern or validity. Yet, as the emerging theoretical paradigm of ecocriticism gathers momentum, there is a certain danger of misunderstanding. This thesis attempts to
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challenge a prejudice which is nowhere more clearly expressed than in Eamonn Wall’s assessment of W. B. Yeats in *Writing the Irish West: Ecologies and Traditions* (2011). Wall sees Yeats as an English language aestheticist, “inclined to reading the landscape symbolically and to objectify people, places and living things to suit [his] own anthropological, racial and historical visions” which then of course are “anthropocentric rather than ecological” (51f). Such misunderstanding is based on a notion of the symbol that is far removed from how the artists themselves understand it. In fact, it is in appreciating their reliance on the notion of the symbol as an interactive, intermedial form of embodiment that the textual environmentalism of the Modernists can best be understood. The addressing and personifying of nature through language, which was scolded by the Victorian art critic John Ruskin as a stylistic and mental inferiority, will be reconceptualised as a vital strategy of resistance to the ontological commitments of modern enlightenment discourses. Speaking with Earth and speaking of Earth as a personified Self that is perceived within others relies on a notion of language and poetic texts as part of a living, shifting, rustling and buzzing web of earthly utterances. This, rather than the attempt at representing nature in language, thought as an abstract semiotic system over and against nature, underlies the poetry of Yeats and Rilke.

There is a tradition of Modernists with Environmental concerns at their heart. W. B. Yeats and R. M. Rilke in this regard belong with Dylan Thomas, Wallace Stevens and Robinson Jeffers and Gary Snyder in a tradition which is still ongoing. Their works challenge the ontological claims of the Enlightenment tradition, a tradition which has created apprehensive ways of seeing ourselves and nature. Enlightenment and humanist self-understanding has created a schism in perception between measurable objectivity on the one hand and subjective, unverifiable impression on the other. Thus the constructive role of perception, which always also creates what it perceives, has been neglected for the sake of a narrowly policed consensus of objective reality. *Homo sapiens* stands abstracted over and against its environment, which has bit by bit vanished into commodity and utility. Modernism reacts against these impositions and the ways in which this reaction takes poetic and poetological shape will be explored in this thesis.

The idea to compare W. B. Yeats and R. M. Rilke with regard to their environmental poetics was strongly fuelled by an encounter with the texts of John Moriarty’s books. Moriarty, for example, draws upon both Rilke and Yeats as he calls for an ‘Irish Orpheus’ in his *Invoking Ireland* (2005). Tom Duddy in *The History of Irish Thought* (2002) sees Moriarty as part of a visionary counter-enlightenment tradition that began with Berkeley. Of this tradition of Irish visionaries and about Yeats’s place therein, specifically, Duddy writes: “Despite its oddness and indeed its downright repugnance to practically all styles of traditional philosophical thinking, the Yeatsian system is important in so far as it offers an antidote to modern […] rationalistic, materialistic and progressivist theories and philosophies. […] Their works are clarion calls to wisdom rather than attempts at fine-tuning our existing conceptual frameworks. As all embracing synthesisers, […] they draw cheerfully and even wildly on the many splendoured resources of human culture, regardless of time or place, form or genre” (300). The same holds true for Rilke. Rilke and Yeats, and in turn John Moriarty, rove wildly across discourses ideas and traditions to bring into view a poetic conception of perception and Being which is in many ways, indeed, an antidote to the thoughts that govern our day. For Yeats and Rilke, as is very tangible in the way in which
Moriarty reads them, envisioning the continuity of man and nature is not necessarily idyllic. It involves the realisation that in being continuous with nature we are also continuous with the feeding frenzy of shark, wolf and Tyrannosaurus Rex. Paradoxically, though, through the rational attempt to save ourselves and exert control, through scientific advancement, hierarchies of being and utilitarian technologies the raptor has achieved its most staggering victory: we have become ‘Deinanthropos,’ Moriarty writes, the terrible man – clubbing the land dead with instrumental reason like Hercules instead of relating in song to its divinity like Orpheus. However, “[b]eing human is a habit, it can be broken” (39). Rilke’s and Yeats’s poetry is viscerally engaged in questioning habit of intellectually clubbing instead of symphonically singing the landscape. Their poetry contributes vital strategies of framing the question of, not delivering an answer to, how being may be conceived. The notion of Unity of Being appears to be the best term for describing the affinity between Rilke and Yeats. As framed in the title of this thesis, Unity of Being denotes the general idea of thinking about being in terms of continuity rather than abstraction. However, the term is a specific Yeatsian concept, which is not only part of his poetic and poetological part but which figures centrally in his occult system of *A Vision*. Yeats’s *Vision* will be discussed separately to do justice to its unique attributes. However, Unity of Being at the same time seems to be a term entirely suitable to subsume the terms and concepts which Rilke develops in his quest for understanding Being, since unity is their common denominator.

Three vital dimensions of environmental concern in the two poets’ works will be approached in this thesis:

1) The conception of an environmental, communal self, characterised by the participation of beings in a living, continuous texture, will be discussed. Transformation of forms, uncertainty of contour and interrelationship are key themes which also impact on poetic strategies. The background of this discussion is formed by the equation of being and utterance, which mattered greatly for the German mystic and philosopher Jacob Boehme as well as for the Romantic tradition.

2) The delimitation of the sacred via an understanding of the divine as restlessly dispersed and poured out into temporal existence will be understood as central textual and thematic concerns in Yeats’s and Rilke’s poetry and thought. The co-insistence of the inviolable eternal divine and its restless disappearance into the perishable forms of existence via *kenosis* (self-out-pouring) will be understood as a key aspect to the Modernist’s poetic conception of Unity of Being. Embracing the self-consummation and destruction of individual forms and the relinquishment of human desires for stature and achievement, unity of an environmental, communal and time-spanning self will be shown to emerge via the poetic celebration of *kenosis* and self-destitution. The importance of caring about and for perishable beings in poetry will be discussed.

3) The vanquishing of death as a horizon of being and its re-institution as the force which facilitates life will be seen as a major concern in the poets’ later work. Death is seen as an aspect of life, which brings about the temporal consummation of Being as uniquely individual embodied, perishing beings. It is also understood as a dimension of shared environments and atmospheres. Both Yeats and Rilke had a strong and sustained engagement with the Occult and were exploring notions of humanity as embracing also the disincarnate and deceased. The ontic
impossibility of confirming a difference between life and death, for which Yeats uses the formula “death-in-life and life-in-death” in his poem “Byzantium,” also questions the boundary between the living (humans), the dead and discarnate and the animals. In this thesis, to preserve the understanding that it is not an either or but a functional identity facilitated by difference, the symbol $\mathcal{L}_\text{aF}\mathcal{E}_b$ will be used.

A lengthy discussion of influence would not make much sense, as Yeats’s and Rilke’s mutual reception was very limited. Yeats in the last year of his life discovered Rilke, reading his poems in translation as well as an essay on his conception of death with avowed enthusiasm. Rilke obtained a German translation of a volume of stories and essays by Yeats from his publisher Katharina Kippenberg in 1915 and expressed appreciation by placing Yeats second on the list of a thank-you note, but apart from these instances there is no material evidence of direct influence (see Mason, *Rilke and the English-Speaking World* 112). This being given, it seems much more important to explore the similarities of their poetry in their own right.

In the scholarly tradition pertaining to either poet, there is a predominant narrative of stylistic development into a greater, masterful achievement from rather dreamy, pre-Raphaelite / Jugendstil beginnings. Myths of ascent to mastery are a favourite among critics and with regard to both poets the narrative invariably leads from ‘Apprentice Mage’ to ‘Arch Poet,’ to borrow the subtitles of R. F. Foster’s influential two volume biography on Yeats. The poets have partly encouraged this tendency by critical comments made retrospectively on their earlier works. Yet, the early works are poetic creations in their own right, and it is the goal of this thesis to show that there is a continuity of engagement with questions of being and becoming, with questions of self and environment which are persistently pursued from the two poets’ earliest to their latest works. The main poetic strategies investigated are the address and personification of nature and the employment of ambiguity and uncertainty or anti-closure.

By using the term *poetic ontology* the following chapters do not imply that a formal philosophical investigation was conducted by the poets but rather that there was a continuous engagement with questions of being, of the divine, the environment and the emergence and perishing of embodied beings. The poets are engaged in a life-long search for expressing perceived interrelations, the paradox of the one and the many, of antitheses that expound each other temporarily yet are forming thereby an infinite unity. It is in this way that both poets are engaged with the idea of Unity of Being. Yet, beyond any affirmations of convictions or creeds, the nature of the open questions that their poetry pose will be of interest. In refusing to affirm opinions or convictions in a positive way and instead framing them as questions orambiguous utterances, the poems themselves become Sphinx-like, extending to the reader (or riddler) their hybridity, their shiftness and their openness. However, it is one of the central assumptions of this thesis that the poems do not need to be responded to with a possible solution of their inherent paradoxes or ambiguities. In fact, they give the reader licence to abstain from breaking the riddle into the illusion of a revealed mystery. To avoid premature or superimposed interpretive or theoretic closure, this thesis will venture, first and foremost, to pay attention to ambiguities and possibilities of meaning. Secondly, it will be necessary to look at secondary
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sources and investigate the ways in which ambiguities are narrowed down via being read in single interpretations, all the while seeking for critical ways in which a scope of meanings can be described without being closed into interpretation. The following chapters will argue that the openness and ambiguity of the poems perform twilight in the sense of a phenomenological uncertainty, a performed impossibility to obtain intellectual distance to objects, suggesting careful approaches to the ‘unknowability’ of the world.

This thesis will not pursue comparison by reading single poems of the two authors side by side but will pursue them separately yet in the context of the same question and theoretical frame. Thus, the questions can be investigated at a greater depth and similarities do not have to emerge at the cost of neglecting individually differing contexts. The similarities between turn-of-the-century cultural contexts and aesthetic projects can thus appear much more clearly and in their own right.

In the first part, selections of poems from Rilke’s early collections Larenopfer (1895) and Mir zur Feier (1899) as well as early critical writings on aesthetics, as for example his book on a German painters’ colony Worpswede (1902), will be analysed. Likewise, poems from Yeats’s poetic beginnings will be discussed: The Wanderings of Oisin (1889), Crossways (1889) and The Secret Rose (1865-1939). Selections will be made on the basis of the immediate relevance to the present study, yet overarching coherences in the collections will be pointed out, as well.

In the second part, the poetic challenge to traditional notions of the sacred will be approached against the background of a discussion of Giorgio Agamben’s philosophical works in the context of emerging ecocritical questions about the sacred. Agamben is suggesting the abolition of the sacred as that which drives a relentless ‘anthropological machine.’ Not by secularising the dysfunctional binarities of the sacred but by the ‘profanation’ of the divine can an ethics and aesthetics emerge which do justice to the continuities of existence. The importance of his theories to environmental discourses is obvious, and especially his books Homo Sacer (1998) and The Open: Man and Animal (2004) will be drawn upon. The latter is a seminal work in environmental philosophy as well as in ontology and will be consulted to understand the significance of the poetic delimitation of the sacred as well as the refusal to draw demarcation lines between the human and non-human. The notion of kenosis has become important in 20th century philosophy and ethical discourses. This thesis will trace the notion of kenosis as a topos as well as a strategy of poetry and show how it can become fruitful for a discussion of the environmental dimension of poetry. This notion will also be important for understanding the paradox at the heart of the idea of Unity of Being in Yeats and Rilke, the consumation of the eternal within temporality. In the light of kenosis, Unity of Being emerges not as an achievement or mastery but it appears as residing within the celebration of processes of self-relinquishment and self-giving which are expressed, on a structural level, by a poetics of self-consummation. Poems from The Wind among the Reeds (1899) and The Tower (1928), will be analysed with the ideas

\[1\] William Empson’s Seven Types of Ambiguity (1930) informs the approach to poetic ambiguity in this thesis. Especially his fourth and seventh type, describing the ways in which a word can hold conflicting and contradicting meanings, are important for my analyses, because these types account for ways in which readers can perceive a unity of discontinuous or even mutually exclusive meanings on account of a word or sentence.
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of kenosis and the delimitation of the sacred in mind, also Rilke’s *Das Stunden-Buch* (1899) will be discussed as a transformation of 19th century frames of understanding the divine, the human self and the environment. Through the profanation of the divine, prayer becomes transformed into apostrophe, the personal address of humans and animals and the address of God become identical. The relinquishment of human aspirations to greatness as well as the non-hierarchical presence of the divine, as that which instantiates and destroys individual forms is central to the poetry discussed and will be shown as important to environmental modernism.

In the final part, the unity of *Duineser Elegien* in the works of Rilke and Yeats will be discussed in the context of their occult interests. A brief exploration of Yeats’s occult system of *A Vision* (1925 and 1937), which was started in the second part, will be continued. Especially in Rilke’s late and most widely known works, *Die Duineser Elegien* (1923) and *Die Sonette an Orpheus* (1922), the world of the living and the dead are seen as a circulatory, transformational unity. The heart and circulation will be explored as a possible way of approaching Rilke’s poetry. Yeats’s reception of Rilke has so far not been discussed in any further detail beyond the affirmation of influence. R. F. Foster, for example, believes that ‘Under Ben Bulben’ “set a Rilkean idea of death firmly in the landscape of Irish history” (Arch Poet 634). But this idea has not been further investigated, as yet. Such a claim can only be substantiated if a proper analysis of Rilke’s notion of death precedes an assessment of the material Yeats read and commented upon to gain a clearer view of what part of it Yeats understood or misunderstood.

W. B. Yeats claims several times in his correspondences to have composed his famous epitaph on the margins of William A. Rose’s essay “Rilke and the Conception of Death,” published in *Rainer Maria Rilke: Aspects of His Mind and Poetry* in 1938 and co-edited by the author. No marginalia can be found in his copy, however. Yet in a letter to Ethel Mannin, Yeats outlines the convergence between Rilke’s notion of death and his own ‘private philosophy’ and the implications of this letter will be discussed in relation to the essay by William A. Rose. What Yeats outlines in this letter is an understanding of the priority and indwelling presence of death within life.

This thesis gains valuable impulses from existing comparative studies. E. J. van Hulst notices that “[t]he poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926) and William Butler Yeats (1865-1936) has occasionally been linked by fellow artists and critics, although not often closely compared” (“Tradition and Transformation in Rilke and Yeats” [1985], 172). This remark, however, ignores Priscilla Washburn Shaw’s *Rilke, Valéry and Yeats. The Domain of the Self* (1964). She compares notions of selfhood yet does not investigate the context of the poets’ evolving oeuvre and critical thought. Hence single poems are placed side by side and general conclusions are drawn. This study wants to conduct a comparison on a systematic basis and therefore will read each poet in his own right so that the affinities or differences can emerge in context. Their notion of Unity of Being can thus emerge in a more comprehensive way. The strata of similarity observed by preceding comparative studies will be investigated in more detail, depth and breadth, reflecting on “the notion of death, and the attempt to reconcile subjectivity and objectivity[,] the relationship between the secular and the sacred, the sense of loss of values and traditions, the
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ethical implications of philosophical materialism and idealism, the paradoxical closeness of joy and suffering, triumph and defeat, delight and destruction, and the search for a new intensity of the experience of Being” (Ibid.). Patricia Merivale’s observations of the importance of liminal spaces in Yeats and Rilke in “‘Ultima Thule’: Ghosts and Borderlines in Yeats and Rilke” (1978) will be adopted and extended, especially with regard to the conceptions of the continuity of self and environment:

When Yeats sets out a landscape of earth, shore, tide line, water, and land over the water, he may be anatomizing an essential unity otherwise indescribable. The shells cast up on the shore, the seabirds flying landward, or seaward again, ships and the seawind, all may be messages, or messengers, from ‘elsewhere.’ ‘Men are ... the foaming tideline of [which the gods are] the sea’ any shore is likely to be a place of marvel or fatality (e.g., On Baile’s Strand) or of strange encounters between mortal and immortal. [...] But another way of crossing the border is to let one realm fade into another so ambiguously that one cannot tell when the border has been crossed, but only that it must have been (259f).

This notion of shifting border territories that defy direction and objectification will be followed through and seen to be a central aspect of Rilke’s poetry as well, whom Merivale understands, in contrast to Yeats, as a poet of stark outlines. On the contrary, both poets make the borderline their habitat. Lines do not need to be crossed, at all, so that beings and things may remain freely shifting. The early works of both poets in particular relies on twilight, or Dämmerung, when things become indistinguishable and are lodged on a threshold which is not gradually released into darkness or light but which remains as a form of open shelter from objectifying abstraction. From Patricia Merivale’s article my thesis receives the inspiration to investigate in more detail “the interconnections between the worlds of the living and the dead, especially in the imagery of ghosts and borderlines” (249). Merivale’s claim that for Yeats alone the world of the living and the dead existed, while Rilke was an introvert, to whom things only assumed reality through introspection can not be supported. While her claim that both oeuvres are marked by process and becoming will be substantiated by a systematic comparison. E. J. van Hulst observes that whether critics “stress or qualify similarities in the works of the poets, they all contribute to the impression that there are definite affinities in subject matter and in the central concerns of the poets” (173). E. J. Van Hulst’s article stresses the differences rather than the similarities between Yeats and Rilke and in doing so comes to the conclusion that Rilke’s sonnets are more musical because they do not “maintain a strict coincidence between period and stanza” (185). This ignores much of the later and latest works of Yeats. One only needs to consider “Cuchulainn Comforted” to see that Yeats creates superb disjunctions of line break and meaningful unit. Ronald Schuchard’s The Last Minstrels: Yeats and the Revival of the Bardic Arts (2005) argues convincingly that musicality and at some stage of his creative process even musical performance
were central to Yeatss poetic texts. This implies similarity rather than distance between the two poets.

Eudo C. Mason in *Rilke, Europe and the English-speaking World* (1961) first mentions the fact that Rilke had actually read Yeats and vice versa, yet he does not further pursue any textual implications of their mutual reception. Finally, Theodore Ziolkowski in *The View from the Tower. Origins of an Anti-Moderist Image* (1998) reads Yeats, Rilke, Jung and Jeffers in the context of their inhabitation of towers and conducts a study in thematics (a branch of literary studies introduced by Werner Sollors in the 1990s. Theodore Ziolkowski conducts a thematic comparison “not simply to catalogue occurrences but, rather, to identify the presence of theme, motif or image as symptomatic of a profound concern in the thought and work of an individual writer and, thereby, to link that writer's oeuvre meaningfully to that of others exhibiting similar patterns” (xiv).

The patterns that, according to Ziolkowski, emerges between the 4 authors is anti-modernism. Anti-modernists, then, are defined as “being outside, and often opposed to the groups conventionally regarded as modernists” such as the Anglo-American poets Pound, Eliot, Stevens and the novelists Joyce, Woolf and Lewis as well as, in Rilke's case, the German Expressionists, (from which Gottfried Benn explicitly excluded Rilke).

Ziolkowski is part of an exegetic tradition that disregards the various mutual influences and continuities that exist between what he calls the anti-modernists and their contemporaries (xii). It is hardly possible to think about Yeats without Pound and to think Eliot without the looming presence of Yeats and likewise, Rilke is not the lone late romanticist phenomenon studies in “anti-modernism” make him out to be. Ziolkowski chooses to read the fact that Rilke, Yeats but also Swiss psychologist C. G Jung and American poet Robinson Jeffers inhabited towers at the same time as an indication of their refusal to participate in the “technological world of modernism to which they saw themselves in opposition” meanwhile the “classical modernists often aduced the tower as a negative icon, as a symbol of the past that they hoped to overturn” (xiii). While the fruitful observation that three major writers and thinkers of the turn of the century inhabited towers, simultaneously, bears many important implications for reading their texts. It appears doubtful whether it is necessary to read the inhabitation of towers as a retreat from the bitter world of making-new into a comfortable adherence to late Romantic ideas and 19th century metaphysical views of the world from a safe dwelling place. On the contrary, the tower is not only depicted in processes of becoming to “imitate the modelé that Rilke admired in Rodin’s sculptures” but it is most significantly a site of the deconstruction of the achievement of the architectural artefact, within the poetry of Yeats as well as Rilke (106). It is true, towers “play a constitutive role, both literal and symbolic, in their writing” (6). But they do not matter either as artefacts or as sites of sequestration, religious introspection or the ascent to consciousness, as Ziolkowski claims, in the poetry of Yeats and Rilke. Contrary to the claim that upward-striving
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towers exemplify the “human desire to transcend temporal existence” in the poetry and thought of Yeats and Rilke, towers are images of desolation; their walls become porous, housing starlings, bats and bees. They crumble altogether as Yeats, for example, only allows the scattered monumental stones, re-used in building houses for the local community in ‘The Tower,’ to function as a memorial. Rilke’s early towers in *Larenopfer* (1895) and various other, later poems conceptualise the tower only as the site of deconstruction and destabilisation. Even animation and personification of towers occur.

Rilke’s and Yeats’s demolition work is rather classically modernist than anti-modernist, based on an anti-enlightenment stance, which centers around a criticism of technology and a distrust in the rational. Also, in their depiction of the continuity between humans and non-human environments as a hypostasis of the divine, an animated personhood that contains the human as one of its possibilities, they overcome 19\textsuperscript{th} century metaphysics. They reject inherited dualisms and traditional understandings of transcendence in turning to Orphism (in the case of Rilke) and Neoplatonism as received and modified by the German early modern mystic and philosopher Jacob Boehme. Environmental modernism, in keeping with the mainstream definition of European literary modernism, overcomes habitual religious and philosophic dualisms and metaphysics without subscribing to nihilism or atheism. Rather, it is a playful and experimental breaking apart of habitual modes of understanding and defining humanity, the divine and nature. Conceiving a hybrid, syncretist bricolage, a unity of fragments of philosophies, myths and religious ideas, Rilke and Yeats achieve a re-spiritualisation of the earth, as much as they criticise and demolish the exclusivist mechanisms of the sacred (see chapter 4). Thus, their texts are in line with modernism in that they deliver a critique of modernity, yet they also point forward to post-colonial and post-modernist discourses in creating hybrid images, mind- and land-scapes that are marked by uncertainty and the inability to perform differentiation.

I have chosen to translate all poems of R. M. Rilke, discussed in this thesis, myself. It would not be feasible to rely on existing translations although there are many and many good ones. Translations are inevitably making choices that compromise the ambiguities in a poem so that the scope of evocation exuded by the original is lost. In delivering individual translations, the goal of this thesis is to be mindful of as many ambiguous and often contradictory implications evoked by a word or syntactic unit as possible. Thereby a vital dimension of the texts’ poetic strategy can be respected even if these translations will not be elegant or as lyrically appealing as might be wished for. To render, in some cases, idiomatic choices into English word by word will retain some of the dynamics that make the underlying image evocative, even if the result sounds outlandish in remaining very close to the idiomatic image used in the original German. In translation, often, the deliberate ambiguity and the resulting obscurity are compromised in the pursuit of a clear rendition.
Introduction

In terms of a theoretical approach, this thesis will contribute to the emerging field of ecocriticism in as far as it participates in “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology xvii). It will question text-environment interrelations and will further develop the discussion of the unresolvedness of the text between different planes of medial and perceptual reality. The works of Giorgio Agamben will be read so as to better understand the relevance of poetry to ongoing debates about the sacred and the human-animal divide. Formative ecocritical texts, such as Lawrence Buell's The Environmental Imagination (1995) and Bryan L Moore's study Ecology and Literature (2008) as well as works belonging to narrative scholarship or eco-sophicy, such as David Abram’s The Spell of the Sensuous (1996) and Becoming Animal (2010), will be consulted.

Understanding literature as part of a “cultural ecology” is one of the goals and preoccupations of ecocriticism. In Germany, this approach to literature has been most consistently developed and employed by Hubert Zapf who understands literature as evolved cultural form “functioning within cultural systems that can themselves be understood as ecological phenomena, i.e. as evolved form, interdependent with and structurally analogous to natural life processes – without flattening out their distinctive aesthetic qualities.” Zapf combines two epistemological traditions – literary anthropology on the one hand (as represented by e.g. Wolfgang Iser, Winfried Fluck and Ansgar Nünning) and cultural ecology in the wake of Gregory Bateson’s Ecology of Mind on the other. Literature can function as an ecological principle, enabling a critique of hierarchical-binary systems of interpretation such as self/other, mind/body, culture/nature which in turn enable a wide variety of pathological dysfunctions and suppress the openness of human life-relations. Secondly, as an “imaginative counter-discourse,” literature articulates and valorises positions and strategies, which the socially dominant systems of reality tend to exclude or suppress. Thirdly, as “re-integrative interdiscourse” literature hybridizes different forms of knowledge that are usually kept separate and so breaks down discursive boundaries (Zapf Kulturökologie und Literatur 33). A fourth point can be added to the functions of literature as an ecological principle and that is the thematisation and eradication of clear boundaries between art-work and world. In reflecting on embodiment, form and infinity, literary texts enable readers to rethink this distinction and assume a different vantagepoint, from which the Welthaftigkeit (world-ness) of art and the Dinghaftigkeit (thing-ness) of world become visible and thus “dominant systems of reality” can be criticised. Lastly, in accordance with Ursula Heise’s view of ecocriticism, it does not suffice to merely engage in a study of the relation between literature and the physical environment, as Cheryl Glotfelty asked for. Much rather, it is also necessary to investigate “why, and how, perceptions of the natural shape literary tropes and genres” (“Letter” PMLA 1097). Each chapter will in its own right engage with ecocritical

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1. Theoretical Approaches to the Literary Personification of Nature

Theories, beginning with the discussion of past and present approaches to the personification of nature.

Ecological concerns are not only a philosophical undercurrent of the poems but also present in the structures and forms, as well as in the poets’ understanding of what poetry is and achieves. ‘Environment’ appears to be the most suitable term for describing the multidirectional and interrelational notion of the symbolic language that emerges in their works. Hence, one of the subplots that this thesis aims to pursue is the question of the interrelation of the work of art and its environment – the reader, the author, the text but also the tree and the letter.

1. THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO THE LITERARY PERSONIFICATION OF NATURE

The following preliminary discussion will venture to understand prosopopeia – the rhetorical and poetic device of ‘creating a face’ in its relevance to environmental Modernism. In the context of Paul de Man’s understanding of the term as a master trope of literature, prosopopeia already emerges as an interrelational principle, which cannot be adequately understood by describing it in terms of projection of humanity into nature. However, John Ruskin’s concept of the ‘pathetic fallacy’ has judged personification of nature in literature as a sign of inferiority and has thus created a disfavorable critical disposition towards personification even in our own age. His claims are marked by assumptions about reality which are opposed to those motivating the poetic address and personification of nature in the first place. An ecocritical re-assessment of personification is necessary, taking into regard the emerging need of a re-valuation and appreciation of personification.

1.1. Prosopopeia

Prosopopeia, “the master trope of poetic discourse” as Paul de Man calls it in his famous essay on Michel Rifaterre “Hypogram and Inscription,” is a figure of poetry’s paradoxical embodiment (1981, 33). A literary text is transported by a page or a screen, evoking a living voice or image in a reader’s imagination. Prosopopeia, according to the OED, is “a rhetorical device by which an imaginary, absent, or dead person is represented as speaking or acting;” and “a figure of speech by which an inanimate or abstract thing is represented as a person, or as having personal

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3 De Man points out the neglect of the reader that characterises structuralist and post-structuralist French theory: “French literary criticism developed and flourished by bypassing the question of reading altogether” (1981, 21). To him, however, a text is not only understandable out of the rules and regulations of signification, seimeion, but more importantly, it is rooted in symbollon the compound, figurative, medial, and material basis, as well as its actualisations within the reader's imagination: “The agrammatical signal can take on a variety of forms: it can be lexical, grammatical, syntactical, figural, or intratextual, but whatever the linguistic mode may be, its actuality is always determined by its phenomenality, by its accessibility to intuition or cognition” (22).
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characteristics, esp. the power to think or speak.” This definition, however, is already committed to reducing prosopopeia to the realm of representation. For Paul de Man, the personification of nature, of objects or the dead in literature, goes beyond representation. The figurative inclusion or direct apostrophe of non-human beings transposes them into an organic, receptive and response-able unity: “It is the figure of prosopopeia, the fiction of an apostrophe to an absent, deceased, or voiceless entity, which posits the possibility of the latter’s reply, and confers on it the power of speech” (De Man, 1979, 926). The capacity of literary texts to hold nature and its beings and phenomena capable of response and worthy of address will be central to this thesis. This thesis will explore modes and contexts of personification and address of nature in the poetry of R. M. Rilke and W. B. Yeats.

De Man defines prosopopeia as the creation of a face in literature, for this is what the Greek *prosopon* (face) and *poeion* (to make) implies. Surprisingly, the assignment of a face to the faceless encounters a de-facement, because in the contour of a face emerges an uncannily close other presence. Textual presences emerge, animated by the imagination, from out of their forms into the reader’s immediacy, vanquishing “the shape and the sense of a world accessible only in the privative way of understanding” (930). Reversing the agency of voice and gaze and endowing the non-human with emotions or attributes which would otherwise conventionally be reserved for humanity, takes away from readers the comfort of experiencing themselves as living, cognitive and controlling beings vis à vis dead, fictional characters or faceless representations of mechanical nature. Thus, de Man speaks of a “latent threat that inhabits prosopopeia, namely that by making the dead[...], speak, the symmetrical structure of the trope implies, by the same token, that the living are struck dumb, frozen in their own death” (928). For example, the address of a tomb-stone (“Pause, Traveller!”) not only reminds the travelers of their own mortality but makes them actually enter “the frozen world of the dead,” because in receiving the address they are forced into a silence which marks a reversal of the habitual exclusion of the dead from the speech of the living (Ibid.). In this sense, for de Man “autobiography (the prosopopeia of the voice and the name) deprives and disfigures to the precise extent that it restores” (930). In as far as prosopopeia destroys the boundary between the fictional or poetic account of personal speech, it prolongs the address of the otherwise voiceless; it leaves both reader and text in an uncertain zone of mutual exposure. Thus, autobiography, for de Man “is not a genre or a mode, but a figure of reading or of understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts” (921). De Man

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5 De Man departs from French criticism by insisting on the importance of the phenomenal over the referential when it comes to understanding poetry: “The criterion for actualization is no longer referential (one is not supposed to assume that the word corresponds to the thing named) but it is still phenomenal. [...] The transfer from referent to signifier occurs without loss of the phenomenal substance of the sign; one might even say that it is enhanced and that the poetic reader has better literal ears and better imaginative eyes than the referential one. The “symbolist” valorizations remain intact. One can claim auditive effects, such as rhyme and alliteration, to be actualizations since spoken language has a phenomenal existence as sound or as voice. But this same spoken language possesses, of course, no visual phenomenality whatever and all transpositions from sound into image are figural. Imaginative figuration implies that the articulation of the sign with its signification occurs by means of a structure that is itself phenomenally realized, that is to say it treats the sign as if it were fundamentally a symbol” (1981, 22; e.a.).
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does not further explore the apostrophe of nature in his reflections on prosopopeia. Addressing this omission, this thesis will argue that the literary address of nature is of essential importance for understanding the “tropological structure that underlies all cognitions, including knowledge of self” (922). Prosopopeia is a way in which texts disturb readers in their self-experience as discreet entities, self-thinking, self-feeling, self-animated vis à vis speechless, mechanical, determinate nature.

The evaluation of literary perceptions of nature’s personhood has ontological implications to which the long history of dispute over the significance of prosopopeia bears witness. A chasm gapes between pre-modern cultures or discourses to which nature is an animate matrix as well as a living Other and modern Enlightenment discourses to which nature is a determinate, mute machine, wound up by physical forces or a transcendent creator. One of the most famous campaigns against literary prosopopeia was launched in the 19th century by the art critic John Ruskin, whose notion of the “pathetic fallacy” will be discussed in the following. The impact of his thought still exerts considerable force on today’s approaches to prosopopeia. Helen Vendler in Poems, Poets, Poetry (1997), for example, claims that prosopopeia is “an abstraction made into a person” (616). Likewise, de Man retracts behind his more inspired and radical definition – that prosopopeia is the master trope of literature and reading – reducing prosopopeia to “something that has no sensory existence: a hallucination ([1981] 34, e.a.). Whoever wonders about “the legs of a table or […] the faces or the backs of mountains,” should know that “prosopopeia is hallucinatory. To make the invisible visible is uncanny” (Ibid, e.a.). Against this supposition, one would have to object that whether it is the leg of a table or the face or hand of a clock, the tooth of time or the body of scholarship, language inevitably abstracts from the vantage point of the human body, and there are ways of denying and concealing as well as uncovdering and revealing this circumstance in figures of speech.

From the viewpoint of contemporary environmental philosophy, also, the supposition that there is no literary value and no ontological validity to prosopopeia is being challenged. The anthropologist and environmental philosopher David Abram in Becoming Animal (2010) reminds of the continuities between language and the environment:

Oral language gusts through us – our sounded phrases borne by the same air that nourishes the cedars and swells the cumulus clouds. Laid out and immobilized on the flat surface, our words tend to forget that they are sustained by this windswept earth; they begin to imagine that their primary task is to provide a representation of the world (as though they were outside of, and not really apart of, this world). Nonetheless, the power of language remains, first and foremost, a way of singing oneself into contact with others and with the cosmos. […] Whether sounded on the tongue, printed on the page or shimmering on the screen, language’s primary gift is not to re-present the world around us, but to call ourselves into the vital presence of that world – and into deep and attentive presence with one another (11).

6 Especially George Lakoff and Mark Johnson have elaborated on the central importance of conceptual metaphors to the very basic functioning of language. They highlight the fact that language begins with embodiment, the “human conceptual system is metaphorical in nature” in that we grasp something in terms of something else. See Lakoff & Johnson, “The Metaphorical Structure of the Human Conceptual System” (1980), 195; Metaphors we Live by (1980); and Philosophy in the Flesh (1999).
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If looked at in this way, prosopopeia is unavoidable. Thanks to embodied perception and conception, the world already bears a human face. Poetic prosopopeia merely makes readers conscious of the fact that the human self and its environment cannot be separated, because they are irrevocably one: through sensation, breathing and metabolism. Prosopopeia is central to what will be outlined as the emergence of environmental modernism in poetry. It is a key figure in the process of making visible bio-physiological continuities.

1.2. John Ruskin’s ‘Pathetic Fallacy’

John Ruskin’s is the most influential treatment of personification in poetry in the 19th century. In volume three of Modern Painters, he dedicates a section to the topic of personification: ‘Of the Pathetic Fallacy’ (1859). His term pathetic fallacy, which the OED subsequently defines as “the attribution of human emotion or responses to animals or inanimate things, esp. in art and literature,” is still having a significant impact on literary criticism today. However, the ontological commitment inherent in this concept is diametrically opposed to what is structurally and topically performed in literature. Pathetic, in its obsolete meaning of ‘pertaining to or originating in passion or strong emotion,’ is combined with the ascription of a failure to see the world ‘as it is.’ Ruskin presupposes a clear delineation of an inside world of perceptions and emotions and an external objective world of things, and natural forces in which all share and upon which there should be an objective consensus, which truly great art would be careful not to contradict. The pathetic fallacy is not merely a term with which poets were chastised for anthropomorphising and thereby reducing and usurping nature for didactic or moralising purposes. It was first and foremost a term with which the ‘Romantic sentiment’ of seeing nature endowed with humanity, of describing it in human terms, was devalued and expelled from the summits of literary greatness. The term, itself, was soon used to describe the idea of a faulty perception of nature rather than merely a phenomenon in literature. When C. H. Herford published Spenser’s Shepheardes Calender in 1932 he made the sweeping statement that all of “pastoral nature is founded upon the ‘pathetic fallacy’” (xlviii). Even today, the term is still commonly used and its ideological charge

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7 The term became a go-to category within 19th century art criticism. However, already George Eliot, in her posthumously published essays containing collected early reviews published in the Westminster Review, uses as well as differentiates the term “pathetic fallacy” for her assessment of the poets Edward Young and William Cowper. She criticizes the former for his “pedagogic habit of mind” which by anthropomorphising nature usurps it for moral didacticism which forestalls any form of authentic emotion: “Before his thoughts can flow, he must fix his eye on an imaginary miscreant, who gives unlimited scope for lecturing, and recriminates just enough to keep the spring of admonition and argument going to the extent of nine books. It is curious to see how this pedagogic habit of mind runs through Young’s contemplation of Nature. As the tendency to see our own sadness reflected in the external world has been called by Mr. Ruskin the ‘pathetic fallacy,’” so we may call Young’s disposition to see a rebuke or a warning in every natural object, the ‘pedagogic fallacy.’ To his mind, the heavens are ‘forever scolding as they shine;’ and the great function of the stars is to be a ‘lecture to mankind’” (Eliot 251f). This thesis joins Eliot’s criticism of abusing prosopopeia for moralising, didactic reasons while arguing against the usefulness of a critical devaluation of personification of nature as such.
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often goes unnoticed, although poetry and perception are expected to abide by frames of referentiality, realism and an uncritically assumed scientific consensus, shaped by Enlightenment views on human-nature relations (especially Descartes’ and Locke’s).

When in the 20th century the effects of the rational dissociation of humanity and nature became more clearly visible, C. G. Jung was among the first to attempt a genealogy of this dissociation. For Jung, the personification of nature is vital to human psychic and psychological health, the modern withdrawal of psychic content from nature is to him the single most destructive habit underlying the man-made atrocities of the 20th century.

It remained for modern science to despiritualize nature through its so-called objective knowledge of matter. All anthropomorphic projections were withdrawn from the object one after another, with a twofold result: firstly man’s mystical identity with nature was curtailed as never before, and secondly the projections falling back into the human soul caused such a terrific activation of the unconscious that in modern times man was compelled to postulate the existence of an unconscious psyche. [...] [T]he gradual dissolution of projections and the withdrawal of projected contents into the human psyche. Thus the rabble of spooks that were formerly outside have now transported themselves into the psyche of man, and when we admire the “pure,” i.e. depsychized nature we have created, we willy-nilly give shelter to her demons, so that with the end of the Middle Ages anno 1918, the age of total blood baths, total demonization, and total dehumanization could begin. Since the days of the Children’s Crusade, of the Anabaptists and The Pied Piper of Hamelin, no such psychic epidemics have been seen, especially not on a national scale. Even the torture chamber—that staggering achievement of modern times!—has been reintroduced into Europe [...]. Finally, the invention of human slaughterhouses compared with which the Roman circuses of 2,000 years ago were but a piffling prelude—is a scarcely surpassable achievement of the neo-German spirit (Psychology and Religion 593).

Many writers of European Modernism, including Yeats and Rilke, had the dangers of depsychisation clearly in view. Their works are of relevance to readers today because they are confronting the abstraction which created an estrangement between humanity and our earthly environments by giving back agency and voice in poetic address and personification, they place

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8 The term pathetic fallacy is still used in criticism and its assumptions are being adopted, today. Richard Joyce uses the term to describe “a certain anthropomorphic tendency in writers and poets [to employ] tired and uninspired anthropomorphic devices” (36). Margaret Homans states that “[w]hether we read the pathetic fallacy with Bloom as a sign of ‘post-Romantic […] mingled grandeur and ruin’ or with Weltman Birch and Emerson as a more neutral […] the pathetic fallacy is still useful to label any work of art that is nota work of referential or realist representation” (87).

9 Ruskin is clearly relying on enlightenment thought in the wake of Newton’s conception of the clock-work universe and Descartes’ depiction of man as “master and possessor” of nature. Cartesian dualism of matter and mind, the differentiation between subject and object implanted the idea of human separation from nature into the very foundations of Western science. Humans were conceived as “subjects who observed objects, including nature, and could impart secondary qualities to them […] separate and above nature, a mere machine” (Pepper, Modern Environmentalism 142). But even more so, Locke distinguishes between primary and secondary qualities, ascribing empirically evident properties of objects or states (measurable aspects like number, density, weight) and subjectively perceived properties, which are less “real.” The assumption that the gathering of empiricist data gives access to empirical truth was attacked by the Irish counter-enlightenment, especially Berkeley in his Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous (1713) as well as the German Romantic poets and philosophers (see also McCracken 2000, 100ff and Kiberd 1966).
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humans in a zone of exposure, contact and uncertainty, where the multitude of our relations, dependencies and the frame of possible contingencies can be assessed.

To the first-wave eco-critics in the 1960s and 1970s the effects of this withdrawal of psychic content from the environment became visible in the ruthless destruction and exploitation of the environment; the immediacy of emerging crises made itself felt. Neil Evernden in “Beyond Ecology: Self, Place and the Pathetic Fallacy” (1996) argues that through science research in biology and ecology new insights have been gained about our relations with the ecosphere which make it impossible to siphon humanity from the environment into a discreet entity which then can or cannot choose to project itself onto nature. Even the human position is part of this “really subversive element in ecology [which] rests not on any of its more sophisticated concepts but upon its basic premise – interrelatedness” (93). For C. G. Jung, likewise, humanity could not be considered separate from nature: “These identifications, brought about by projection, create a world in which man is completely contained psychically as well as physically. To a certain extent he coalesces with it. In no way is he master of this world, but only a fragment of it” (“Archaic Man” 144). Since it is per se impossible to observe the world without inflicting the human perceptive apparatus and its prostheses upon it, fallacy is thus the only possible way of perceiving: No matter under what paradigm and by what means we look at nature, what appears is always already an amalgamation – humanature. Hence, the term fallacy, just as de Man’s “hallucination,” is mute, since there is no way in which it could be replaced by any sense of a veracious human perception.

For Ruskin, however, nature’s animation can only emerge from deluded human perception. Ruskin quotes a line by Alton Locke: “They rowed her in across the rolling foam— / The cruel, crawling foam” and then claims that “the foam is not cruel, neither does it crawl. The state of mind which attributes to it these characters of a living creature is one in which the reason is unhinged by grief. All violent feelings have the same effect. They produce in us a falseness in all our impressions of external things, which I would generally characterize as the ‘Pathetic Fallacy’” (160). To Ruskin, identification with nature is a “weakness” and “falseness” which truly “great” poets would avoid; it is “only the second order of poets who much delight in it” (161). He goes so far as to say that Keats and Tennyson display “modes of thought which are in some sort diseased” (165). His criticism of art turns into an indictment. Who ever uses the pathetic fallacy is simply “too weak to deal fully with what is before them or upon them” (163). As Dino Franco Felluga writes in *The Perversity of Poetry* (2005):

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10 Ruskin erects the “fetish of greatness,” a cultural practice Marjorie Garber describes in detail in *Symptoms of Culture* (1998). It is marked by “a desire for identifiable and objective standards, and a nostalgia for hierarchy, whether of rank or meri” (18). I would claim that the masterful poet emerges in Ruskin’s works as “the fantasy of greatness [and is] enacted as pure theatre” (21).

11 The underlying assumption is that while emotions can “overpower” them, they are generally absent from reasonable perception. Kate Rigby in “Gernot Böhme’s Ecological Aesthetics of Atmosphere” (2011) describes the term as a paradigm “that has for so long structured Western understanding, while perhaps always partially illusory and certainly culturally contingent, has now become highly problematic, and with it, the modern division of the natural and human sciences must also be challenged” (140).
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Such poets [for Ruskin] lack the willpower to control their emotions and lose the ability to make cognitive distinctions between the internal self and the external world. Passion, sensualism, the loss of self-control: these are the symptoms of a mind turning in on itself. The pathetic fallacy of such poets, in other words, amounts to a devouring solipsism, a masturbatory self-involvement (151).

At the other end of Ruskin’s spectrum Felluga sees the “truly creative poet” whose writing establishes a “triumph of the will over fantasy, emotion and internality” (Ibid.). Felluga can be followed when he suggests that the pathetic fallacy signifies the desire for “phallic mastery.” (Ibid.). Surprisingly, it is notable that in his later work Ruskin himself makes such heavy use of it. Personification is not easy to avoid. J. Hillis Miller in “Praterita and the Pathetic Fallacy” (1998) points out that it is nearly impossible to create an autobiography without resorting to prosopopeia: What else is the pathetic fallacy, he asks, than a “dyslogistic name for prosopopeia, the ascription of a name, a face, or a voice to the absent, the inanimate or the dead” (176). The inconsistency in Ruskin’s argument against prosopopeia becomes clearest when he reveals that he is not opposed to the personification of nature as such but to the end to which nature is personified. When Shenstone has the flowers say to Jessy:

If through the garden’s flowery tribes I stray,
Where bloom the jasmines that could once allure,
’Hope not to find delight in us,’ they say,
’For we are spotless, Jessy; we are pure’ (172).

Ruskin observes that “Jessy is weaker than [Wordsworth’s] Ellen exactly in so far as something appears to her to be in nature which is not. The flowers do not really reproach her. God meant them to comfort her, not to taunt her; they would do so if she saw them rightly” (Ibid.). It is obvious that here Ruskin is not engaged in an aesthetic criticism but in a didactic and ideological one, defending the view that God has created nature for man’s edification.

As John Newton observes in Colonialism Above the Snowline (1999) Ralph Waldo Emerson saw an inherent tragedy in Ruskin’s position. Emerson’s belief that “[t]he ruin or the blank, that we see when we look at nature, is in our own eye” runs directly athwart Ruskin’s: “Visiting Ruskin in 1873 he surely encountered a case in point, reporting to their mutual friend Charles Eliot Norton, ‘I cannot pardon him for a despondency so deep. It is detestable in a man of such powers […] He should come to America to be restored to sanity’” (86). John Newton further claims there is a direct link between Ruskin’s rejection of the personification of nature and his own final renditions of “malign Nature which […] emerge[s] from out of the shadows of his own gloom and disintegration in The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century” (85). However, the notion of

However, even these great poets, contrary to Ruskin’s claims, are in fact making heavy use of prosopopeia, for example Homer is making “spears hungry for flesh” and letting the river Scamander argue and fight with Achilles, while Shakespeare’s Henry IV: personifies rumour (Guthrie, Faces in the Clouds 127f).

Harold Bloom subscribes to Ruskin’s notion of the “pathetic fallacy,” observing that Ruskin in his later works did not manage to escape it, himself: “The aesthetic tragedy of Ruskin is that works like Sesame and Lilies and The Queen of the Air are giant Pathetic Fallacies, but the mingled grandeur and ruin of those books only make them still more representative of post-Romantic art” (Essaysists and Prophets, 138). Bloom’s enthusiasm for Ruskin is obvious.
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the pathetic fallacy as a category for understanding the personification of nature is still an influential one and many voices in the field of literary criticism still apply it. Even Lawrence Buell, a seminal figure in ecocriticism, adheres to its commitments\(^\text{14}\) (See Buell, *The Environmental Imagination*, 181). The *pathetic fallacy* is based on the assumption that viewing nature without emotion or affection as an object of study, exterior to humanity, enjoys the advantage of being in tune with univalent empirical truth. This attitude has successfully advanced the almost total eradication of an affective emotional identification of humans with non-human nature but paradoxically it also counters intellectual understanding of the multifarious ways in which we are part of and dependent on the ecosphere and it is thus complicit in the global devastation of ecosystems and habitats we are witnessing today. While it is necessary to be mindful of nature’s otherness, this is not what the derision of personification achieves. The ability to dissociate ourselves from nature, paradoxically, unleashed our predatorial nature, which yields reason from the unconscious. C. G. Jung in his *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (1963) writes that “[w]hat we from our point of view call colonization, missions to the heathens, spread of civilization, etc., has another face—the face of a bird of prey seeking with cruel intentness for distant quarry—a face worthy of a race of pirates and highwaymen. All the eagles and other predatory creatures\(^\text{15}\) that adorn our coats of arms seem to me apt psychological representatives of our true nature” (248). Thus, as Jung claims, with the loss of our ability to see humanity in nature we have also lost consciousness of animality and nature within us. In literary traditions, on the contrary, the personification of nature has always played a vital role and has allowed for reflecting on our relation with the ecosphere, and has challenged “Enlightenment’s thoroughgoing epistemological attack on anthropomorphic paradigms of knowledge” (Hutchings *Imagining Nature* 63).

1.3. Ecocentric Personification

Within ecocriticism, this function of literary personification has been reassessed and an emerging body of criticism searches alternative analytic pathways to describing how and in what contexts nature is imbued with personhood. They abandon the term *pathetic fallacy* for the more appropriate “ecocentric personification.” Bryan L. Moore in *Ecology and Literature* (2008) observes that in current literary studies personification is one of the least fashionable items, regarded as an

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\(^\text{14}\) Lawrence Buell’s “Nature’s Personhood,” (In: *The Environmental Imagination*) is one of the few major discussions of the validity of personification in environmental writing. Buell suggests that personification is a once-major but now-minor device, a clichéd, cheap trick that writers avoid except when confronted with no other option. Buell does admit, however, that contemporary images of personified nature, as for instance John Lovelock’s Gaia hypothesis, have deeper roots: “Lovelock was probably not entirely unaware that his personification of Earth was already current in occult and feminist circles. [...] Of course, from a cultural historian’s perspective, the notion of myth free scientific discourse is itself a myth” (201).

\(^\text{15}\) Nietzsche, in his first book of *The Genealogy of Morals* uses the association between eagle and man quite differently. He tells a parable of a lamb and an eagle in which the eagle is not “evil” for killing and the lamb not “good” by suffering. He uses the animals as vehicles in a metaphor that is describing mankind as entitled to use its powers without scruples. Jung, on the other hand, regards the eagle as an archetype which has the potential to seize humanity so that it is tragically and unconsciously enacting eagle logics, eagle ethics.
1. Theoretical Approaches to the Literary Personification of Nature

archaic, even discredited figure of speech (2). While the ancients anthropomorphised freely, in our own era “the attribution of human qualities to nature became abhorrent,” as humans became increasingly shut off from the natural world. However, as Moore insists, even today personification remains “one of the key figures employed to explore and explain the place of humans on a planet we share with more than one million other living species” (Ibid.). The main motivation of personification is to “provide an alternate world view to the anthropocentric paradigm, which Onno Dag Oerlemans defines as ‘the world view which turns all that is not human into an otherness subservient to human needs’” (Ibid. 3). Literary personifications of nature are political in so far as they can motivate people to understand and assume non-anthropocentric\textsuperscript{16} perspectives.

Literature has potential effects on cultural attitudes and social practices and thus affects nature itself (See 187). “[P]rogress could be made in ending the ecological crisis by challenging anthropocentric ethical norms and extending moral considerability to nonhuman beings” (Ibid.e.a.). Ecocentric personification’s “consubstantiating gesture” perceives nature as appearing to humans, thereby recognising nature as inevitably human via the act of being communicated through human senses. Poetry can lift the spell that makes nature appear as alterior, “just there” and in personifying nature, poetry can show how the human is always already implied in our perception of the worlds, by de-facing our intellectual habits that shield us from this realisation. Just how and along which lines we extend our humanity onto, for example trees, is of the essence for ecocriticism: “...it matters greatly whether a stretch of old growth forest is called timber or a nature reserve, a commodity or ‘lordly monarchs proclaiming the gospel of beauty like apostels’” (11). Moore observes that to conceive the earth as living in literature is to “create a sort of barrier against its destruction” (Ibid.). Referring to Carolyn Merchant’s hypothesis put forward in The Death of Nature he claims that before the rise of the mechanistic view of nature, speaking of the earth “as a living organism and nurturing mother had served as a cultural constraint restricting the actions of human beings” (Ibid.). Lawrence Buell, if somewhat hesitantly, admits that

\begin{quote}
[people cannot do without the idea of a 'living earth,' and that humanity is maybe better off accepting it – some versions of it anyhow – than trying to extirpate it. Who is more likely to treat other people as machines, a person who
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{16} Basic to ecocentrism, short for the theory of ecosystem-centred ethics, according to Bryan L. Moore, is “the sympathetic recognition and observance that all members of land community exist for their own sake and not what they can do for humans.” Moore provides an overview of the formation of eco-criticism in relation to ecocentrism and mentions the importance of the works of environmental philosopher J. Baird Callicott (Moore 120). According to Moore the term came into use following the publication of Aldo Leopold’s A Sand County Almanac in 1949 in which he observed the need to develop a new land ethic: “In short, a land ethic changes the role of Homo sapiens from conqueror of the land community to plain member and citizen of it – it implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such” (240). As Callicott further points out, we need ecological theories to “provide a synchronic link [...] a sense of social integration of human and non-human nature” (107). Ecocentrism, then, as Bryan L. Moore continues, is derived “from both philosophical and scientific bases, though it is not without challenges to both fronts, as well as others” (4).
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has trained herself to feel that plants and animals are fellow beings or a person who looks at them as convenient resources217 (217).

2. ORIGINS AND CONTEXTS OF RILKE’S AND YEATS’S ENVIRONMENTAL IMAGINATION

The central claim of this thesis is that the works of Rainer Maria Rilke and W. B. Yeats are challenging anthropocentrism and are developing an environmental view of nature, language and the human self, which locates interconnectedness, mutual pervadedness and participation at the centre. The address and personification of earth is essential to their works and ‘selfhood’ is extended beyond the confines of homo sapiens. This centrality of the environment as opposed to its domination by the rational mind is developed through their reception of Counter-Enlightenment views of nature as put forward, for example, by George Berkeley18 and William Blake,19 the German Romantic tradition as well as occultist discourses at the turn of the 19th/20th century. Rilke’s and Yeats’s literary revolt against the mechanical age was inspired in no small part by the spread of Eastern teachings and esoteric movements throughout Western Europe at the turn of the century, as well as alternative wisdom traditions which were perpetuated via mysticism, occultism and literary Romanticism. The German mystic and theosophist Jakob Boehme,20 for example, was not only impacting their works through direct reception but was already widely diffused through his reception by the Romantics in both Germany and England, and his non-dualist thought is an important source for the emergence of the idea of a unity of being which is central to both Rilke and Yeats. Their environmental thought is rooted in the

17 Buell further claims that such occurrences as feminist neopaganism and other “more conservative forms of revisionist ecotheology” like mother earth movements may not only be a fleeting contemporary upsurge but may indicate that “the idea of an earth-humanity continuum of more than a material sort may be unsuppressible” (Ibid.). Buell refers to John Tallmadge who claims that the personification of nature signifies the commitment to perceiving the non-human world not “as an object, but [...] as a presence” (Buell 217). Furthermore, it is not enough, as Gary Snyder argues, just “to want to ‘be in harmony with Gaia,’ our relation to the natural world [...] must be grounded in information and experience” (Snyder, The Practice of the Wild 39).

18 As Matthew Gibson rightly points out “Berkeley, who argued that esse est percipi, and that things only exist materially in our perceiving them, was already Yeats’ favourite philosopher, being the first he had read after finishing the original edition of A Vision” (Yeats, Coleridge and the Romantic Sage 32).

19 Kevin Hutchings in Imagining Nature (2003) observes that the eighteenth century animistic and panvitalistic philosophies, with which Blake was familiar, were largely rooted in the Greek philosophical tradition. Although, as Hutchings outlines, Blake claimed to detest the Greeks, he does not entirely reject their cosmology, the “organic viewpoint of panvitalism and hylozoism [...] for they provide him with a model of universal existence stressing the interrelationship of all entities as integral parts of a divine unified organism [...] the interconnectedness and interdependence of all entities” (62).

20 I would not go as far as to suggest, as James Olney does in The Rhizome and the Flower (1980), that the ideas put forward by the Western tradition of thinkers, connecting Yeats, Jung, Swedenborg, Blake Boehme, Paracelsus, von Cusa, Augustine, Plotinus, Plato and Pythagoras indicate a “corporate human consciousness,” a “historical and a psychical rhizome,” because to do so would result in participating in perennialism rather than critically assessing the conditions and modes of its occurrence (12ff). Although I fully agree with Olney that it is possible to observe similarities between the works and assumptions of writers participating in a shared tradition, I would not quite agree that a certain lineage of humans could form a “corporate human consciousness” because this assumption makes it hard to appreciate the uniqueness of each author’s different experience and creative vision and the artistic means and philosophical procedures by which it is achieved. Deleuze and Guattari have shown that the rhizome can fruitfully be applied to understand signification and works of art and mind (Mille Plateaux 1980). Similarly, when it comes to looking at Yeats’ and Rilke’s work, goal of this thesis is not to abnegate and flatten the differences while trying to point out the similarities of their poetic ecologies.
refusal to see a categorical difference between self and environment, the profane and the divine, the living and the dead. Beyond all interest in lyrical mediations of natural phenomena or any engagement in the pastoral tradition it is this preoccupation with uncertainty that gives their works ecological validity. Most importantly, however, the oeuvres of the two poets I will investigate show a persistent effort to overcome nature-culture dualisms and habitual enlightenment modes of perceiving self as separate from and superior to nature.\textsuperscript{21} The attempt to deliver a concise delineation of all relevant influences that shaped their environmental thought would exceed the frame of this thesis due to the sheer variety and expanse of their reading and the eclecticism\textsuperscript{22} and syncretism that characterises the ways in which they assimilated disparate ideas into their own works. However, the idea of a \textit{Unity} – perceived as a functional continuity – of an animated cosmos of which all beings, phenomena and even human signifying practices are part, forms the foundation of their thought and it is central to what will be described as literary environmental modernism. In the following, at least a fragmentary outline of possible sources for the emergence of this thought shall be drawn.

The two poets whose works I will investigate show a persistent effort to overcome habitual Enlightenment modes of perceiving self and environment. The latter is being conceived as a place which humans share with non-humans and the dead to the degree that all participate in each other and no certain boundaries are drawn. The modernist poets’ efforts can be viewed in a tradition which both pre-dates and outlives them. Thoughts of “Oneness” have from the Neoplatonists via their reception by the German philosopher, mystic and theosophist Jakob Boehme and his reception by the Romantic poets (such as Novalis, Coleridge and Blake) and the American transcendentalist R. W. Emerson influenced the ecological thought at the turn of the century.

\textbf{2.1. The Reception of Ancient Philosophy and Non-Dualist Thought in W. B. Yeats}

While Rilke was not greatly interested in Greek philosophy, Yeats was. He read the Pre-Socratics, Plato and the Neoplatonists, whose works were available via the mediation of translators, particularly Thomas Taylor, Ralph Cudworth and Henry More.\textsuperscript{23} Especially through

\textsuperscript{21} Yeats affirms: “When my generation denounced scientific humanitarian preoccupation, psychological curiosity, rhetoric, we had not found what ailed Victorian literature [...] The mischief began at the end of the seventeenth century when man became passive before a mechanized nature” (Introduction to \textit{The Oxford Book of Modern Verse, LE 194}). In a letter to John O’Leary in 1892 Yeats writes: “The mystical life is the very centre of all that I do and all that I think and all that I write. It holds to my work the same relation that the philosophy of Godwin held to the work of Shelley and I have always considered myself a voice of what I believe to be a greater renascence – the revolt of the soul against the intellect – now beginning in the world” (Wade \textit{The Letters of W. B. Yeats 210}).

\textsuperscript{22} Yeats’ eclecticism as a reader is well known and extensively commented upon, so is Rilke’s – in fact, Leon Surette sees it as a distinctive feature of Modernist writers (\textit{The Birth of Modernism} 12). Yeats and Rilke, although they were both eclectic in their reading and driven by their interest for learning to all sorts of subjects - from both ancient philosophy and in Rilke’s case, biology, to esoteric and occult learning, were happy to grasp what furthered the ideas and visions they were elaborating and to discard whatever did not suit.

\textsuperscript{23} Taylor See also: \textit{Thomas Taylor the Platonist} (1969). Henry More was deeply indebted to Boehme’s thought; in fact More’s writings first prompted Leibnitz to give Boehme’s thought serious consideration (See Richter \textit{Jacob Böhme. Mystische Schriften} 11).
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the latter, as Brian Arkins points out in *Builders of my Soul* (1990), he encountered Porphyry’s thought and read More’s own Anti-Cartesian argument in *The Immortality of the Soul* (15).

Reading the Pre-Socratics and the works of Plato via the translation of Neoplatonist Thomas Taylor’s, already the Platonic division between the One and nature would have occurred to Yeats as a relaxed one, affirming unity. Taylor was an “enthusiastic, if highly inaccurate translator” (13). “Orphic hymn IX” personifies the principles of nature via invocation and apotheosis. In his introductory note Taylor writes “[Nature] connects all the parts of the universe together: containing within herself intellectual life by which she illuminates the whole, and unifying powers by which she superintends all the opposing natures of the world” (See “Various Thy grace. Orphic hymn IX [X],” In: *Torrance Encompassing Nature* 592f). Nature possesses “connecting, and unifying power” as well as a “plenitude of seminal reasons” connecting the irreconcilable opposites and all that is discordant into “unity and consent”:

> To all things common and in all things known,
> Yet incommunicable and alone.
> Without a father of thy wondrous frame,
> Thyself the father whence thy essence came.
> Mingling, all-flourishing, supremely wise,
> And bond connective of the earth and skies (Ibid.).

Platonic dualism figures prominently to the development of Yeats’ own thought, but it is also clear that this dualism is constantly subverted and overcome in images depicting the unity of antinomies. Arkins rightly claims that Yeats reconciles “the central paradox of Platonism” with “the material world that Yeats calls ‘the circle of the moon / that pitches common things about,’” which is sanctified “precisely because it ‘stands in God’s unchanging eye’” (60). If this metaphor was read verbatim – as I think the elaboration of *Tom the Lunatic* strongly suggests we do, the world is *in god’s eye* – both part and interruption of divine sight. The perishing and decaying of the world is made visible, paradoxically, as organic part of the eternal divine. As for Crazy Jane “nothing can be sole or whole / That has not been rent,” so the divine could not be complete if it did not *contain within itself* the world’s temporal perishing (*VP* 518). All that is unsavable and “rent” is in itself already saved not by standing as a dim copy of eternity in the *gaze* of the eternal but physically in the *eye* of God, partaking of God’s being, undergoing its own destruction (which is God’s) as part of all-comprehending, all-consummating infinity. As a consequence to this reconciliation of the Platonic paradox, I will argue, art for Yeats is no longer a copy or mirror of the eternal but is thought in terms of embodiment, performance and theophany, part of the self-consummation of *Being*. A passage from Yeats’ 1896 essay on Robert Bridge’s *Return of Ulysses*, which Brian Arkins considers evidence of Yeats’ thinking art as merely “mirroring nature, which, in turn, mirrors the One or God,” in fact proves, as do many other instances already in Yeats’ early thought, that he does not subscribe to referentiality and mimesis but to ritual and

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24 God, from the very beginning of Yeats’ oeuvre is not the Judeo-Christian transcendent Creator but rather a principle of *being*, derived from Boehme, that which *is* and expresses all beings and that which consummates itself within incarnations.
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embodiment (42). “The more a poet rids his verses of heterogeneous knowledge and irrelevant analysis, and purifies his mind with elaborate art, the more does the little ritual of his verse resemble the great ritual of Nature, and become mysterious and inscrutable. He becomes, as all the great mystics have believed, a vessel of the creative power of God” (EE 149, e. a.). The resemblance is here not mechanical, as nature is described as “inscrutable,” art partakes in the “mystery” that is nature and also become a site, a vessel of the divine self-consummation. Yeats furthermore attests to symbols vital powers; the image is not mere representation but “living soul”

Shelley understood this, as is proved by what he says of the eternity of beautiful things and of the influence of the dead, but whether he understood that the great memory is also a dwelling-house of symbols, of images that are living souls, I cannot tell.[...] He could hardly have helped perceiving that an image that has transcended particular time and place becomes a symbol, passes beyond death, as it were, and becomes a living soul (“The Philosophy of Shelley’s Poetry” EE 62).

In On Popular Poetry Yeats outlines a fusion of art with ritual, learning, and witchcraft in Irish literary traditions. Although it might be Yeats himself, rather than tradition, who sees these realms fused: “I learned from the people themselves, before I learned it from any book, that they cannot separate the idea of an art or a craft from the idea of a cult with ancient technicalities and mysteries. They can hardly separate mere learning from witchcraft, and are fond of words and verses that keep half their secret to themselves” (“On Popular Poetry” EE 10). The idea that the symbol is not revealing its secret forestalls any ambition to make it an instrument in the pursuit of intellectual knowledge. The symbol is described as a living soul and in this definition is clearly influenced by Yeats’s reception of the works of Jacob Boehme, whose thought is itself a fusion of theosophy, alchemy, cosmology, and language theory. In Boehme’s thought, as will be explored in more detail below, there is continuity between the divine principle’s self-manifestation in the world and the phenomena of human language.

2.2. The Impact of Jacob Boehme’s Theosophical Ontology

Especially Jacob Boehme’s reception of the Neoplatonic tradition and his unique interpretation of it were of enduring interest to Yeats. Boehme overcomes the Platonic separation
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of the One from being. He sees humanity, divinity, and nature participate in a continuum, which has clear ecological implications. More significantly still, Boehme rediscovers the divinity in *all that is*. In this sense, more than in any other, he becomes important to the German Romantics, and subsequently to Yeats and Rilke. R. F. Foster suggests that Yeats was reading Boehme (“to clarify references”) from as early as 1889 when his collaboration with Edwin Ellis on the works of Blake began (*The Apprentice Mage* 99). However, Yeats’ correspondences and indeed the Boehmean influence on his poetic works suggest a substantial and ongoing interest. Yeats’ interest in Boehme was profound, life-long and philosophically as well as aesthetically motivated. In his 1896 review of Richard Garnett’s *William Blake*, he claims that Boehme “first taught in the modern world the principles which Blake first expressed in the language of poetry; and of these the most important, and the one from which the others spring, is that the imagination is the means whereby we communicate with God.” (*UA* 302) In fact, Yeats was convinced that Blake could only be understood fully if one recognized his heavy indebtedness to Boehme; especially Blake’s *Urizen* he calls a “page by page transformation of Boehme’s *Mysterium Magnum*” (304). Yeats, then, quotes from Law’s compilation of Boehmean texts *The Way of Christ*, which he was certain Blake read, to elucidate the Boehmian notion of ‘image’:

The word image […] meaneth not only creaturely resemblance, in which sense man is said to be the image of God; but its signifieth also a spiritual substance, a birth or effect of a will wrought in or by a spiritual being of power. And imagination which we are apt erroneously to consider an airy, idle and important faculty of the human mind, dealing in fiction and roving in phantasy or idea without producing anything powerful or permanent, is the magia or

Paulina Remes remarks that “The Neoplatonists understood the famous second deduction of the second part of *Parmenides*, to establish a One separate from being, the dialogue thus forming a central source for the Neoplatonic philosophy of the first principle” (*Neoplatonism* 13). This, as Cyril O’Regan points out in *Gnostic Apocalypse* (2002), Boehme contested. Moreover, considering the impact of Paracelsus, Agrippa von Nettesheim and the Kabbalah, Neoplatonism can be seen “neither as an exclusive nor primary taxon of Boehme’s visionary, narrative discourse” (O’Regan 178). Boehme received the three main strands of Neoplatonism: 1. the ancient Neoplatonism of Plotinus and Proclus; 2. the Christian Neoplatonism of Dionysos, Eckhardt, Eriugena; and 3. the Renaissance thought of Nicolas of Cusa and Giordano Bruno. Boehme departs from the negative theology that characterises all of them, according to O’Regan, by problematizing the “perfection of the immanifest, inexpressible divine” and questioning its “constraints on apophasis” (178f). He questions the “non-compulsiveness of divine manifestation” and instead ascribes a necessity that has “ontological and logical” implications. In contrast to the Neoplatonist tradition, for Boehme manifestation does not equal merely achieving “verisimilitude” (180). The divine in Boehme is “compelled” to enter into existence and has no choice to stay ineffable.

E. M. Conradi insists that it is, in essence, an „ecological wisdom“ Boehme communicates in his works (*Christianity and Ecological Theology* 90).

John Kelly and Ron Schuchard point out in the footnotes to the *Collected Letters* that Yeats read Boehme in the 4-volume translation by John Sparrow, which Blake had read as well (*CL* vol.3, 223.) They see Boehme’s influence “particularly in *The First Book of Urizen*. Yeats also owned a copy of Franz Hartmann’s *The Life and Doctrines of Jacob Boehme, the God-taught Philosopher* which he annotated extensively (*CL* vol.2, 24). He read Bishop Hans Martensen’s commentary: *Jacob Boehme: His Life and Teaching*, translated by T. Rhys Evans. In O’Shea’s catalogue of Yeats’ library there are further editions listed, for example: *The Works of Jacob Behmen, the Teutonic Theosopher*, edited by Joseph Richardson, 1763. For a closer look at the many ways in which Yeats’ *Vision* relies on Boehme see Jeffares, *The Circus Animals: Essays on W. B. Yeats* (1970) (103ff).

Yeats is enthralled by Boehme, he writes to Mahel Beardsley on 28th March, 1915: “The only book I have with me at the club is Boehme & he is a beautiful person. Is not this fine, ‘O how cheerful is the soul when its anguish source of fire tasteth God's light. O how exceeding courteous it is’. Is not that word ‘courteous’ placed just there exquisite? The translation was made in the 17th century” (*CLU*, #2620).
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power of raising or forming such images or substances and the greatest power in
text.

This notion of the imagination as a locus of divine-natural power and subsequently the definition
of image and symbol as powerfully charged entities, participating in being, outside modern
frames of referentiality and mere resemblance, becomes important to W. B. Yeats’ own notion of
art. As has been variously shown, German Romanticism but also that of Blake and Coleridge in
the English language, is not thinkable without Boehme. One of the basic assumptions of
Boehme’s thought is the self-authoring omnipresence of the divine, which performs its own
“fall” into embodied, material existence as part of a process of self-revelation and salvation.

Destruction, thus, is written into its self-constitution. The divine is not visible to the soul “within
the divine state of being wherein she lives” (Boehme1891, 39). Boehme ascribes the fall of man
to this invisibility of the divine. Human ignorance of the divine is therefore an affliction of eyes
and mind, a psycho-historical condition, a habitual tragedy, which can be rectified and
redeemed. Boehme’s cosmology is non-dualistic since the divine is to him what manifests all
aspects of existence, including evil, which is thought of as an elemental, physico-chemical
imbalance within the divine. Nature and the universe, in a fusion of religious, alchemical,
astrological as well as poetological discourses, is understood as participating in divine Being. In the
opening of De Signatura Rerum: Das ist von der Bezeichnung aller dingen / wie das Innere vom Eusseren
bezeichnet wird (1638), Jakob Boehme discusses what he calls the “signature” of existence as a
spirit-matter relationship, which cannot be understood purely rationally: “All whatever is spoken,
written or taught of God, without the knowledge of the signature is dumb and void of

29 Jonathan Wordsworth points out that Coleridge dismissed Boehme along with Schelling as “pantheist,” yet that he
was nevertheless hugely influenced by his unified vision of being (22ff). Coleridge was a “Beheminite” in that he
saw the “primary imagination in its highest power [as] one with ‘the deific energies in Deity itself’” (49). For
Coleridge, the imagination is charged with divine powers of creation and enables “to see God everywhere” and
experience God as diffused within being so that consequently it is the poet’s task to “proclaim the One life” and
reconcile man with nature (34). Coleridge is an important source for Yeats’s own notion of the imagination as
well as his evolution as an Artist-as-Sage as Matthew Gibson lucidly argues in Yeats Coleridge and the Romantic Sage
(2000). Coleridge helped Yeats “to end abstractions in three major spheres: the transcendental, the political
and the life after death” (58). Especially with regards to unity of being, “Coleridge must be regarded as a continual
source for images of mental and spiritual unity” (175). Gibson remarks Yeats’ persistent return to Coleridge’s
“Aeolian Harp” (1975) – which strongly resonates with early German Romanticism, and which John Wordsworth
is tempted to “see Boehme’s influence in” (51).

30 See Jacques Roos, Les aspects littéraires du mysticisme philosophique et l’influence de Boehme et de Swedenborg au début du
romantisme (1951), Paola Mayer, Jena Romanticism and Its Appropriation of Jakob Böhme (1999), Gisela Dischner in
Wandlung ins Unsichtbare (1999) points out the connection between Rilke’s and Boehme’s phenomenological
pursuit of the numinous. Although Cyril O’Regan may be right in claiming that “W. B. Yeats’ indebtedness to the
tradition of Boehme and Swedenborg are almost too well known to deserve comment” there is yet much to be
discovered: Kathleen Raine points to Yeats’ continuous engagement with Boehme and Blake: “when Yeats had
exhausted or outgrown works of lesser genius and challenged Plato himself “he continued to write of Blake as a
disciple writes of his master” (O’Regan Gnostic Apocalypse 228; Raine Yeats the Initiate 82f). For Boehme’s
influence on Blake see Beer Blake’s Visionary Universe (1969), and Fischer, Converse in the Spirit (2004).

31 “Why is it that we cannot see God” This world and the devil (perverted good) within the wrath of God are the
cause that we cannot see with the eyes of God” (Boehme [1891] 40).
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understanding; for it proceeds from an historical conjecture. Awareness of the divine can only be gained somatically: as through *Essenz* und *Principium* outpoured, the divine communicates itself via the “Hall”[32] [reverberation, resonance] creating within human experience the continuum and transgression in which everything participates. Axel Goodbody in *Natursprache* (1984) traces Boehme’s thought back to Paracelsus and notes, at the same time, that this notion of language is sensuous [“sensualisch”] (21). The principle of reverberation, to Boehme, is the precondition of any communication. Resonance signs or scripts the *Gestalt* or figure [“Gestaldniß”] of one into the other [“bezeichnet seine Gestaldnis in meine”] (9). Boehme employs the metaphor of bell and hammer – “so er den Hamer hat/ der meine Glocken schlagen kann” – to describe communication (Ibid.). At the same time, sound and resounding is Boehme’s prime metaphor for emanation. The *signature* is nothing but a mute box [“kasten”] unless spirit enacts the lute ülay [“Lautenspiel”] and by its resounding the qualities and nature of the instrument become known, “signed into” another being[34] (10).

One Being, for Yeats, is no longer “whole, immutable, eternal and inviolate,” as James Olney claims (137). It is immanently present within nature and all its beings and is performing their emergence as well as their destitution. In Boehme’s thought, by its desire for self-revelation, the divine and infinite by necessity become profane, corporeal, and temporal.[35] The divine instantiates itself as existence; the world, then, is theophany:

For God is without beginning, and has an eternal beginning, and an eternal end, which he is himself, and the nature of the inward world is in the like essence from eternity. We give you to understand this of the divine essence; without nature God is a mystery, understand in the nothing, for without nature is the nothing, which is an eye of eternity, an abyssal eye, that stands or sees in the nothing, for it is the abyss; and this same eye is a will, understand a longing after manifestation, to find the nothing; but now there is nothing before the will, where it might find something, where it might have a place to rest, therefore it enters into itself, and finds itself through nature (Law *De Signatura* 22).

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32For the sake of preserving the beauty and peculiarity of Boehme’s diction, the German will be quoted from the original. Written in 1622, this book was published in 1635 for the first time 11 years after the death of the author. All translations in the following unless otherwise noted are from William Law’s *Signature of All Things* (1912). “Alles was von Gott geredet /geschrieben oder gelehret wird ohne die Erkändnuß der Signatur/ das ist / stum und ohne verstand / dann es kompt nur auß einem historischen Wahn” (9).

33“Sound” is too narrow a translation, because the German word encompasses much rather reverberation, and resonance and thus points towards the vibrational capacities of objects in space – space itself is implied via Halle (9).

34Walther Gebhard understands *signature rerum* as one of the “hierarchised, psychomorphic analogies” sprung from the thinking of totality – similar to the idea of a pyramid of being, plan of nature, great chain of being, see *Der Zusammenhang der Dinge* [1984] (26). But already now it is apparent how uneasily signature sits in this enumeration. Gebhard views the practice of analogising as affirmative of the most central supposition of Greek thought: the cosmos, as a structural principle by which the divine demiurge orders the things. In seeing scripting not as a practice that is a privilege of human agency, but on the contrary, as a principle of self-authoring of existence, the hierarchy is abolished and human scripting can be seen as part of an omniscious self-perpetuating scripture.

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Here, the aberration from the original German is significant: Law translates “Ungrund” as “abyss” which takes away the paradox, we might retain in “groundless ground” or “non-ground” and secondly, the original has the divine seeking itself within nature itself, not through nature. But Yeats, interestingly, adopts it in Boehme’s original sense, regardless of the translation. God is at the same time the abyss of the “eye of eternity” as well as a “longing after manifestation” and at the same time manifest nature hanging into the abyss. This is how “Tom the Lunatic” can see all nature non-hierarchically “in God’s unchanging eye”:

Whatever stands in field or flood,
Bird, beast, fish or man,
Mare or stallion, cock or hen,
Stands in God’s unchanging eye
In all the vigour of its blood;
In that faith I live or die (VP 528).

Yeats is here thoroughly Boehmian rather than “being Berkleyan” (Snukal High Talk 20). The basic idea of a co-insistence of mutually exclusive states, is expressed by the ambiguity of the third person possessive pronoun – the “vigour of its blood” – of the beasts or of God’s eye? The ambiguity is irreducible and creates an attribution of the one “blood” to animal, man and the divine, alike. The stanza creates a circuit, so to speak. The simultaneity of stasis and flux indicates both the dynamic energy and the material manifestation of the divine imagined as blood cell and stream, field and flood.

James Olney’s claim that the modernists rely on Plato’s Timaeus and its notion of nature as a derivative “moving likeness of eternity” separate from the “inviolate being” must, in this light, be contested (144). Yeats does not maintain Neoplatonist “hierarchies of being and of knowing […] beyond both of which [is] the One” (Ibid.). According to James Olney, Plato’s efforts, as opposed to Parmenides,’ return “correspondence, simile and analogy to the universe” and enable poets like Yeats and psychologists like Jung to resort to myth to tell “the likely story” (136). For Olney only human separateness from “One Being” enables to “think about it, to speak of it, to approach it” (137). This notion, however, is diametrically opposed to Yeats’ conceptions of being that can be found in his poetry and prose. He puts into words the immediacy and in-dwelling presence of the divine dispersed into being, which escapes rational comprehension. His way, from the first of his critical explorations and poetic practices to the last, therefore, is symbol, not allegory:

36 “Sähnen” in modern German “Sehnen” – beyond the emotion implies via the noun’s root the physicality of extension, tension, the tensor of the bow-string.

37 This uncertainty underlies the majority of poems in The Winding Stair and Other Poems (1933) Kathleen Raine in Death-in-Life and Life-in-Death (1974) observes: “The Delphic Oracle described Plotinus struggling through the sea of material existence to the golden country, his spiritual sight blinded by the physical body. […] There is an implicit identification of the salt of blood with the salt of the sea, ancient symbol of material existence and its storms” (49). I would oppose that since in “Salt blood blocks his eyes” the identification is explicit – the clear distinction between the exteriority of the environment (sea) and the interiority of the body (blood) is alleviated (VP 530).
William Blake was the first writer of modern times to preach the indissoluble marriage of all great art with symbol. There had been allegorists and teachers of allegory in plenty, but the symbolic imagination, or, as Blake preferred to call it, ‘vision,’ is not allegory, being ‘a representation of what actually exists really and unchangeably.’ A symbol is indeed the only possible expression of some invisible essence, a transparent lamp about a spiritual flame; while allegory is one of many possible representations of an embodied thing, or familiar principle, and belongs to fancy and not to imagination: the one is a revelation, the other an amusement (EE 87-88).

Based on the Platonic assumption of the ineffability of the “One,” we could only ever make reference to it, could describe or represent but not participate in it. Yeats’ definition of the symbol, however, talks of its participation in an “invisible essence” and in the performance of embodiment. Employing the metaphor of a diaphanous lamp around a spiritual flame, as will be demonstrated, Yeats’ and Rilke’s conception of the symbol are very similar. Both insist that the symbol is an embodied medium. It belongs to imagination and is essentially connected to being in ways which will be elucidated further within analyses of selected works of both poets. Furthermore, the symbol is never fully knowable and concealment is essential; revelation is only ever a disclosure of concealment (Smith, W. B. Yeats: A Critical Introduction 59ff).

Dieter Mersch in “Paradoxien der Verkörperung: Zu einer negativen Semiotik des Symbolischen,” points out the discontents of the dyadic logics of the classical notion of representation as developed by Michel Foucault and the structural linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure’s (33). Structuralist and poststructuralist thought are based on notions of signification as (failing) representation. They are focused on describing representation as relationality within shifting chains of signifiers making arbitrary, temporary and inessential connections over a negative void: signifiers stand in for something which they can never embody – they merely create arbitrary and shifting references (See 34). Mersch emphasises that the academic discussion has shifted since Charles Sanders Pierce’s theories of an infinitely iterating ternary structure and Gottlob Frege’s ideas of language being based on modalities of “sense.” Since the beginning of the 1980’s mediality has gained more importance in debates about language: Rather than reference and representation, the “reality of the symbolic” has moved into focus, the mediality and materiality of the symbolon – that which is thrown together – as opposed to the conventions and regulations of semeion (35). The aim of this thesis is to show the ecological validity of the idea of the symbol, as understood by the modernist poets. Language, to them, is through its medial embodiment in either speech or writing already unspeakably entangled with being.

This thought enables Rilke to describe hearing as a permeable, impressionable space, a sanctuary for the animals in the first of his Sonette an Orpheus, and a bed for the dead-yet-alive dancer in the second. The basic assumption that being is reverberation influences the thought of R. W. Emerson and consequently also the young Rilke, who read Emerson extensively at that time though not yet Boehme himself. Rilke’s Orphic song in many ways draws upon the notion
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Rilke received this notion of a sensuous, all-pervading language via German Romanticism, to which he was exposed since his school years. Especially Novalis’ relation to Natursprache must be discussed in more detail here.

2.3. “A tongue to the sea-cliffs”: the Emergence of W. B. Yeats’ Environmental Imagination

With regard to the evolution of his oeuvre, Yeats himself considered Boehme, Blake and Swedenborg to be of formative importance. In his early essay “William Blake and the Imagination” he emphasizes the importance of the imagination and even assigns to it a soteriological function:

He [Blake] had learned from Jacob Boehme and from old alchemist writers that imagination was the first emanation of divinity, ‘the body of God,’ ‘the Divine members,’ and he drew the deduction, which they did not draw, that the

38 Boehme’s signature pre-figures Romanticism’s notion of a “speech of nature”: “[H]ow the one only essence has manifested itself with the external birth in the desire of the similitude, how it has manifested itself in so many forms and shapes, which we see and know in the stars and elements, likewise in the living creatures, and also in the trees and herbs. Therefore the greatest underlying lies in the signature, wherein man (viz. the image of the greatest virtue) may not only learn to know himself, but therein also he may learn to know the essence of all essences; for by the external form of all creatures, by their instigation, inclination and desire, also by their sound, voice, and speech which they utter, the hidden spirit is known; for nature has given to everything its language according to its essence and form, for out of the essence the language or sound arises, and the fiat of that essence forms the quality of the essence in the voice or virtue which it sends forth, to the animals in the sound, and to the essentials in smell, virtue, and form. Everything has its mouth to manifestation; and this is the language of nature, whence everything speaks out of its property” (Law 12). “…wie sich das einige wesen mit der außgebährung […] hat in so viel Formen und Gestaltniß offenbahret / alß wir solches an Sternen und Elementen / so wol an den Creaturen, auch Bäumen und Kräutern / sehen und erkennen / darumb ist in der Signatur der gröste verstand / darinnen sich der Mensch […] nicht allein lernet selber kennen / sondern er mag auch darinnen / das Wesen aller Wesen lernen erkennen / dann in der eusserlichen gestaltniß aller Creaturen / in ihrem trüb und begierde / item in ihrem aufgehenden hang / stim und spraache / kennt man den verborgnen Geist / dann die natur hat jedem dinge seine spraache (nach seiner Essenz und gestaltniß) gegeben / denn aus der Essenz uhrständet die spraache oder der hang […] und das ist die Natur spraache / daraß jedes ding aus seiner eigenschafts redet” (Boehme De Signatura 14).

39 Yeats expresses the primacy of Boehme, Blake and Swedenborg in a letter to Ernest Boyd in February 1915: “My interest in mystic symbolism did not come from Arthur Symons or any other contemporary writer. I have been a student of the medieval mystics since 1887. […] My chief mystical authorities have been Boehme, Blake and Swedenborg” (Wade Letters 592). F. A. C. Wilson must be followed when in W. B. Yeats and Tradition he writes: “Yeats was not altogether a convinced Platonist, and it would be wrong to think that he subscribed even to Plotinus without reservation. At the time of Plato and Aristotle the pendulum of history was already beginning to swing away from the Self towards the idea of an objective God […]. Plato, to some extent repelled Yeats because of the element of objectivity in his thought: ‘Even the truth into which Plato dies is some form of death, for when he separates the eternal ideas from nature and shows them self-sustained he prepares the Christian desert and the stoic suicide’” (AVB 271; Wilson 97). The only true adhesion to Platonism can be found in On the Boiler, which, as Brian Arkins points out, adopts the anti-democratic thought put forward in the Republic, calling for the “rule of educated and able men,” which results in “the most – perhaps only – thoroughly disreputable idea in Yeats” (33). But even that idea is proclaimed in a mode of willful exaggeration, casting doubt on the sincerity of the persuasion, as he who gets up onto the boiler to speak is “a mad ship’s carpenter” (LE 235). Yeats’s efforts to give primacy to the imagination are modern in that they resonate with other projects, critical of Platonism, as Martin Heidegger’s criticism in The Letter on ‘Humanism’ (1949), where he writes “Thinking is engagement by and for the truth of being […] we must free ourselves from the technical interpretation of thinking. The beginnings of that thinking reach back to Plato and Aristotle. They take thinking itself to be ἔγγυον, a process of deliberation in service to doing and making” (Pathmarks 240). Similar arguments have been launched against Platonism more recently by ecotheorists for the same reasons, a point in case is Lynn White’s “The Roots of Our Ecological Crises” (1960).
imaginative arts were therefore the greatest of Divine revelations, and that the sympathy with all living things, sinful and righteous alike, which the imaginative arts awaken, is that forgiveness of sins commanded by Christ. The reason, and by the reason he meant deductions from the observations of the senses, binds us to mortality because it binds us to the senses, and divides us from each other by showing us our clashing interests; but imagination divides us from mortality by the immortality of beauty, and binds us to each other by opening the secret doors of all hearts. He cried again and again that every thing that lives is holy, and that nothing is unholy except things that do not live—lethargies, and cruelties, and timidities, and that denial of imagination which is the root they grew from in old times⁴⁰ (EE 85).

Yeats observes an ecological dimension in Blake’s imagination, whose role it is to make tangible the “sympathy with all living things, sinful and righteous alike” and thus to overcome the divisions of the abstract mind, the limitations of the sacred and the humanist hierarchisations of being so that the holiness of “everything” can appear. He understands Blake’s imagination as facilitating apokatastasis panton, the “forgiveness of sins commanded by Christ” extended unconditionally to all existence thus exploding traditional Christian metaphysics. This definition of the imagination in Blake informs Yeats’ own notion of the imagination, which he expresses in his essay “Magic” (1901):

I believe in three doctrines, which have, as I think, been handed down from early times, and been the foundations of nearly all magical practices. These doctrines are--

(1) That the borders of our minds are ever shifting, and that many minds can flow into one another, as it were, and create or reveal a single mind, a single energy.
(2) That the borders of our memories are as shifting, and that our memories are a part of one great memory, the memory of Nature herself.
(3) That this great mind and great memory can be evoked by symbols.

I often think I would put this belief in magic from me if I could, for I have come to see or to imagine, in men and women, in houses, in handicrafts, in nearly all sights and sounds, a certain evil, a certain ugliness, that comes from the slow perishing through the centuries of a quality of mind that made this belief and its evidences common over the world (EE 25).

Although this passage has received a lot of scholarly attention, its environmental aspect has not been commented upon. Yeats’s convictions run athwart Enlightenment conceptions of

⁴⁰ Margaret Mills Harper’s observation, that in this passage Yeats “transforms a rhetorical device into spiritual truth […] deducing the sacredness of art from an a-priori assumption of active, commanding divinity,” can be followed (Wisdom of Two 49). Further, her contextualization of this move as in the spirit of Coleridge rather than Arnold makes sense, as Yeats is “transferring literal faith into the realm of aesthetic rather than raising the aesthetic to the language of faith” (Ibid.). In emphasising the imagination as “presence” rather than “convenient shorthand for spiritual abstraction” Harper rightly attests a Catholic rather than Protestant dimension to Yeats’s aesthetic faith, “pre-Schismatic, of Orthodox colouring, Byzantine rather than Roman.” (Ibid.) The Swiss Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar outlines the shift from an “aesthetic theology to a theological aesthetics” in the age of German Idealism (79). “[A]n attempt had to be made to bring together “the theory of beauty, which by now had become self-conscious, with Christian revelation, and beyond this, to identify the two, if at all possible” (79). Thus, the unsustainable separation of aesthetics and theology was temporarily overcome in recovering the “possibility of a genuine relationship between theological beauty and the beauty of the world” (80).
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subjectivity. This passage represents a radical dissolution of the Western notion of self-hood either as a conjunction of soul and body or body and mind. Instead, what Yeats talks about is unity as community. He envisions a great mind made of the confluence of many minds which can fuse because they are not viewed as strictly separated, in the first place. He also envisions memory as unbounded in that our memories are part of the memory of “nature herself” – who appears as the locus in which individual memory originates and where it goes. The human body, thus, is already understood here as an interface to a plurality of minds and memories. It is in this sense also that Yeats’s personification of nature must be understood as an attempt to reveal the impossibility to restrict self-hood to the human self alone. Yeats sees humanity and language as tied into and exposed to the “Great Mind” and “Great Memory” which are within nature, which is open to encounters with spirits or the experiences of the dead.

Ireland at the turn of the century exposed Yeats to both vast landscapes and mind-scape from the perception of which the supernatural was not expurgated and with which the human inhabitants still felt a great degree of continuity and kinship. Editing Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry (1888 and 1892) had made him more aware of what he called the tradition onf Ireland. Yeats edited out “didacticism, skepticism and condescension” that he found in the original authors of the stories which implies that he saw value in both the beliefs and modes of expression (Jeffares W. B. Yeats: A New Biography 2001, 34). In The Celtic Twilight (1893) the authorial self in first person singular participates in supernatural experiences and acts as a witness, validating the occurrences by being “temporarily in touch with these ‘bodiless moods’” (Putzel, Reconstructing Yeats 39). Yeats regards the traditional practices and beliefs in Ireland as valuable to counter the “shrunken world” of modernity, and it is his hope that in Ireland “the simplicity and amplitude of the imagination” can be revived:

What is literature but the expression of moods by the vehicle of symbol and incident? And are there not moods which need heaven and hell and purgatory, and fairyland for their expression, no less than this dilapidated earth? Nay, are there not moods which shall find no expression unless there be men who dare to mix heaven, hell, purgatory and fairyland together, or even to set the heads of beasts to the bodies of men, or to thrust the souls of men into the heart of rocks (CT 10, e.a.)?

Yeats defines the idea of a “Great Memory,” in The Philosophy of Shelley’s Poetry (1900) as “some great Memory that renews the world and men’s thoughts age after age, and that our thoughts are not, as we suppose, the deep, but a little foam upon the deep...dwelling-place of symbols” (EE 61). Phillip Wolf notes in Modernization and the Crisis of Memory (2002): “a cultural and collective sphere of past knowledge, which is independent of a memory that evolves in and through the socio-economic and communal conditions of a specific people as well as the dominant versions of history”(159). Kathleen Raine points to the continuity between this term and Blake’s ‘Los’ hall.’ (1986, 170).

See also Kinahan, Yeats, Folklore, and Occultism(1988)

In “Moods” (1895) Yeats explains that literature differs from explanatory and scientific writing in being wrought about a mood, or a community of moods” which are immortal but must be discovered by the poet as dwelling in “mortal desire. (EE 143) Moods are embodied experiences, “feelings that exist as though outside the self.” (O’Neill 105) Roy Forster sees the common origin in Blake’s, Shelley’s and Yeats’ Moods in Boehme’s notion of the “imagination as the vehicle of divine revelation.” (99)
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This passage describes what is most central to a Modernist environmental imagination: The delimitation and restitution of seeing the continuity of humanity and the ecosphere, I shall argue, will be central to Yeats’s works from this programmatic early statement through to his very last creations. This is how environmental modernism attempts to counter the vicissitudes of the long-rooted errors of the modern age. Only now the devastating effects of the exploitation of the ecosphere by humanity become visible. Also, it becomes visible that humanity has lost touch with the sensuous presence of the earth, no longer self or Other, but a resource and commodity, Earth disappears behind data screens and abstractions. Yeats’s contribution to environmental discourses is significant in so far as he is willing to ‘see humanity back’ into its physiological and phylogenetic contexts of embodied existence, its environments. He creates exposure to uncertainty and the indefinable mystery of being.

In his essay “Swedenborg, Mediums and the Desolate Places” (1914) Yeats describes this uncertainty more clearly. Mediumship to Yeats is not some determinate transmission from a sender to a recipient but it is, first and foremost, the consciousness of an unbounded self, which finds itself exposed to uncertainty: symbols and thoughts are perceived but whether they are formed in the subconscious of the one who receives them, or in the disincarnate memory traces of the dead, or in the physical structures of the environment cannot be affirmed with certainty. Authorship is from the beginning an indeterminate communal process, embracing the natural environment. In “Per Amica Silentia Lunae”(1917) which, written in the style of his earlier essay, prepares his readers for the occult system of A Vision (more on A Vision will follow in Chapter Five) Yeats outlines the importance of ‘influence’:

I elaborated a symbolism of natural objects that I might give myself dreams during sleep, or rather visions, for they had none of the confusion of dreams, by laying upon my pillow or beside my bed certain flowers or leaves. Even today, after twenty years, the exaltations and the messages that came to me from bits of hawthorn or some other plant seem of all moments of my life the happiest and the wisest (“Per Amica Silentia Lunae” LE 17).

The relevance of Yeats’ oeuvre as a contribution to environmental thought lies in his refusal to see humans as closed off from the scope of influence and exposure exerted by the various aspects of a human and non-human environment. While the conscious mind is happy to decipher messages fixed in letters on printed pages, never inquiring what tree the book was made of, the dreaming poet receives messages directly from the plant world, which is given the authority to transfigure his dream and grant vision. In the ‘Anima Mundi’ section of his essay “Per Amica Silentia Lunae” Yeats describes images and thoughts within the world-soul in terms of rhizomatic, organic growth and embodiment. This growth connects and pervades the immateriality of thought and binds it to material existence:

I am persuaded that a logical process, or a series of related images, has body and period, and I think of Anima Mundi as a great pool or garden where it spreads through allotted growth like a great water plant or branches more

44 Northrop Frye calls it: “the bottle out of which the smoky genie of the V i s i o n emerged” (“Yeats and the Language of Symbolism” 70).
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''..fragrantly in the air. [...] A seed is set growing, and this growth may go on apart from the power, apart even from the knowledge of the soul. [...] We are always starting these parasitic vegetables and letting them coil beyond our knowledge, and may become, like that lady in Balzac who, after a life of sanctity, plans upon her deathbed to fly with her renounced lover (LE 22f).''

Thought is continuous with vegetable growth – uncontrollable, a wilderness rather than a garden, where one cannot foresee the course embodiment will take, where a thought can prefigure a living form. In this regard, the personification of nature in Yeats’ poetic texts does not amount to anthropomorphic objectification, but recognizes the personhood of nature in the very inability to delineate the human self and the human memory from the “greater” communal self and memory of the natural and human environments.\(^{45}\) Not by accident does W. B. Yeats in *Autobiographies* recall his father saying that, espousing the intellectual ideas of the Yeatses on the paternal side and the passion and zest for living of the Pollexfens on the maternal side, that in fathering W. B. Yeats he was proud to have given “a tongue to the sea-cliffs.”\(^{46}\) This, W. B. Yeats assures his reader, is “the only eulogy that could turn my head” (*Au* 23). The image of the sea-cliffs having a tongue shows the poets’ desire to be part of a continuity, an organ and medium to the self expression of the land, the cliffs that form the iconic forehead of Ireland.

The communal, environmental self which emerges in Yeats’s early thought is fed out of many sources, first and foremost the idea of a boundlessly dispersed and resounding divine in Boehme, but just as significantly out of his direct encounters with the Irish landscape, its people and beliefs, as well as his growing enthusiasm for Eastern thought, especially India, through encounters with Mohini Chatterjee,\(^{47}\) a Brahmin and theosophist, whom he meets aged 21 (See also Unterecker 216 and Ross 159) and who kindles a life-long interest in Indian learning, culminating in his translations of the *Ten Principal Upanishads* with Shri Purohit Swami, completed in 1935. When Yeats integrates Boehme and the Upanishads as a foundation for his poetry and drama, he does not do so in order to put “exotic fable in a Celtic cloth” (Wilson [1958] 99). Much rather, he attempts to connect it with uniquely Irish traditions that are already in tune with Non-European teachings:\(^{48}\)

\(^{45}\) Robert Woodrow Langbaum in *The Mysteries of Identity* (1977) observes that “Per Amica Silentia Lunae” “makes the large, bold statement that our unconscious mind lies outside us; hence our identity comes from without” (159). See also Herbert J. Levine *Yeats’ Daimonic Renewal*. (1983) David Fite in *Harold Bloom: The Rhetoric of Romantic Vision* (1985) summarises Bloom’s dislike of Yeats on the grounds of what he perceives to be anti-humanism and an affirmation of Yeats’s “natural religion” (35-54). This thesis will argue that Yeats does not destroy the notion of an interiority of human experience and is not averted against humanity, he merely opens these notions so as to be part of a greater continuity, where the inside becomes porous, so that an interior experience can become continuous with an exterior environment. In this sense, humanity becomes the site of the non-human, it is no longer clearly delineated against animality or the non-human or disincarnate beings inhabiting an environment.

\(^{46}\) R. F. Foster in *The Apprentice Mage* (1997) points out that John Butler Yeats first used this image in a letter to Edward Dowden on Jan. 8th 1884. In his memoirs he writes: “One day while still a school boy he showed us some verses that delighted because of a wild and strange music. I remembered his mother’s family and their puritan grimness and, turning to a friend, said “If the sea-cliffs had a tongue, what a wild babbling there would be! I have given a tongue to the sea cliffs” (542).

\(^{47}\) In 1885 Chaterjee, whom Foster calls “theosophy’s roving ambassador,” visits Dublin (47). Chaterjee’s Vedic teachings and Samâdhi philosophy, searching for the expression of “the supreme in the individual self,” and contemplating the nature of appearances, influenced the poetry and thought of early Yeats some “forty-odd years before his discovery of Berkeley’s metaphysics” (48).

\(^{48}\) According to F. A. C. Wilson, Yeats had come to see “primitive Ireland and India as complimentary” (99).
It pleases me to fancy that when we are turning towards the East, in or out of Church, we are turning not less to the ancient west or north, the one fragment of Pagan Irish philosophy come down, the ‘Song of Amergin,’ seems Asiatic (TPU 11).

Yeats was intensely interested in the idea of continuity between selfhood and nature-as-divine as expressed in the Upanishadic texts. In his *Introduction to Aphorisms of Yôga, by Bhagwân Shree Patanjali* (1938) he notes that in the Upanishads selfhood is described as “one and the same” through its many embodiments. It cannot be reduced to any cognitive message and thus points to poeticty, transformation, and ultimately nature itself:

In the Brihadaranya Upanishad, there is a certain Yadnyawalkya into whose mouth are put profound thoughts, litanies, variations upon a theme: Thunder is the honey of all beings, all beings are the thunder of honey. The bright eternal self that is in thunder, the bright eternal self that is in the voice, are one and the same: that is immortality, that is spirit, that is all’… He had substituted the eternal Self for all the Gods (quoted in Wilson [1958] 97).

Voice and reverberation – which also typify Boehme’s “Hall” – are identified as cosmogonic *Self*-expression. Nature and spirit become inseparable, “God” as a metaphysical object disappears. In this inseparability lies the gist of Yeats’s own ontology as he “ranges through history to find parallels to it in heterodox mysticism,” philosophy and religious teachings (Ibid.). Christianity which “had lost the habit” of such thinking until in Boehme it rediscovered it, however, is never completely discarded (Ibid. 98). For Yeats, the Christian West⁴⁹ and the East are reconcilable: “In the seventeenth century, conscious Samadhi⁵⁰ reappeared in the waking trance of Boehme, when truth fell upon him ‘like a bursting shower’” (*LE* 179).

Phillip L. Marcus observes that Yeats’ personification of nature and his “proud ‘subjective’ identification of the self with the Divine Being” are motivated by the wish “to create a ‘great

⁴⁹ In 1896 Yeats attempts to convince his friend W. T. Horton to join the order of the Golden Dawn but when Horton proves reluctant, seeing too much of a disparity between his own faith and the practices of the order, Yeats outlines a basic notion of immanence as an in-dwelling of the divine as imagination and will which he identifies with Christ. He then urges Horton not to rely on Christ as an “outside” metaphysical object or a purely “emotional religion” but he points him instead to the study of Boehme: “I am convinced however that for you progress lies not in dependence upon a Christ outside yourself but upon the Christ in your own breast — in the power of your own devine will & devine imagination & not in some external will or imagination however devine. We certainly do teach this dependence only on the inner devinity but this is Christianity. The uttermost danger lies for you in emotional religeon, which will sap your will & wreck your self controls. I do not mean that you cannot progress outside the GD but that you should read or study in some unemotional & difficult school. Jacob Boehmen is certainly the greatest of the Christian mystics since the middle ages & none but an athletic student can get to the heart of his mystery” (quoted in George Mills Harper *W.B. Yeats and W.T. Horton* 261f).

⁵⁰ Yeats not only explores Indian thought but also, although much later, Zen teachings, which he received through Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki's *Essays in Zen Buddhism* (See Matthew Gibson: “Satori in Yeats’s “Stream and Sun at Glendalough” 1998). Gibson demonstrates the relevance of satori to later Yeats, esp. in “The Stream and Sun at Glendalough” which concludes the collection *The Winding Stair*. “It was in Suzuki’s book that Yeats found an excuse for seeing the material world as part of God’s ‘splendour,’ since Suzuki explained that Zen, being a form of Mahayana Buddhism, believed all things, sentient and non-sentient, to contain the Buddha-nature, and thus to be capable of Enlightenment. More importantly, Zen taught that the split in our wills between the duality of subject and object, and the further dualism of spirit and matter, were in fact forms of ignorance, and that true wisdom, or Prajna, depended upon our discovering ‘mirror-insight’” (30).
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community’ by bringing the wisdom of ‘older faiths’ to bear upon the present” (Yeats and Artistic Power 186). He links Yeats’ thought with the Irish bardic tradition, specifically, the continuous identification of the speaker with the natural world in the “Song of Amergin. […] Amergin being the archetypal Irish bard” (Ibid.). Marcus refers to this song as the longing for a great community. Yeats participates in a tradition which departs from the mechanistic, scientific view based on differentiating human from non-human, creating subject and object which reduce nature to commodity and resource. This division lies at the root of the human destruction of habitats, which is, albeit unconsciously so, a self-destruction. Modernism challenges this division by consciously taking up traditions that challenge enlightenment views, such as the Cartesian split between res cogitans and res extensa. Boehme, as demonstrated above, is one of the pillars of this Modernist counter-Enlightenment and in the following, Boehme's impact on the German speaking literary tradition will be outlined.

2.1.4. Novalis’ Natursprache – Boehmian Resonances

The teachings of Boehme were widely received among the German as well as the English Romantics. Novalis’ poetry and philosophical thought are shaped by reception of ancient myth and neo-Platonic sources, the experiential-sensual dimension of German Pietism as well as the 16th and 17th century mystics and theosophists Paracelsus and Boehme, especially their ideas of signature (Goodbody Natursprache 29). The notion of indeterminacy shapes Romantic thought and inspires Novalis’ concept of a living language. Within the “Golden Age” which according to his model of history is past and yet to come, humans, animals, plants, minerals and elements all shared the same language (Goodbody 51ff). If, as Axel Goodbody claims, analogy is the central term to Novalis’ poetry, it certainly isn’t a Platonic analogia entis but a comparative approach to understanding all phenomena as emanations of the same cosmogonic principle, which, via analogy emerges to consciousness as common ground, “veiled” within the single phenomena. Micro- and macrocosm, the human self and the world are unified: “Our body is part of this world […]. The former is an abbreviation, the latter an elongation of the same substance.”

In a paper presented at the conference From Ego-to Eco: Imagining Ecocentrism in Literature, Philosophy and Film held in Galway in 2011, Elisabeth Juetten, speaking with reference to Novalis' theoretical texts and his Heinrich von Ofterdingen, observes a shift from a “rhetoric of the living to an aesthetic of life” (manuscript n.p.). Residing in the idea of a living language, Novalis’ “new mythology” can be seen as a strategy “for comprehensively animating poesy, nature, and culture by means of a

51 Paola Mayer gives a good overview of the scholarship concerning Novalis' Boehme reception. She views Novalis' interest in Boehme in the context of his general interest in mysticism and theosophy (Jena Romanticism and Its Appropriation of Jakob Böhme 77).

52 "Unser Körper ist ein Theil der Welt […] das Universum völlig ein Analogon des menschlichen Wesens in Leib, Seele und Geist. Dieses Abbreviatur, jenes Elongatur derselben Substanz” (Novalis Schriften vol. 1, 1837).

53 Elisabeth Juetten’s paper will be published in the forthcoming proceedings of the conference. Her submitted manuscript has no pagination, thus far, but will be cited properly once the collection goes into publication.
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semantics of the indeterminate” (Ibid.). Emerging from this connection of “sensualization” and “movement” in the second half of the 18th century is, according to Juetten, the ideal of a moving, living, self-organized poetry— “the self-moving work of art which, according to August Wilhelm Schlegel, all art is to live up to” (Ibid.). Novalis claims that language is either mechanical, or atomistic, or dynamic. However, he believes that real poetic language ought to be organic, living. 54 Novalis believes that the poet is better suited to understand nature than the scientist, since science merely subjuggates nature via its methods and procedures. Against this subjjugation, Juetten claims, Novalis demands that genuine physics must study the imagination. The language of the Romantics is dynamic, revelatory, and productive rather than a mere utility:

As in Novalis’s magical idealism, language, which is ultimately always dialogical, possesses a creative power that brings to light the original connection between oneself and the world [...] the world is in fact a communication — a manifestation of mind. The hermetic of communication can only be opened up by letting the living language game be (Sich-Überlassen), by letting it in (Sich-Einlassen). By breaking with the regularity of language, language turns against the force of rule-bound mechanisms of the universal and makes a space for embodied life (Ibid.).

This ideal of a living language, for Novalis, is opposed to the notion of a raw, discursive thinker who destroys all living nature and replaces it with an act of mental acrobacy, desiring the infinite machine. 55 Novalis emphasizes that it is not humanity alone who speaks. The universe also speaks as everything expresses infinite speech, what he calls the “law of the signatures.” 56 In that it speaks and is being heard it becomes a human “Other”: Novalis claims that nature expresses humans as a face. In this sense even the rock can become for us a ‘Thou’ in the moment it is being addressed. For Novalis, understanding radiates from the statues and stones of ancient times that the onlooker is covered in a crust of stone that extends inwards. 57

This is the kind of mutual affectedness that Rilke expresses in many of his poems, most significantly in “Archaischer Torso Appollos,” in which “radiance” of subjectivity suddenly erupting from the stone artifact, as that which “sees,” becomes an Other to the human observer

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54 “Unsere Sprache ist entweder mechanisch, atomistisch, oder dynamisch. Die ächt poetische Sprache soll aber organisch, lebendig seyn” (Novalis Schriften vol. 5, 230).
55 “der rohe, discursive Denker ist der Scholastiker [...] er vernichtet alle lebendige Natur um ein Gedankenkunststück an ihre Stelle zu setzen” (Novalis Schriften vol. 5, 205). On the other end of the spectrum we find attempts to make language totally lucid to the rational mind, to reduce it to a mathematical equation. In Leibnitz’ elaborations on “Universalsprache” and Roland Barthes, Criticism and Truth ‘The Science of Literature’ (1987) it is possible to witness the power of this desire for the infinite (language) machine, and therein, the desire for discursive control via the eradication of obscurity, misunderstanding and error. Against this tradition, Romantic thought can be delineated precisely in its insistence on the necessity of concealedness and obscurity.
56 “Der Mensch spricht nicht allein — auch das Universum spricht — alles spricht — unendliche Sprachen. / Lehre von den Signaturen” (Novalis Schriften vol. 3, 267).
57 “Drückt nicht die ganze Natur, so gut wie das Gesicht und die Gebärdner, der Puls und die Farben, den Zustand eines jeden der höheren, wunderbaren Wesen aus, die wir Menschen nennen? Ob jemand die Steine und Gestirne schon verstand, weiß ich nicht, aber gewiß muß dieser ein erhabnes Wesen gewesen seyn. In jenen Statuen, die aus einer untergangenen Zeit der Herrlichkeit des Menschengeschlechts übrig geblieben sind, leuchtet allein ein so tiefer Geist, ein so seltsames Verständniss der Steinwelt hervor und überzieht den sinnvollen Betrachter mit einer Steinrinde, die nach innen zu wachsen scheint” (Novalis Schriften vol. 1, 32).
who is addressed: “you have to change your life” [“Du mußt Dein Leben ändern.”] (W 1 513).
This is often misread as an imperative – but the exclamation mark is missing. Thus, the gaze directed at the observer, effects a compulsory change, which the human subject cannot withstand. Participating in this infinite speaking does not automatically mean cognitive understanding of its mystery. As Juetten points out, the idea that poetic presentation of life transcends human epistemological powers, is central to early Romanticist thought. Thus for Novalis, life also confronts philosophy with its limits:

As a central concept of a ‘semantics of the indeterminate,’ life appears less as an object of nature than as an epistemological category. In this respect, life marks a place in language, which by definition is not able to be fully conceptually penetrated and thus is not fully accessible through language. Because life and language serve as analogues in the aesthetic of life, both of them avoid an objectification that leads, in the experience of time and the symbolism of it in a society, to the loss of a forward-facing open dimension and prevents the other, the new, and the creative from emerging as possibilities (Juetten manuscript n. p.).

This in essence Boehmian tradition influenced the Romantics, Blake and Coleridge. Their reception maintained the idea of the central importance of the imagination and an organic language as part of the process of nature as self-manifestation of the divine. It subsequently reached W. B. Yeats and R. M. Rilke. The Modernists, like the Romantics, seeking to find answers to the “mechanical-rational character of the relationship between mankind humanity and nature,” found inspiration in Boehme’s idea of a unity of divine-natural all-instantiating language (Goodbody 29).

2.5. The Question of Life in German Literature at the End of the 19th Century–Between Totality and Infinity

Many attacks have been levelled against literature of the turn of the century in German criticism, especially after WWII in the course of trying to identify the causes of the upsurge of totalitarianism in the heart of Europe. In the following, some central arguments will be discussed that understand the thinking of an organic unity in literature in the light of totality and an alternative approach will be suggested.

The Copernican shift from anthropocentrism to bio- or eco-centrism in German literature at the turn of the 19th/20th century has been broadly discussed in scholarship albeit with different results. Wolfdietrich Rasch in his article “Aspekte des Lebens um 1900” (1967) observes that the gravitational centre of literature around the turn of the 20th century was the question of life. Rasch, like a majority of commentators, sees fin de siècle literature as a reaction to industrial-
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and technological advancement, tasked with the retrieval of the lost link between the particular
and the universal.\textsuperscript{58}

concepts of all-unity as an escapist and regressive reaction to the shock of mechanical- and
rational thought in philosophy and aesthetics. Against the compartmentalisation and atomisation
effected by the sciences, literature proclaims the “relatedness of all things” [“der Zusammenhang
der Dinge”] as a formula of a totality-consciousness [“Totalitätsbewußtsein”] (214). Thus
maintaining Romantic and 19th-century positions which interpret being in the light of monism,
animism and panpsychism. Gebhard thus tries to outline the philosophical repercussions of the
analysing thought of the Romantics. He finds a continuation of this tradition in the thought of
Schopenhauer, Fechner and Haeckel but also in the turn-of-the-century poets Rilke, George and
Holz performing a shift from dualism to monism.\textsuperscript{59} The axiological meaning of the proclamation
of unity for Gebhard manifests in totality consciousness,\textsuperscript{60} legitimising the part via the whole: Only as functionary and ambassador does the part assume dignity. The totality, however, as an
objective sovereignty endows all phenomena with elevated stature and significance\textsuperscript{61} (9).
According to Gebhard’s assessment, for the 19th century tradition of Romantic ideas, the soul of
the world – of nature, the universe, the atom – is \textit{mirrored} in each separate thing (xiv). Relatedness
and continuity are conceived in accordance with Plato and Cusanus: a plan or concept precedes
all that exists, man occupying an elevated position, vouchsafing the relation of all things (11).
Gebhard sees an aristocracy of nature established as an “introspective prejudice” [“intrinspektives
Präjudiz” xii], which is strongly linked to subjective consciousness, divorced from any form of
social awareness and responsibility (Ibid.). In its flight into homogeny and monistic unity, turn-
of-the-century post-Romantic literature does not offer a flight from human estrangement in the
age of technology nor does it critically interact with the sciences or the dialectics of history,
according to Gebhard. In diverting from dialectics and in proclaiming symmetry, continuity and
relatedness, literature is grasping for totality.\textsuperscript{62} Hierarchised, psychomorphic analogies, as well as
biomorphic, anthropomorphic and technomorphic metaphors serve to imagine continuity - as a
pyramid of being [“Pyramide der Wesen’’], great chain of being [“Kette der Dinge’’] – or

\textsuperscript{58} Benjamin Bühler, however, observes that Rasch’s ascription of this task to literature moves his analysis from
description to prescription (see \textit{Lebende Körper} 15).

\textsuperscript{59} An overwhelming majority of scholars sees “monism” as the prime context for late 19th/early 20th-century
literature. However, O. A. I. Botar and Isabel Wünsche have provided a collection of essays which investigate the
different streams within the era’s thinking about life, the authors explore the various different traditions and
tendencies within \textit{Lebensphilosophie}, such as organicism, vitalism, bio-romanticism and biomorphism (2011).

\textsuperscript{60} On the same note, Charles I. Armstrong views three main criteria derived from Kant’s Third Critique - “totalising
unity, delimitation and interrelationship” - as central to Romantic organicism (\textit{Romantic Organicism: From Idealist
Origins to Ambivalent Afterlife} 16).

\textsuperscript{61} “Das Ganze als das sich selbst Repräsentierende, als objektiv sich ausweisendes Souveränes, stiftet in den Teilen
den Mehrwert einer übers Dasein als ‘Masse emporgehobenen Geltung’” (Gebhard 9).

\textsuperscript{62} “Totalitätsinteresse intentionalisiert sich in diesem zweiten, häufigeren Fall als Behauptung von
‘Zusammenhängen,’ Gegenseitigkeiten, Doppelheiten, Polaritäten. Genauer als es bei Lukács geschrieben, soll hier
am sprachlichen Material der poetischen und philosophischen Texte das ‘irrationalistische Abbiegen von der
Dialektik’ analysiert und in den Kontext einer Bewußtseinsgeschichte des Wissens gestellt werden” (Gebhard
xiii).
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“signatura rerum”\(^{63}\)(5). Gebhard views the practice of analogising as affirmative of the most central supposition of Greek thought as expressed in the *Timaios*: the cosmos, as a structural principle by which the divine demiurge orders the things analogously and evenly (26). This notion of *analogia entis*, according to Gebhard, shapes medieval thought and, functioning as an absolute metaphor, forms the heart of the last, closed system of metaphysics – Leibniz’ Monadology, in which the soul as “miroir de univers” is an entity which subsumes within itself and at the same time mirrors the universe\(^{64}\) (Ibid.).

Jacob Boehme’s transformation of Neoplatonist thought has been identified as a main source of inspiration to the Romantics as well as the two modernists this thesis will investigate. Boehme’s idea of the breaking apart of the ‘perfect sphere’ and the outpouring of the divine into existence lays the foundation for a theory of language and symbol that no longer works along the lines of analogy and totality. The following chapters will analyse Yeats’ and Rilke’s early poetry and prose and differentiate the notion of unity from totality, to deliver evidence that an easy dismissal on the grounds of totality consciousness is not justified.

Monika Fick’s study *Sinnenwelt und Weltseele, der psychophysische Monismus in der Literatur der Jahrhundertwende* (1993) also contextualises Rilke’s poetry as monist. However, in contrast to Gebhard she abstains from any form of judgement (49). *Lebensphilosophie* appears as a context especially for Rilke’s poetry in a variety of critical studies\(^{65}\) – but also Rilke’s special interest in biology and bio-physiology has to be taken into account.\(^{66}\) He was interested in understanding life in detail. In letters to Lou-Andreas Salome he repeatedly expresses the wish to study biology: „How life emerges, how it works in the lower life forms, how it branches out and expands, how it blossoms, how it sustains, I desire to learn all this.”\(^{67}\)

Walther Gebhard critically observes “ego-inflation” in Rilke among other poets of the same generation. The infinite Ego, in Gebhard’s view, tends towards the eradication of self-reflection and ends in self-apotheosis, “making cosmic and universal sites convertible with the poet’s pineal gland” (482). This claim, however, overlooks the most basic assumptions of, for example, Rilke’s Orphism, which entails ego-destruction, as will be argued. An investigation of Rilke’s negotiations of the self-environment relation, the role of death, destitution and Otherness will call into question whether they represent self-totalisation. The mistaken assumption that all-unity, as envisioned by Romantics and modernist poets, can exhaustively be described as human

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\(^{63}\) Especially in this undifferentiated dismissal of Boehme’s concept, Gebhard’s argument loses much relevance to the present study (5).

\(^{64}\) Paul de Man reads the Romantic tradition in the same way based on dualism derived from Plato: “The original entity, which has to contain an infinity of places and an infinity of moments, is necessarily transcendent. Trying to conceive of the natural object in terms of origin leads to a transcendent concept of the Idea[,]” (See de Man “Intentional Structure of the Romantic Image” 68).

\(^{65}\) Wolfgang Riedel who claims that Rilke’s background was in *Lebensphilosophie* (that of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche und Bergson), in which also his enduring interest in biology is rooted - sees *Lebensphilosophie* as a metaphysics of biology [“Metaphysik der Biologie”] aiming at the differentiation of organic and material nature, life and death (“*Homo Natura*“274).

\(^{66}\) Monika Fick points towards the importance of Rilke’s friendship with and reception of the biologist Jakob von Uexküll, whom he met in 1905 (See Fick, *Sinnenwelt und Weltseele* 184-223).

\(^{67}\) “Wie Leben entsteht, wie es wirkt in den geringen Wesen, wie es sich verzweigt und ausbreitet, wie es blüht, wie es trägt, alles das zu lernen verlangt mich.” (Letter from 12. 05. 1904, Rilke/Andreas-Salomé Briefwechsel 162).
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self-totalisation, has led scholars to find here the roots of protofascism.68 It is via this context that ecological thought in the early 20th century is often also condemned as latently fascist.69 Along the lines of fascist thought, the thinking of life as a whole is exposed as interested in empowering people’s sense of national cohesion and destiny and gaining higher significance by connecting the individual with the state’s totality. Rilke and Yeats cannot be simply equated with this desire for totality, which to some degree characterise the poetry being created in the circumference of Lebensphilosophie and occult movements. Their desire for unity is fundamentally counteracted and undermined by “Sprach- Und Erkenntniskritik” (critique of language and knowledge) and by the celebration of poverty and self-destitution rather than stature or grandeur (Manfred Engel Duinesier Elegien 6).

In fact, the performance of epistemological uncertainty, unknowability and self-destitution are key aspects of the poetry in question. Totality and with it the illusion of knowability serve as a device for enabling, empowering and justifying the will to dominate. On the other hand, Yeats's and Rilke's literary modernism emphasises the infinite, hybrid, uncontrollable and unknowable nature of existence. The poets replace a notion of totality with thinking infinity. Structurally, this is what the transposition of the divine from eternal stasis to temporal outpouring into reverberation performs in Jacob Boehme’s writings.

In his seminal essay in 20th century continental philosophy Totality and Infinity, Emmanuel Levinas describes infinity as a principle of being which defies totality because while located within experience, it simultaneously always exceeds it.70 For Levinas, “the revelation of infinity does not lead to the acceptance of any dogmatic content” as thinking remains “this side of objective certitude” (25). Infinity by definition breaks the form that holds it, i.e. thought or poetic figure, “infinity overflows the thought that thinks it […] its very infinition is produced precisely in this overflowing” (Ibid., e.a.). In this sense, infinity cannot be thought as transcendence to which being relates allegorically, but as a:

relation with the absolute other, which is what always overflows thought. The relation with infinity accomplishes experience in the fullest sense of the word […]. Infinity does not first exist and then reveal itself. Its infinition is produced as revelation, as a positing of its idea in me” (Ibid.).

Thus, the “I” becomes the site of “impossible exigencies”: it “contains in itself what it can neither contain nor receive” (Ibid.). Subjectivity, in realising these impossible exigencies, performs the impossible feat of containing the uncontainable, “shattering in every moment the framework of a content that is thought, to cross the barriers of immanence but without this descent into being reducing itself to a concept of descent” (27). Levinas understands “the transcendence of thought” in the Platonic tradition as “despite all its adventures” always being

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68See for example Matthew Buttsworth, Eden and the Fall: The Fallacies of Radical Ecological History (1999), or Janet Biehl and Peter Staudenmaier: Ecofascism: Lessons from the German Experience (1995). However, as Val Plumwood rightly points out, such conflations are based on “shallow analyses of fascism and Nazism” overlooking the ambivalent relationship fascism had with technology, modernity and nature. See Environmental Culture (2013).


70Namely, in encountering the Other as autrui – „the personal Other“ (24)
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“on the way home” like Ulysses, whereas infinity-thinking does not foster hopes for such a return. The notion of infinity without the position of a transcendent realm of ideas that always remains inviolably beyond frees the thinking of being from predetermination and teleology and enables us to understand symbols as participation in being not representation (Ibid.). “The overflowing of the idea by its ideatum moves consciousness,” but this relation of consciousness to overflowing, in Levinas’ conception, is not fully knowable to the consciousness inquiring into this relation (see 28). The thinking of infinity forestalls the desire for total lucidity, as the overflowing of infinity happens in “nightly events” (Ibid.). In the following, infinity and unknowability rather than the grasp for totality will be traced as the principle thought underlying one of the central terms Rilke developed: Weltinnenraum.

2.6. Rilke’s Environmental Concept of Weltinnenraum

Rilke’s interest in unorthodox spiritual texts and practices had thoughts of unity and continuity of being at its centre. The foundation for this thought can be found in Boehme’s cosmology of the im/manifest divine. Gísli Magnússon’s Dichtung als Erfahrungsmetaphysik: esoterische und okkultistische Modernität bei R.M. Rilke (2009) is the most recent and in many ways most comprehensive elaboration on the influence of occult and esoteric discourses on Rilke’s oeuvre.71 It is not only a spiritual dimension of symbolism (“spirituelle Deutung des Symbolismus”), that Rilke expresses to Marie von Thurn und Taxis in a letter on 13th April 1915 (Magnússon 155). Comforting the Countess in her fears and apprehensions about her son having gone to war, he insists that her son experiences everything, including the world war, from within the ground of being [Wesensgrund].72 Rilke sees humans connected by a deep, inner numinous something [“Etwas”] in which all human beings partake. Magnússon is right in observing that this notion of the divine ground within is essentially derived from Boehme but has its roots also in Rilke’s reception of Indian philosophy.73 Magnússon can also be followed when he observes, in the light of this letter,
that Rilke’s aesthetic creations are intrinsically linked to this understanding of an in-dwelling divine that permeates existence and signification with a larisch-spiritual essence (“larisch-spirituelle Essenz”) (156). Magnússon sees Rudolf Kassner’s claim (that Rilke wanted to overcome poetry with poetry) directly linked with the spiritual quality that Rilke tries to achieve via his lyrical alchemy (“spirituelle Qualität […] die Rilke durch seine lyrische Alchemie erreichen will”). (155)

He furthermore rightly argues that Rilke’s poetry defies the restraints of customary definitions of symbolism as art pour l’art. Indeed, as early as 1934, Eberhard Kretzschmar in his dissertation Rilke als Dichter des Seins observes the centrality of Rilke’s interest in the question of being. But the direct relevance of the mystic, theosophical and esoteric traditions for this quest has only emerged slowly and fairly recently in scholarship. Liselotte Richter points out the proximity between Rilke’s cosmology and Boehme, whom Rilke had, curiously, read in the French translations of Louis Claude de St. Martin (Richter Schöpferischer Glaube im Zeitalter der Angst 107). These translations exerted also a considerable influence on e.g. Maurice Maeterlinck and Henri Bergson (Ibid.). Boehme’s idea of all-pervading cosmogonic forces that work within the divine, the realm of matter, the logosphere and the imagination, alike, shape Rilke’s understanding of language, the symbol and the imagination. This world-forming, theophanic understanding of the imagination is tangible from within the early writings of Rilke through to his very last. In his famous letter to Withold von Hulewicz of 15 November 1925, Rilke describes the imagination as the site or process which allows humans to realise the ethical imperative to transpose the perishing world of finite beings and natural phenomena into a world internity via embodied experience, memory, and poetry. Most translators favour “world-inner-space,” “worldinnerspace” (Ryan [2004] 163) or “cosmic inner space” (Marcel 135). But in a strict sense this is not what the original, paradoxical notion implies. ‘Weltraum’ – the German term for cosmos and universe, as a vast spatio-temporal extension is interjected with the word “innen” - “inside,” which adds the experiential dimension of embodiment but retains the duo-unity of time and space of the original word. The following chapters will elaborate in more detail how Rilke develops and applies this notion, but what is most centrally important is the fact that Rilke is not envisioning an ego inflation which devours existence so that suddenly everything is inside and accessible to human consciousness – thus far the superficial treatment to which Peter Sloterdijk subjects Rilke’s concept. But it is a re-attribution of an “experiential interiority” that is rent open

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74 My own attempt at rendering “larisch” in English: ‘pertaining to the Lares’ – the household deities of the Romans. The word is used to denote the divine dwelling in the profane world of everyday objects and landscapes.

75 Boehme uses astrological symbols such as Saturn, Jupiter, Mars and alchemical elements and delimits their significance to embrace principles of emanation of the divine immanent. “Heavenly, eternal Mercury” is thus the “word” which the father speaks “in the ignition of his word” and the word, in turn, is the “worker and creator” of all figurations within the iteration of being: “Er ist in seiner geistlichen Eigenschaft / der unterscheider der Worte / sinnen und sprachen / Es stehet geschrieben / Gott habe alle Dinge durch sein Wort gemacht / der himlische ewige M e r c u r i u s ist sein Wort / daß der Vatter in entzündung seines Liechtes außspricht / und daß außgesprochene ist seine Weißheit / und das Wort ist der Arbeiter und macher der Formungen in der außgesprochenen Weißheit” (Boehme De Signatura 64).

76 In The World Interior of Capital: Towards a Philosophical Theory of Globalization, 2013 [orig. Im Weltinnenraum des Kapitals, 2003] Peter Sloterdijk in lieu of a proper interpretation confines himself to breaking this complex concept down to “world-experience typical of primary narcicism” (197). Claiming that “[i]n this mode of experience the horizon is encountered not as a boundary and transition to the outside but rather a frame to hold the inner world[…] Let us note that the poet gave the proposition ‘in’ the unusual function of affirming the ego as an integral vessel or
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to the spatial-temporal expanse of the universe and transposed into pure duration. So that suddenly the world as experiential inside becomes rent ‘open’ to the perishable beings and momentary phenomena. This most private space of the finite human interior is given over to the entirety of the universe which surpasses and via infinition destroys the experiential embodied form. “Internity” is meant to transport the spatio-temporal direction and location of “in” and combine it with the notion of duration inherent in the word eternity, which is not limited by an ego-constitutional, spatial or temporal horizon. This is how, as will be elaborated through the following chapters, Rilke’s notion will be understood. Taken together, what emerges is a shared, porous and uncertain time-space extension which passes into and through embodiment. Rilke formally applies this term first in 1914 in his poem “Es winkt zu Fühlung fast aus allen Dingen”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>From out of all things (almost)</th>
<th>From out of all things (almost)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>it beckons to sensation.</td>
<td>it beckons to sensation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It wafts from every turning point:</td>
<td>It wafts from every turning point:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>be aware/remember!</td>
<td>be aware/remember!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A day we passed by as a stranger</td>
<td>A day we passed by as a stranger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decides, in the future, to be /to make a gift</td>
<td>Decides, in the future, to be /to make a gift</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who counts our gain/revenue? Who divides</td>
<td>Who counts our gain/revenue? Who divides</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>us from the old, the past years?</td>
<td>us from the old, the past years?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What have we experienced since the beginning,</td>
<td>What have we experienced since the beginning,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other than that one recognises itself in the</td>
<td>other than that one recognises itself in the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other?</td>
<td>other?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other than that the indifferent warms up in</td>
<td>Other than that the indifferent warms up in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>touch with us?</td>
<td>touch with us?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O house, o slanting pasture, o evening light,</td>
<td>O house, o slanting pasture, o evening light,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suddenly you almost come to be/[bring it to</td>
<td>Suddenly you almost come to be/[bring it to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the face</td>
<td>the face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And stand erect at us, embracing and embraced.</td>
<td>And stand erect at us, embracing and embraced.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Through all beings the one space extends/</td>
<td>Through all beings the one space extends/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>suffices:</td>
<td>suffices:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internity. The birds fly silently</td>
<td>Intenity. The birds fly silently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>through us.</td>
<td>through us.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O, I, who want to grow,</td>
<td>O, I, who want to grow,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>look out, and the tree grows inside me.</td>
<td>look out, and the tree grows inside me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I care, and in me there is the house.</td>
<td>I care, and in me there is the house.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I guard myself and in me is guardedness/shelter</td>
<td>I guard myself and in me is guardedness/shelter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beloved, whom I became: leaning on me/</td>
<td>Beloved, whom I became: leaning on me/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in touch with me rests</td>
<td>in touch with me rests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beautiful creation’s image and cries itself</td>
<td>Beautiful creation’s image and cries itself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>away/cries itsfill.</td>
<td>away/cries itsfill.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Two things are immediately apparent in reading this poem: The centrality of prosopopeia, the odel apostrophe of nature, and the repeated use of ambiguous words, which make varying, even contradictory readings possible. The use of ambiguity in this poem is crucial. The environmental

 universal place[,]” It is questionable whether Sloterdijk read Rilke at all or whether he just needed a catchy phrase for a chapter heading, see: “The Capitalist World Interior: Rainer Maria Rilke almost meets Adam Smith” (194-210).

77 This co-oincidence of Weltninnenraum, as Anthony Phelan suggests “can only ever be utterly uncertain” because it is a permeable, “psychic continuum, in which each creature and thing possesses a degree of sensibility. […] We are to transcend the boundaries of self to reach empathy with all being” (“Rilke and His Philosophical Critics” 183; Görner, “Rilke a Biographical Exploration” 14).
phenomena, house, pasture and evening light are addressed as first person singular, and “almost become a face / bring it to the face.” If we decide to read the latter option what is brought to the face? Suddenly, in the act of attempting to translate, the incongruous relationship of the German ‘es’ and the English ‘it’ highlight a difficulty in understanding action without an agent. The use of ‘it’ in describing passive progressive events, as in ‘it is raining,’ deprives us of an agent. Hence when “it beckons” from out of all things the agent is the beckoning itself, extended by the imperative at the end of the second line. The poem begins with attesting that from within all things “almost” sensation is beckoned as an imperative to consciousness and awareness, but also as a memento, Gedenken denotes both the memory of the dead or of dying as in memento mori. This simple abbreviation “Gedenk!” functions as a verbal stop sign, comparable to de Man’s “Pause Traveller!” Rilke’s memento, however, is also a call to consciousness: Consider how the significance assigned to experience is altered over time – a certain apparently meaningless day can in the future turn into a gift. The experienced day is freed from being entombed in an unalterable past and instead is imbued with personhood, the power to “decide” to become a gift in the future. Temporal experience, past and future are in a dialogic actualisation of one realising itself in the other. But the perceived beckoning to awareness is not fully ascertained, the “almost” pushes the entire process into the realm of uncertainty, as does the rhetorical question, prolonged through two stanzas: Rilke’s observations about perception are put in front of the reader as a question so they are open to contradiction.

The indifferent exterior becomes warm when/where it is touching us. The poem performs the “turning” from indifferent phenomenon into personhood on the spot: Suddenly house, pasture and evening light are invoked with a three-fold odal “O” – the world becomes an ‘almost-face’ where it is in touch with us, humanly perceived. The sudden occurrence [“auf einmal!”] signals the immediacy and disruptive quality of kairos in this turning from what was exterior and strange into what is recognisable as human. But identity is never simply affirmed. As in M.C. Escher’s tessellations one comes into being through the contours of the other, thus in the poem the exterior world and the human body are “embracing and embraced” –the consistent a-b-b-a rhyme structure formally realises this embrace.

![M. C. Escher, Mosaic I 1951](image)

Rilke takes up this idea of a unity of antitheses that form each other’s contour again in the 4th of his Duineser Elegien (1922):
Rilke’s is a poetic exploration of the senses which displays the unknowability of the agent of sensation: consciousness disappears into that which one is conscious of. That which comes to consciousness is not knowable either. It shows itself as an unknowable agency: “man ist sehr deutlich mit uns” implies that we are patients of experience, being shown clearly, but it is not certain who or what is doing the showing. Rilke encourages to read the unity of a light figure that only becomes visible at the contour of its dark anti-figure as an agreement with both death and life, regardlessly. In fact, as in “Es winkt zu Fühlung” the “beautiful image of creation” is paradoxically consuming itself away in “crying” its heart out where it touches the human contour, self-realisation and -destitution are one and the same within the ambiguous setting of the world as image wasting away at the human contour, crying its fill/crying itself away [“weint sich aus”].

In “Es winkt zu Fühlung,” Rilke also makes clear that through the extension of perception, the human self becomes a permeable space, a tree can grow inside and birds can transmigrate. In fact, the birds are “signed into” human perception in very much the same way in which for Boehme the signature of each being is signed into another via reverberation. As temporal activity in the third stanza becomes transposed into an attributive noun the active verbs of caring, guarding, sheltering turn into the attributes of guardedness, shelter and house. The human self has become hospitable, not engulfing. Thus, the self, in its capacity to shelter and house the world in sensory perception is transposed into a site where the ethical imperative of transforming the exterior world into internity can be realised.

Boehmean logics and language are at play when Rilke understands the transformative work of the imagination as part of the natural and cosmic processes in the material world, via the

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78 In a letter to Witold Hulewicz dated 13, November 1925, he suggests that “Agreeing to life and to death proves to be the same thing in the elegies. What is being experienced and celebrated in the elegies is the notion that to admit to the one and not to the other would be a limitation that excludes all infinity” [“Lebens- und Todesbejahung erweist sich als eines in den Elegien. Das eine zuzugeben ohne das andere, sei, so wird hier erfahren und gefeiert, eine schließlich alles Unendliche ausschließende Einschränkung”]. Mark here the affirmation of the inclusion of the infinite by admitting to death via double negation (Rilke Briefe aus Muzot 1921-1926, 332).

79 The signature of animals is substantiating their presence as a disruption of the human: the bat’s trace rips through the porcelain of the evening in the 8th elegy, like a crack runs through a cup [“wie wenn ein Sprung durch eine Tasse geht”] (W 2 225). A bird flies through the raised eyes of the “young dead” in the 10th elegies, “and traces visibly far and wide the written image of his lonesome cry” [“weithin das schriftliche Bild seines vereinsamten Schreis.”] (W 2 232).
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idea of “vibration” and “reverberation” which are functionally integral to being and communication. In this sense it becomes possible for Rilke to envision the power of the imagination as world-creating. In his oft-quoted letter to Withold Hulewicz, on 13th of November 1925, shortly before the end of his life, he describes the continuous transposition of the beloved visible and tangible into the invisible vibration and excitedness/arousal/perturbation of our nature, which introduces new frequencies into the vibrating sphere of the universe. (Since the different fabrics in the universe are only varying vibrational exponents, in this way we are not merely preparing intensities of a mental nature but, who knows, new bodies, metals cosmic nebulae and constellations.) And this activity is supported and driven in a unique way by the ever quicker vanishing of so much of the visible world, which will not ever be replaced. For our grandparents, even, a ‘house’ or a ‘well’, a familiar tower, yea, their garments, their coat were still infinitely more and infinitely more companionable; almost everything was a vessel in which they found the human and into which they saved more of the human.

Rilke states the ethical obligation to transform the vanishing earth, its beings and things, into “internity.” As for Yeats in ‘Anima Mundi’ thoughts were envisioned as continuous with organic growth, here the imagination has the power to create bodies, substances and entire cosmic regions. At the same time the above passage reminds of the perishing of visible things. In the same letter Rilke deplores the way in which items of everyday use are losing their meaning with mass production.

Taking things into the Weltinnerenraum is understood as a labour of love no less than a creative visionary effort. Already in 1902 in a lecture on Maurice Maeterlinck in Bremen on the occasion of the opening of the play “Schwester Beatrix,” which Rilke directed, he is outlining his hope for unity that in the famous letter to Hulewicz, 23 years later culminates in one of the most

Death and life as well as past and future are a continuity, which Rilke imagines as a circulation (more on this in chapter four). He writes to Hulewicz: “The true Gestalt of life is extending through both realms, the blood of the greatest circulation runs through both: There is neither a here nor a beyond but the great unity of a realm whose depth and influence we share with the dead and the coming, without limit” (“Die wahre Lebensgestalt reicht durch beide Gebiete, das Blut des größten Kreislaufs treibt durch beide: Es gibt weder ein Diesseits noch ein Jenseits sondern die große Einheit. [Die Einheit] jenes Reiches […] dessen Tiefe und Einfluß wir überall und unabgegrenzt mit den Toten und Künftigen teilen” (Rilke Briefe aus Muzot 1921 – 1926, 372).

die fortwährenden Umsetzungen des geliebten Sichtbaren und Greifbaren in die unsichtbare Schwingung und Erregtheit unserer Natur, die neue Schwingungszahlen einführt in die Schwingungs-Sphären des Universums. (Da die verschiedenen Stoffe im Universum nur verschiedene Schwingungsexponenten sind, so bereiten wir, in dieser Weise, nicht nur Intensitäten geistiger Art vor, sondern wer weiß, neue Körper, Metalle, Sternnebel und Gestirne.) Und diese Tätigkeit wird eigentümlich gestützt und gedrängt durch das immer raschere Hinschwinden von so vielen Sichtbaren, das nicht mehr ersetzt werden wird. Noch für unsere Großeltern war ein ‚Haus’ ein ‚Brunnen’, ein ihnen vertrauter Turm, ja ihr eigenes Kleid ihr Mantel, unendlich mehr, unendlich vertraulicher; fast jedes Ding ein Gefühl in dem sie Menschliches vorfinden und Geschichtliches hinzuparte” (Rilke Briefe aus Muzot 1921 – 1926, 335).

In his lecture on Maurice Maeterlinck (“Maeterlinck” [1902]) Rilke further describes the becoming-internal of the world, quoting the opening of “La sagesse et la destine” in which Maeterlinck observes that human beings, in a way, experience only what they wish for, because although they have only a minute impact on events outside themselves, they have a boundless influence on what becomes of these events inside. The point of gravity in this possession of the moment is not translocated from the unknown to the known but from the mystery that surrounds us to the mystery that we carry inside us (“Der Schwerpunkt der Geschehnisse wird damit nicht aus dem Unbekannten in Bekanntes verlegt, erwechselt nur den Ort, erfindet sich nicht mehr in dem Mysterium, das uns umgeht, sondern in demjenigen, das wir in uns tragen”) (W 4 223).
beautiful instances of modernist ecocentric personification: “We are the bees of the invisible. We gather desperately the honey of the visible into the great golden hive of the invisible” [‘Wir sind die Bienen des Unischtbaren. Nous butinons éperdument le miel de visible, pour l’accumuler dans la grande ruche d’or de l’Invisible’]. Emphatically breaking into French, Maeterlinck’s language, without directly quoting him, this statement already performs transposition, structurally. Humanity is metaphorically identified with bees and bees’ activity – melissomorphism of the human rather than anthropomorphism of the bees takes place. Rilke confesses his fascination with Maeterlinck’s book on bees, La Vie des Abeilles (1901), quoting it in his lecture. He sees a parallel between Maeterlinck’s ‘longing faith’ in a common major task of humanity and his interest in ‘another community’ he had watched through the glass wall of a bee hive. There, Maeterlinck found the motions of another world, a world whose “founding/originary thought is no less mysterious and no less known than the truth hiding at the foundation/ground of our lives.”

Rilke admires Maeterlinck’s abstinence from burdening the bees by ascribing to them human intentions. He praises Maeterlinck’s humility, who abnegates human superiority and claims that the “miracle of every small, simple fact is more exalted than the most wondrous supposition we could attach to it.” Maeterlinck, in Rilke’s perception, knows only that “their truth is not inferior and no less eternal than all great truths” and that this truth is not tied to one single phenomenon, one single bee but is spread among all “as a light emanating from these thousands of minuscule energies to illumine their dark paths on which their small powers are ascending and descending.”

Maeterlinck names the mystérium of the bees Esprit de la ruche, the spirit of the hive. Rilke sums up what Maeterlinck might have felt most acutely in the face of the bees: that humanity is also working on a future which will be happier than the present because it is based on a “unity of soul”: “because the souls will pervade each other more and more through the darkness of our intellect and our passions, which divide us and because in the light of the souls we can better communicate and help each other, because with the souls a deep and great communality rises in

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83 Franka Köpp Axiomatisierung in der poetischen Produktion (2003) insists that Rilke’s notion of the invisible is deliberately vague and lacking in contour, but has to be read as closely related to his concept of Weltinnenraum as Rilke describes the imperative of earth – to become invisible in us (184f).

84 Es ist gewiß kein Zufall, daß Maeterlinck, der so sehnsüchtig an eine gemeinsam große Aufgabe des Menschengeschlechtes glaubt, schon als Knabe aufmerksam das Leben einer anderen Gemeinsamkeit betrachtet und verfolgt hat, daß er jahrzehntelang Gelegenheit hatte, durch die Glaswände eines Bienenstockes die Bewegungen einer anderen Welt zu begleiten, einer Welt, deren Grundgedanke nicht weniger geheimnisvoll ist und nicht weniger unbekannt als die Wahrheit, die sich auf dem Grunde unseres Lebens verborgen hält” (W I 226).

85 “Nirgends macht sich eine Überlegenheit des menschlichen Geistes fühlbar, überall spricht sich die Überzeugung aus, daß das Wunderbare jeder kleinen einfachen Tatsache größer und erhobener ist als die wunderbarsten Vermutungen, die wir daran knüpfen können” (W I 227).

86 “Mit einer Demut ohnegleichen geht er auch hier wieder der Wahrheit nach, für welche diese kleinen Wesen leben, und er weiß von ihr nur, daß sie nicht geringer ist und nicht weniger ewig als alle großen Wahrheiten […] auch hier ist sie wieder an keine bestimmte Erscheinung gebunden, sondern über alles verteilt wie ein Licht, das aus diesen tausend winzigen Energien ausstrahlt, um die dunklen Wege zu beleuchten, auf denen ihre kleinen Kräfte auf- und niedersteigen. Er wagt nicht, in das Mystrium einzudringen, aber er erfaßt es, indem er ihm einen Namen giebt: Esprit de la ruche” (W I 227).
2. Origins and Contexts of Rilke’s and Yeats’s Environmental Imagination

us, from which no-one will be excluded and which has to seize us.”

Rilke envisions a vast and deep all-embracing communality ascending which “has to seize us like the Esprit de la ruche seizes the hive, so that one day it will be possible to speak of an Esprit de la terre embracing and unifying all.”

This “unity of souls” is never a purely human unity, as the following chapters will make clear. It embraces the animals, the living and the dead. Perhaps the clearest example of how Rilke envisions this mutual pervadedness of souls can be found in his tenth elegy of the Duineser Elegien. Here we follow a man who has recently died and a personified “lament” through the world as it figures in “death consciousness.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Naht aber Nacht, so wandeln sie leiser, und bald mondets empor, das über Alles wachende Grab-Mal. Brüderlich jenem am Nil, der erhabene Sphinx -: der verschwiegene Kammer Antlitz. Und sie staunen dem krönlichen Haupt, das für immer, schweigend, der Menschen Gesicht auf die Waage der Sterne gelegt.</th>
<th>As night approaches, they tread more softly, and soon, it moon-rises: the all-guarding sepulchre. Brother to that of the Nile, the sublime Sphinx -: the secretive chamber’s face. And they are gaping at the crowned head, foreversecretively silent, it had placed the human face into the scale of the stars.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nicht erfaßt es sein Blick, im Frühtod schwindeln. Aber ihr Schau, hinter dem Pschent-Rand hervor, scheucht es die [Eule. Und sie, streifend im langsamen Abstrich die Wange entlang, jene der reifesten Rundung, zeichnet weich in das neue Totengehör, über ein doppelt aufgeschlagenes Blatt, den unbeschreiblichen Umriß. (IF 2 232f)</td>
<td>His gaze cannot grasp it, in young-death still dizzily swaying. But their looking from behind the rim of the crown, startles [the owl. And she, brushing in slow down-stroke along the cheek the one of the ripest rounding, inscribing softly in the newly-dead hearing over a doubly unfolded folio, the indescribable contour.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The last of his elegies is heavily influenced by Rilke’s experience in Egypt, where he had waited for days in vain for any significant occurrence and then, one evening, lodged between the paws of the Sphinx he was moved by the sound that an owl made when it flew startled from behind the head of the Sphinx and brushed the stone with its wing. On February 1st, 1914 he writes about his Egyptian experience to Magda von Hattingberg:

This face had adopted the habits of the universe, single parts of its looking and smiling were destroyed, but the ascensions and descents of the skies had

87 “Vielleicht empfand er in diesem Augenblick deutlicher als je, daß auch wir immer an einer Zukunft arbeiten, die glücklicher sein wird und reifer als unsere Zeit. Glücklicher, weil die Seele immer mehr durchdringen werden durch das Dunkel unseres Verstandes und unserer Leidenschaft, das uns voneinander trennt, und weil wir im Lichte der Seele uns besser verständigen und besser helfen werden. Denn mit den Seele steht eine tiefe und große Gemeinsamkeit in uns auf, von der keiner ausgeschlossen ist und die sich unserer bemächtigen muß” (IF 1 227).

88 “[... ] wie der Esprit de la ruche sich des Bienenkorbes bemächtigt hat, so daß es einmal möglich sein wird, von einem Esprit de la terre zu reden, der alle umfaßt und vereinigt und die Kräfte ordnet, die sich jetzt noch widersprechen und aufheben”(IF 1 227f).

89 Rilke elaborates on this in the letter to Witold Hulewicz, writing that we are not in actual Egypt but in Egypt reflected in “the desert clarity of the dead’s consciousness” “[in der Wüstenklarheit des Todesbewußtseins]” (Rilke Briefe aus Muzot 1921-1926, 337).
reflected outlasting emotions into it….it took a while until they (the eyes) outlasted, grasped this being, until mouth, cheeks and forehead were achieved/exerted, at which moon light and moon shadow passed from expression to expression. How many times had my eye attempted this explicit cheek, it was rounding up there so slowly [...] And there! As I was just observing it again, I was taken into confidence in an unexpected way, I was permitted to know it, to experience it in the perfect sensation of its rounding. I only understood a few moments later what had happened. Just think about this: from behind the protrusion of the royal head cloth at the Sphinx’s head an owl had risen and had brushed the face slowly, indescribably audible in the pure depth of the night with its soft flight and now, on my hearing, incredibly clarified by the hours of nightly silence, the contour of this cheek was inscribed, as if by a miracle. 

The face of the Sphinx is partly destroyed and its expression is therefore visibly attributable to the elements. The following chapters will explore in greater detail Rilke’s attempt to describe humanity as a half-obliterated contour, as a condition which is partly instantiated by what is non-human: the elements, the animals, death. It is the owl which gives Rilke the perfect impression and understanding of the Sphinx, because it “signs into his being” the “indescribable” mystery. The contour of the cheek, in another sudden realisation is “given” into the poet’s understanding. In the 10th elegy, this face is hovering on the verge of death and life as an “all-observing/guarding sepulchre.” As a face of a death-chamber which is actively silent. The consciousness of the young dead is the privileged site into which the human face is inscribed. Weltinnenraum – internity appears as continuity and unity of being that becomes tangible in mutual inscription and in an only partial differentiation of states of beings and life forms. The following chapters will trace the emergence of this unity through Rilke’s early works.


91. Wolfgang Janke observes that it wasn’t only the sublime architecture of Egypt which moved Rilke but a cult of the dead and a realm of the dead that was grown into one without the Platono-Christian chasm between this world and the next [“ein Totenkult und Totenreich das mit dem Leben verwachsen war ohne den platonisch-christlichen Graben zwischen Diesseits und Jenseits”] (Archaischer Gesang 270).
3. The Environmental Self in R.M. Rilke’s and W. B. Yeats’s Early Poetry and Criticism

3. THE ENVIRONMENTAL SELF IN R.M. RILKE’S AND W. B. YEATS’S EARLY POETRY AND CRITICISM

3.1. “Who of us two now is you?”: The Unsurveyable Body of Nature in R. M. Rilke’s Early Poetry and Thought

At the beginning of his career, as Monika Fick observes, Rilke has no trouble combining all-encompassing nature and the utterly unknowable, arriving at a “great and dark unity.” Although some of the dynamics of this unity can be elucidated, Fick can be followed when she proclaims that:

[…] young Rilke trusts in the subterranean unity of man and nature. His is an emphatic notion of nature. Nature is seen as an overpowering force, which in its sheer size and abundance also forms the strange and the other. As such, nature is related to the unconscious (see footnote 92).

In very much the same vein Rilke writes about the creative, generative power of the artist as of that of a tree:

Because the artists are reaching much further down into the warmth of all becoming, other juices are rising to their fruits. They are the wider circulation into the channels of which ever new beings place themselves […] nobody can survey the boundaries of their being.

The artist here is described as a vegetative organism in which creativity emerges. Rilke turns away from understanding artistic creation as an exclusively conscious willed activity and develops visions of an ecological unity. Even in his earliest poetry, which is widely dismissed on account of inferiorities of style, this strive towards outlining unity is tangible. In the following his earliest works will be analysed with regard to the emergence of his ecological vision of unity. It will be necessary to show how the artistic triumph of his later poetry is intrinsically linked with these early works and is an outcome of a continuous engagement with questions of being and in so far a fruitful result of rather than a counterpoint to his early works.

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94 See Yeats’s idea of the body as the locus of creation. Michael O’Neill sees Yeats’s idea of ‘growing’ art as related to William Morris’s (founder of the Arts and Crafts Movement, who greatly inspired young Yeats) ideas: “Only in the fallen world of capitalism must one labour to be beautiful: for Morris beauty is a right which socialism will restore” (O’Neill 79). In The Trebling of the Veil (1922) Yeats praises Morris for imagining “new conditions for making and doing” (As 133). I do not agree that these new conditions are sought in “physical perfection” but rather in organic process. Art in Yeats as well as in Rilke is centred around process and the embodied condition rather than perfection (O’Neill 79).
3. The Environmental Self in R.M. Rilke’s and W. B. Yeats’s Early Poetry and Criticism

3.1.1. Larenopfer (1895) – Personification of Nature and the Ecological Uncanny

Although it is his second collection of poetry, Larenopfer is generally viewed as the opening of Rilke’s poetic oeuvre.\(^5\) It engages with both the city-scape and life of Prague.\(^6\) I agree with Judith Ryan that the poems in Larenopfer “forge an aesthetic of marginality” (Rilke Modernism and Poetic Tradition 22). Rilke, as a German in Prague, is a permanent resident and yet an outsider. Thus, he is not “looking at home from the perspective of a tourist,” as Judith Ryan suggests, but from the perspective of a foreigner who cannot easily merge with the place he inhabits.\(^7\) Many poems such as “An der Ecke” are based on recurrence: An old woman coming each winter, frying chestnuts, whom the speaker calls “meine Alte,” revealing familiarity as well as distance\(^8\) (W 1 30).

Larenopfer encapsulates Rilke’s weariness. He is fed up with Prague, as he reveals in a letter to Valerie von David-Rhonfeld, his sweetheart of the Prague years.\(^9\) Her uncle, Julius Zeyer, is mentioned as most noticeable influence on Rilke during this time. To him he reads his poems and through him he encounters the idea of pan-Slavism and got a glimpse of the Czech language and Slavonic myth and culture (See Tavis Rilke’s Russia 1). He thus received an early notion of their relation with Russia, a relation which later became a central reference point for his art and thought: “Two Slavic lands, two ethnic neighbours formed opposite poles in the psychological landscape of his imagined biography”\(^10\) (Ibid.). He did not see himself belong to either. Larenopfer is not so much a traditional offering to the Lares, the household gods,\(^11\) as a reckoning with

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\(^5\) Anna-Luise Langner points out that Rilke, unhappy with Leben und Lieder (1894), retracted this first “youthfully naïve” book from the market, himself, in 1898 (Langner Der Begriff der Liebe bei Rainer Maria Rilke 7).

\(^6\) Rilke’s Prague years are well documented and contextualised by Peter Demetz in René Rilke’s Prager Jahre (1953) and “Noch einmal René Rilke’s Prager Jahre” (1998). Demetz sees represented in Larenopfer the baroque Prague under the rule of Rudolph II. Rudolph turned Prague into the golden city: arts, sciences, and magic flourished at his court (See Demetz 13). However, all we see of material baroque Prague in Larenopfer are architectural traces.

\(^7\) Frank Baron claims that Rilke found himself in a “linguistic diaspora” and in “literary provinces” (Rilke, the Alchemy of Alienation 41).

\(^8\) For Schoolfield the personae of Larenopfer “smack as much of patronization as of sentimental devotion to Czechdom” (Schoolfield Young Rilke and his Time 70).

\(^9\) In a letter to Valerie (31. 8. 1895) from Ostseebad Mistroy Rilke writes: “Wald und See haben ihre Zaubernetze um mich gezogen [...] Ich fürchte mich vor Prag und seinen rußigen, staubigen Gassen u. vor meinem Zimmer” (“Forest and lake have drawn their magic nets about me. I am afraid of Prague and its sooty, dusty lanes and my room”) (quoted in: Scharffenberg / Stahl “Sieh dir die Liebenden an” 208).

\(^10\) Rilke inhabits a precarious position as a German in Bohemia and later Prague. The experience of cultural in-betweeness of his early years manifests as the refusal to identify with any nationality. I read Rilke’s stance along the lines of Jahan Ramazani’s reading of Yeats’ in The Hybrid Muse: Postcolonial Poetry in English (2001). He emphasizes that “[assessing] hybridity, [...] the cultural in-betweeness of writers who inhabit, explore and articulate the after-colonial relationships between the imposed culture of the colonizer and the native culture of the colonized [...] is potentially more responsive to the aesthetic complexity of literary texts” (36).

\(^11\) “die guten alten Hausgötter der Römer” “the good old household gods of the Romans” (Eppelsheimer 11).
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human certainty and homeliness, with the cosiness of belonging, which creates habitual blindness in those who inhabit confidently their own history and metaphysics.

The personification of nature throughout the whole collection blurs the boundaries between human and non-human. The personification of city-scapes in Larneopfer ranges from the mock-picturesque equation of the church towers looking up to Hradschin “as the children to their dear father” [“wie die Kinderschar zum / teueren Vater”] to the eerie and monstrous (W 1 12). When he imagines the chapel of St. Wenceslas with all its glistening semi-precious stones:

| Zauberhell wie ein Mirakel       | Magically illumined like a miracle |
| glänzt der Raum im Lichtgetänzel| the room glistens with flirtatious lights |
| unterm golden Tabernakel         | under the golden tabernacle         |
| ruht der Staub des alten Wenzel. (W 1 14) | the dust of old Wenceslas rests. |

Parody and irreverence are obvious in these lines: the antiquated and pompous sounding Mirakel (instead of “Wunder”) rhyming with Tabernakel (the consecrated space on the altar in which the host of the Communion, the 'body of Christ' is kept, but which in Rilke’s case entombs the dust of the church's patron Saint), appear in the flirtatious, not-so-serious dancing of light. The second stanza assigns agency to the building:

| Ganz von Leuchten bis zum Scheitel | Filled with gleaming to the crown |
| ist die Kuppel voll, die holhe;     | Is the hollow dome |
| und der Goldglast sieht sich etel   | and the gold glare spies vainly |
| in die gelben Karneole. (W 1 14)    | into its own yellow carnelians. |

The dome’s human shape, glimmering up to the crown, looking vainly at itself, criticizes Catholicism by employing the exact same metaphoric structure that the church relies on in its self-conception, the ideal of the ‘mystical body’ uniting believers and Christ. Rilke, however,

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102 In his letter to Witold Hulewicz, on 13. 11. 1925, Rilke retrospectively elucidates the idea of Larne in relation to our habitual dealing with things: “The animated, the experienced things that are privy to us [share in the knowledge of us] are coming to an end, and cannot be replaced. Maybe we are the last ones who know such things. It is our responsibility, not only to conserve their memory (that would be little and unreliable), but to conserve their human and laric value” [“Die belebten, die erlebten, die uns mitwissenden Dinge gehen zur Neige und können nicht mehr ersetzt werden. Wir sind vielleicht die Letzten, die noch solche Dinge gekannt haben. Auf uns ruht die Verantwortung, nicht allein ihr Andenken zu erhalten (das wäre wenig und unzuverlässig), sondern ihren humanen und larischen Wert”] (Rilke Briefe aus Muzot 1921-1926, 336). Thus, the poetic rendition of how things share in humanity from beginning to end played a central role to Rilke.

103 The stance of mockery becomes clear in Intérieurs (1898) where Rilke personifies the small cities of his childhood in Bohemia: “You have to have seen them, these small and very small towns of my native region. They have learned one day off by heart, which they scream into the sun like big, grey parrots. Closer to night, however, they become namelessly contemplative. You can see the town squares labour to answer the dark question that is in the air. This is moving and a bit ridiculous for the stranger, for he knows anyway: if there is an answer – any – it will certainly not come from the small and very small towns in my region, try as they may, poor things!” [“Man muß sie gesehen haben, diese kleinen und ganz kleinen Städte in meiner Heimat. Sie haben einen Tag auswendig gelernt; den schreien sie immerfort wie große graue Papageien in die Sonne hinein. Nah an der Nacht aber werden sie namenlos nachdenklich. Man sieht es den Plätzen an, daß sie sich bemühen, die dunkle Frage zu lösen, die in der Luft liegt. Das ist rührend und ein wenig lächerlich für den Fremden. Denn er weiß ohneweiters: gibt es eine Antwort – irgendeine – dann kommt sie bestimmmt nicht von den kleinen und ganz kleinen Städten meiner Heimat her, – sie mögen sich noch so ehrlich anstrengen, die Armen”] (W 4 93).
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employs prosopopeia to show the character of this “mystical body” manifesting itself in vanity, pomp and profusion.

Throughout *Larenopfer*, Rilke looks at the ways in which items and buildings are animated by their strange symbiosis with humans. Rilke consistently maintains an ironic distance to the potentially idyllic scenes of Prague. More in tune with the visions of Kafka, in “Vom Lugaus,” Prague’s towers undergo an uncanny transformation:

Dort seh ich Türme, kuppig bald wie Eicheln und jene wieder spitz wie schlanke Birnen; dort liegt die Stadt; an ihre tausend Stirnen schmiegt sich der Abend schon mit leisem [Schmeicheln. 
Weit streckt sie ihren schwarzen Leib. Ganz hinten, sieh, Sankt Mariens Doppeltürme blitzen. 

There I view towers, dome-shaped like acorns and others again pointed like pears; the town expands; to her foreheads the evening nestles with silent [caressing. 
Far she extends her black body. Look, in the distance 
St. Mary’s twin towers are flashing.

Ists nicht: sie saugte durch zwei Fühlerspitzen in sich des Himmels violette Tinten? (W’ 114)

Is it not as if she sucked through two feeler tips into herself the violet inks of heaven/sky?

The initial simile, comparing the towers of Prague with the shape of acorn and pear, is followed by the metaphoric equation of the town’s buildings with human bodies which the wind caresses. Unified in the third stanza into a “black body” at the very rear end of which the twin towers of St. Mary’s are flashing. This body once more reveals animation of the body of *Ecclesia*, for hardly do people in Western Europe stop and wonder at the strange animism inherent in calling buildings by female (or male) names – “St. Mary”. Far from the “naive sense of integration and delight” which John Sandford observes about Rilke’s early poems set in Prague, the city-scape is depicted here as a monstrous body, at the helm of which the church acts like a rather uncanny insect (*Landscape and landscape imagery in R.M. Rilke* 1980, 6). “St. Mary” is neither restricted to the concept of the mother of Christ nor to a building representing her, or a religious group located by and within a building. She assumes an uncanny animal agency as Rilke transforms the personified building into an insect. Her feelers extended towards *Himmel*, the German word which refuses to differentiate between physical sky and metaphysical heaven, feeding on its violet inks.

The permeability of boundaries between the human and non-human turns the safety of interior spaces out into the uncertain and insecure space of nature, participating in selfhood. Significantly, these personifications are depicted at the hour of twilight “die Dämmerstunde.” Already in the collection’s opening poem, the hour of twilight “walks by silently” and subsequently the city dissolves as behind glass [“Die Stadt verschwimmt wie hinter Glas”] (W’ 1 11). Twilight stretches its arms out to the speaker. (W’ 1 15) And again the city dissolves “im Dämmerdustgeschwel” in “Das Kloster” (W’ 1 19). The speaker describes a Carmelite nunnery, to which evening comes skipping down the mountain side, bringing fiery sheaves, decorating the windows with a thousand colours [“hüpft hangab / vorbei mit Feuergarben / und windet tausend Farben / um jeden Fensterstab”]. However, evening’s efforts are in vain: All the evening effects, is to decorate grave stones with fresh wreaths [“so sehen frische Kränze auf
Leichensteinen aus.”] (Ibid.). Thus, Rilke confirms the nunnery dead and the evening alive. The evening never transgresses into the dead interior of the nunnery but in “Herbststimmung” a true inversion of spaces takes place. The environment on a day in autumn becomes a room in which someone passes away [“Sterbezimmer”] (W 1 34). Via simile Rilke eases us into the scenery of light reflected on wet roofs “like that of a candle, ready to go out” (Ibid.). However, the second stanza presents prosopopeia: rainwater’s choking breath and the wind’s executing an autopsy on dead leaves. Here, Rilke creates an ecological uncanny:104 “[T]he divide between the natural (the outside, the open) and the anthropogenic, the inside, the closed has collapsed” (Giggs “The Green Afterword” 205).

However, it is quite often overlooked in contemporary ecocritical discourses that not only in the “post-natural” world of today’s gene-manipulated monocultures nature is “neither veridically man-made nor patently natural” but that this duo-unity of man-made impact and naturality is the very definition of “landscape” (Ibid.). Rebecca Giggs concretises: “in the world entirely of our making, the ecological uncanny is the experience of ourselves as foreign bodies. The secreted, concealed thing in nature is us, and although we secreted ourselves there, the discovery makes us strange to ourselves” (Ibid.). For Rilke, this “us” is so entirely and irrevocably interspersed with our natural and cultural habitats that it is impossible to perceive them at a safe distance. We might have “secreted ourselves” into our environments but certainly not necessarily consciously so. Also, nature is per se partaking in whatever humans do, although we are not necessarily conscious of her doing so. It is the personifications of literary texts that can overcome the habitual perceptions of dualism and opposition and restore this mutual participation into consciousness. In his book on the artists’ colony in Northern Germany Worpswede (1902) as well as in his poetry collections Mir zur Feier (To Celebrate Myself) Rilke develops this notion of interconnectedness even further.

Here, however, in “making unsafe” the homely space of the inhabited city, Rilke begins to exercise liberation from other modes of containment, as well, such as the “nation.” Rilke’s “creative self-ethnicity” throughout his life is based on the refusal to belong to any nation (Tavis 1). In “In Dubiis” he has the speaker say:

| Der erscheint mir als der Größte, der zu keiner Fahne schwört, und weil er vom Teil sich löste, nun der ganzen Welt gehört. (W 1 40) | He appears to me the greatest who swears by no flag and detached from the particular now belongs to the entire world |

104 In contemporary ecocritical discourses this term has been developed by Timothy Morton The Ecological Thought (2010). Todd A. Borlik Ecocriticism and Early Modern English Literature (2010) applies it to the poetry of Sidney. The most thorough development of the term can be found in Rebecca Giggs The Rise of the Edge (2010).
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As jubilant as this ‘belonging to the entire world’ may at first seem, Rilke creates an immediate counterpoint in *Larenopfer* by arrangement: “Barbaren” makes clear that one has to share the world with “barbarians” who cut down the “holy grove of Pallas” the Clam-Callas Park in Prague. The park which is cut down and drowned in the noise of modern times is ancient: it houses the murmuring oracle, the divine word of the Pythia.

To Rilke, as to Yeats, time is never a convenient arrow that allows man to boldly progress from a dark past into a bright future, but time is a very porous structure, a continuity which intersperses “time future” with “time past” and instantiates them equally in “time present.” Not only in the case of personal memory but also concerning collective history, time is a continuum as “Gerichtet” (“Judged/Executed”) makes clear. There Rilke takes up a local folk legend and writes:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gerichtet</th>
<th>Judged/Executed/</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Am ›Ring‹ stand einst ein Blutgerüst,</td>
<td>At the ›Ring‹ once stood a gallows</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lang ist es her; doch wenn der Schein des runden Monds das Rathaus küßt,</td>
<td>a long time ago, but when the glow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dann wallen aus dem heiligen Teyn Gerichtete in Geisterreih…</td>
<td>of the round moon kisses the town hall,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weh wer sie sah!</td>
<td>from the holy Teyn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viel Herren fielen auf dem Ring; die Herren finden Ruhe nicht; –</td>
<td>Executed ones float in ghostly lines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sie zogen eines Nachts: Es ging voran Herr Christus, groß und licht,</td>
<td>Woe to him who saw them!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mit ernstem, traurigem Gesicht Und einer sahs!</td>
<td>Many lords were slain on the Ring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Der war ein Maler. Und im Flug malt er, wie er geschaut, den Ring.</td>
<td>– proceeding one night; Lord Christ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Er malt den ganzen Geisterzug, dem ernst voran Herr Christus ging.</td>
<td>was leading them, tall and luminous,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Er malt… bis ihn ein Fieber fing…</td>
<td>with a solemn, sad face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jetzt ist er tot. –</td>
<td>And one saw it!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>(IIf 1 41)</em></td>
<td>He was a painter. And in haste</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

105 Rilke, like Yeats, displays the ancient Horacian fear of the “vulgar mob” (“Odi profanum vulgus et arceo [Odes 3:1:1] I despise and shun the vulgar mob”, See Schoolfield, 69). Meanwhile the sentiments expressed in “Barbaren” can certainly be read as “elitist classical memories” and might even be seen as an adherence to an “deified aristocratic way of life” [“vergöttlichte aristokratische Lebensform”], which Egon Schwarz sees Rilke mourn for (Egon Schwarz “Ich bin kein Freund allgemeiner Urteile über ganze Völker” 167). However, there is certainly also a concern about the disappearance of the natural habitat of the park, which had allowed for an encounter with the divine. But this remains the only piece in Rilke’s oeuvre mourning the loss of nature in a stretch of woodland so concretely.

106 Rilke in “Vigilien IV” fuses and layers and thereby fuses the image of a little child keeping vigil at her mother’s death bed and the image of a woman enjoying a night of sexual bliss. As suddenly, as if by higher power “wie durch höhere Macht” the memory of the night at the deathbed breaks into the present and imposes itself on the presence of love-making (IIf 1 46).

107 Schoolfield describes the poem as a “careful reproduction of Gretsch’s *Salvatorlegende* […] a phantastico-historical painting” based on the folk legend of a procession of executed academics and noble men, lead by Christ “each anniversary of their execution” (Schoolfield *Young Rilke and his time* 75.) Since the painter died suddenly, Rilke’s text, according to Schoolfield provides a sort of “terse requiem” (Ibid.).
The ghostly procession might seem at a precursory glance nothing more than a remnant of dark romanticism, *Schauerromantik*. However, what is central here, and very much reminiscent of Yeats’ otherworldly riders in “The Hosting of the Sidhe” (from The Wind among the Reeds 1899) is the way in which the continuity of the presence is “shot through” with the presence of the past, pointing to Rilke’s later concept of time, which he expresses in his oft-quoted letter to Nora Purtscher-Wydenbruck (11. 08. 1924), describing consciousness as the tip of a pyramid, the base of which is the infinite co-presence of all times within eternal duration. Those who died in times gone by are never far away for Rilke. In “Gerichtet” these presences pose a similarly immediate threat to the artist who dies as he completes a picture of the ghostly procession. (He will take up this notion again in *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurid Brigge*, destabilising the boundaries between now and then; the world of the living and the dead.)

These presences pose a danger to the onlooker, as they do throughout Yeats’s oeuvre: “and if any gaze on our rushing band / we come between him and the deed of his hand” (*VP* 141). The otherworld always poses to mortals the danger of death by exposure to the luring beauty or the persuasive speech of supernatural presences in Yeats (see the poem “The Stolen Child” [*VP* 86], and the play *The Land of Heart’s Desire* 1894). In the poem above, the painter is “consumed” by the otherworldly presences, as the painting assumes form he is snatched by a personified fever. “Gerichtet” radicalises Rilke’s observations in *Intérieurs* (1898) in which he outlines a world memory, similar to Yeats’s “Great Memory”:

The history of Zoroaster and Plato, Jesus Christ, Columbus, Lionardo and Napoleon and many others had to be written, that is, it wrote itself, so to say. Each of these acting persons carved a furrow into the grey brain of the earth and we all carry a small reproduction of this originary brain in us, like a pocket watch or one of those small round compasses indicating where the sun rises over a staid bourgeois belly.

Rilke creates continuity between the interior, personal memory and the one of the earth, in which the life-lines of the dead are carved like furrows into a field. The great historical personae are inscribed in the “grey brain” of the earth, thus impacting every single human experience thereafter. However, Rilke also points out that the last centuries strove towards a “*paysage intime*,” the history of the nameless: “One or the other believes to have noticed that a battle doesn’t necessarily have to be fought at Thermopyla, Hastings or Austerlitz, but occasionally at Fear, Longing or Ingratitude” (Ibid.). Thus he creates an inner cartography of human experience, which destabilises historiography and reintroduces something very close to Yeats’ *Moods* – trans-historical modes of being and feeling, patterns of experience, which can at any time possess a human being or a community as well as a shared environment.

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108 Gislí Magnússon’s thorough assessment of Rilke’s occult research and practices gives insight into his acquaintance with ghosts whose presence he acutely felt. He participated in séances and even travelled to Toledo for a rendezvous with a ghost who had spoken to him at a private seance through the son of Marie Taxis (See 92).

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3.1.2. *Mir zur Feier* (1899) – Entering a Zone of Unknowability

The interlacing of self and nature is central to *Mir zur Feier*, the speaker in the majority of poems in the collection is the locus of their encounter. His own position and agency become uncertain. Whereas in *Larenopfer* the uncertainty had been restricted to the perception of phenomena in the outside world, now an even more fundamental mutual exchange and destabilisation of the conceptual boundaries between self and environment takes place. I would argue that *Mir zur Feier* does not as radically depart from the preceding collections as is often claimed. Since, as we have seen, even Rilke’s earliest works already outline an uncanny human-nature relation through the too-close-for-comfort presence of personified environments. Judith Ryan rightly observes that *Mir zur Feier* is heavily influenced by *Jugendstil* art. She writes:

The flowing lines and decorative surfaces give new shape to Rilke’s language and imagery. *Jugendstil*’s abolition of clear distinction between background and foreground, nature and the human figure, subject and object, presents a seductive but troubling vision for the young writer who tries to forge a new lyric identity for himself (23).

I would furthermore suggest that Rilke’s slanting lines and the unique rhyming of “words of lesser significance” (personal- or general pronouns, conjunctions or adverbs), which accentuate the occurrence of the rhyme in mid-flow of a syntactic unit, are all part of the aesthetics of becoming, of the organic “curvilinear forms of *Jugendstil* art” (24). Rilke poetically develops the idea of an organic continuity. However, the preceding chapters argued that these poetic visions cannot be simply understood as “the idea of an ‘inner garden’ – the projection of the poet’s psyche into the external world” (Ibid.). What emerges even in the early works is a poetics of uncertainty that via various figures abolishes the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman. Self-experience and bodily perception are mediated through the figure of trees, vines and flowers. The speaker is bearing white blossoms: “Ich fühle wie ich weiße Blüten trage, die in der Kühle ihre Kelche haben” (*W* 1 65), is portrayed as a plant with chalices or tendrils, or sprouting branche (*W* 1 95), or turns into a pale birch tree enduring the cold (*W* 1 107).

Rilke first observed this organic web of human-nature in the art of Heinrich Vogeler, a painter and illustrator to whom he dedicated the final chapter in *Worpswede*, and who, in turn, provided the ornamental illustrations for the first edition of *Mir zur Feier*. Rilke describes the

110 Poplawski sees the “ornamental effects of *Jugendstil*” still operating aesthetically in this collection (*Encyclopedia of Literary Modernism* 2003, 350). This is certainly the case, organic growth and a continuity between figurative content and ornament characterise the collection. In his poem “Ich bin so jung, ich möchte jedem Klange” the self desires to become a plant with vines and tendrils (*W*’1 65, See also: Ryan [1999], 23ff). The *Jugendstil* painter and engraver Heinrich Vogeler designed ornamental prints for the first edition of the collection which very much reflect this vegetative interlacing.

111 In “*Homo Naturana*” (1996) Wolfgang Riedel points to the erotic dimension of the delimitation of the self in the experience of *raptus*. However, he claims that Rilke’s turn towards all-unity (Erfahrung des All-Einen) goes beyond physical experience of love in a context of a metaphysic of love [“lebensphilosophisch-metabiologische[n] Liebesmetaphysik”] (276).
intimacy of Vogeler’s relation to his garden and claims that Vogeler had a beetle’s in-depth knowledge of the flowers’ chalices (See W 4 392). Vogeler’s work, Rilke further claims, grew into a dense organic texture growing and branching out in unison with the actual garden, which grew “ever denser and filled with forms and colours” (W 4 398). The light in Vogeler’s garden changes gradually, as plant life takes over and finally the garden assumes personhood: “It didn’t fall broadly through the lose net of countable branches. The leaves, the blossoms, the fruits, the surfaces of a thousand things pushed close together, caught it like little hands and played with it, shimmering, darkening, glowing” (W 4 398). Nature assumes personhood in the green twilight of the dense organic network of personified branches. Rilke observes the emergence of an “organic space” in Vogeler’s art, a space which is itself affected by the phenomena of the outside world, by “growth and wind” (W 4 394). Although Rilke observes the influence of Aubrey Beardsley on Vogeler, he believes that Vogeler’s art, in its essence, grew out of the garden. Vogeler’s is the perception of one who lives permanently in a place and therefore witnesses the processes of growth and decay:

The crowns of the trees had become ever denser latticed and under the influence of wind and growth new lines emerged, lines and systems of lines, crossings and contractions that surprised at first glance. But it was not the first glance that rested on them. It was the eye that not only saw but knew and witnessed how everything had become. Like tree lichen (“Baumflechte” Flechte also: weaving) with thousands and thousands of strings the drawing covers the sheet, overgrows it with its wealth, spreading out in it like a texture under a microscope. Maybe Aubrey Beardsley’s decadent physics of lines inspired Vogeler to these drawings, but what is essential about them grew out of himself and the influence of his garden is stronger than anything else112 (W 4 394).

112 "Die Kronen der Bäume hatten sich dichter vergittert und überall waren unter dem Einfluss des Wachstums und des Windes neue Linien entstanden, Linien und Systeme von Linien, Überschneidungen und Verkürzungen, die auf den ersten Blick etwas Verwirrendes hatten. Aber es war nicht der erste Blick, der auf ihnen ruhte. Es war ein Auge, das nicht allein sah, sondern das auch wußte und gesehen hatte, wie alles geworden war […] Wie eine Baumflechte mit tausend und abertausend Fäden überzieht die Zeichnung das Blatt, überwuchert es mit ihrem Reichtum, breitet sich darinnen aus wie ein Gewebe unter dem Mikroskop. Mag, was den Inhalt dieser merkwürdigen Blätter betrifft, die dekadente Linienphantastik Aubrey Beardsleys anregend auf Vogeler wirkt haben, das Wesentliche an ihnen wuchs aus ihm heraus, und der Einfluß seines Gartens ist stärker als jeder andere gewesen" (W 4 394).
According to Tina Simon, for Rilke landscape assumes authorship in that “she has compositional competence” [“kompositorische Kompetenz”] (Rilke als Leser 72). However, as became clear in the preceding argument, Rilke does not envision nature as a counter-world [“Gegenwelt”] “in which the space of landscape functions as a utopia which is merely an ‘occasion for reflection’ and a medium which creates mirror effects, inverting subject and object” (Ibid.). Most prominently this is the case in the illustration of the fairytale of Melusine [a German mythological mermaid figure] (“Melusinenmärchen”):

“Maybe what is most unforgettable about this image is how the mermaid girl is entwined with this confusion of overabundant things, so that it is impossible to tell where she begins and whether these are the eyes of the forest itself, opening curiously and startled at the same time in front of the stranger” (W 4399). This oscillating figure, looking out of the glimmering/wavering depths of the forest [“flimmernde Tiefe”], half way between human and forest encounters the “dumb iron man” [“den tumben Eisenmann”] who can only stand there in his armour “hot and helpless” [“heiß und hilflos”] (Ibid.). Since the speakers of the poems in Mir zur Feier are exclusively young girls, who are not clearly delimited against their natural environment, we can assume that this image is essential to understanding the poetic stance in the collection:

Kann mir einer sagen, wohin ich mit meinem Leben reiche?
Ob ich nicht auch noch im Sturme streiche und als Welle wohne im Teiche, und ob ich nicht selbst noch die blasse, bleiche frühlingsfrierende Birke bin? (W 1107)

Can anyone tell me, where I am reaching with my life?
Whether I am not roaming even in the storm, and living in the pond as a wave, and whether I am not even the pale, wan birch tree, spring-shivering?

“Ob ich nicht…” in German already expresses an affirmative assumption underlying the rhetorical question and thus Rilke, while asking, already dares the reader to refute his assumptions. However, identity is not simply proclaimed as it is still the reader’s position to agree or disagree.

113 “Es ist vielleicht das Unvergeßlichste in dem Bilde, wie das Melusinenmädchen mit dieser Wirrnis übervielen Dingen verflochten ist, so daß man nicht sagen kann, wo es beginnt, und ob es nicht die bangen Augen des Waldes selber sind, die sich, neugierig und beunruhigt zugleich, auf tun vor dem Unbekannten” (398-399).

114 Manfred Engel points out that the original layout of Mir zur Feier contains cycles which bear the following titles: Beichten, Engellieder, Landschaft, Gebete der Mädchen zu Maria, Im All-Einen. (See Engel, Rilke-Handbuch 207) These, Rilke condensed and altered into Mädchengestalten, Lieder der Mädchen, Gebete der Mädchen zu Maria [Girl Figures, Songs of the girls, Prayers of the Girls to Mary]. Androgyny plays a crucial part in Rilke’s works; he imagines the act of artistic creation as an expression of a female-in-male conjunction (Freedman Life of a Poet 193).
Twilight is the ideal mode for perceiving this living web of undifferentiated being. In “Die Nacht wächst wie eine schwarze Stadt” (“Night grows like a black city”) the alleys are interlinking, “networking” with each other [sich “vernetzen”], spaces add themselves to spaces while it becomes impossible to know who lives in the houses [“aber Du weißt nicht, wer darin siedelt”] dreams are dancing in the gardens of this city but it is impossible to know who plays the fiddle [“und du weißt nicht, wer ihnen fiedelt”] because uncertainty dominates twilight (W 1 108). Not only the receding of light but also an overabundance of light can eradicate the clear contour of objects and vanquish the difference between self and world. In “Blendender Weg, der sich vor Licht verlor” (“Gleaming path which lost itself in light”) nature becomes uncanny. John Sandford’s observation in Landscape and Landscape Imagery in R. M. Rilke (1980) that “Landschaft” signifies the total environment, the realm of the Non-Self from which the Self distinguishes itself by viewing and ordering cannot be supported in the light of the preceding observations on Rilke’s personifications of nature (1). “Twilight” is both a too little and a too much of light. The poems of Mir zur Feier were for the most part written in Berlin Schmargendorf, where Rilke had taken up residence with Lou Andreas Salomé and her husband. They reflect a variety of landscapes, from his first trip to Northern Germany, to memories of Prague and Bohemia, to impressions of his first trip to Italy, in 1897, which resulted in his Florentine Diary and a number of poems which directly mediate the intense light of Italy (39).

The excess of light experienced in Italy results in overexposed images that create conditions of low contrast through too much light. “Blendender Pfad der sich vor Licht verlor” opens with a blinding impression of a path losing itself in/ in front of/ through light and in this uncertain space a gateway emerges “as in a dream”:

| Blendener Weg, der sich vor Licht verlor,         | Blinding path, that lost itself in/through light, |
| Sonnengewicht auf allem Weingelände.            | Sun’s weight on the wine region.                  |
| Und dann auf einmal, wie im Traum: ein Tor breit eingebaut in unsichtbare Wände. | Suddenly, as in a dream: a gate broadly built into invisible walls. |
| Der Türen Holz ist lang im Tag verbrannt;        | The doors’ wood was burnt long since in the day; |
| doch trotzig dauert auf dem Bogenrand das Wappen und das Fürstendiadem. | but on the arch’s rim stubbornly insist the coat of arms and the prince’s tiara. |
| Und wenn du eintrittst, bist du Gast. – Bei wem?  | And when you enter in, you are a guest. – whose? |
| Und schauermd schaust du in das wilde Land.     | And shuddering you gaze into the wild land.      |

(W 1 80)

The wooden gates have vanished. They are no longer demarcating one physical realm from another. The image is surreal, depicting a gate from nowhere to nowhere, a memorial that reminds of nothing. The anonymous coat of arms and tiara are signifiers from under which the bodies of their owners have passed. Passing through a gate could have signalled the arrival and entrance into someone’s hospitality but the poem closes with a gaze into the wilderness. The speaker will be someone’s guest, but whose? Within the open question, again, nature itself appears as the potential host. We can surmise that it will not be Ludwig Uhland’s Romantic wondrously mild host, a personified apple tree, a homely provider of shelter and food for bird- and humankind, who welcomes the speaker into its shade. Rilke’s speaker gazes into an open,
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unsheltered and uncertain space. The broad gate could also be read as a threshold between waking and dreaming, and as consciousness and memory fades, social hierarchies and the insignia of worldly authorities lose their significance.

Man and nature participate in a continuum. At the beginning of the collection this participation is approached anxiously. In “And one day I will loosen in twilight” [“Und einmal lös ich in der Dämmerung”] the speaker takes off her garments “like a lie” [“wie eine Lüge”] to become naked and exposed and to dive into the sun (W 1 69). The speaker is anxious [“bang”] of the openness that she faces. But the act of undressing, putting off habitual perception with the habitual clothing, results in an act of addressing: The personified forest in “You wakeful forest” [“Du wacher Wald”] is first addressed but soon the speaker is lost in its conscious presence. The speaker does not enjoy a secure sheltering as she walks deeper into the presence of the personified forest. Being guided by “your ways” she loses both her sense of origin and direction, as she realises, that once there were doors before “your depths” which are no longer there:

Just like the early poems of the “Celtic Twilight” phase of William Butler Yeats, Rilke’s Dämmerung makes tangible the threshold between night and day, when vision grants no certainty and the boundaries between entities begin to dissolve. Between dreaming and daylight consciousness a zone of uncertainty emerges, a space which becomes apparent as mediated and created through the senses.

In “These are the gardens I believe in” [“Das sind die Gärten, an die ich glaube”] gardens appear at twilight in a zone between vision and sound. As visibility is diminished silence drips down through the linden trees. The synaesthetically transformation begins with a gradual fading out of vision into silence, filtered through the trees and running like a liquid through the gravel. The visual phenomena literally die away. To the increasingly undifferentiated shores, which are no longer obvious or interpretable, a swan ‘communicates’ moonlight by swimming from rim to rim.

The dual presence of sun and moon at twilight allow for the discerning and differentiating activities of the solar mind and the intuitive and emotional attributes of the lunar realm of creativity to coincide.
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In the final part of the collection there are a number of poems in which Mary as described as earth: “A force lifted itself out of what was “diseased” in her, twisted upward as “suns glowed and seeds fell / and you became as wine” (“Aber tief aus deinem Kranken / wagte eine Kraft zu ranken,- / Sonnen lohten / Samen sanken / und du wurdest wie der Wein” 95). Now Mary is “sweet and full” [“süß und satt”], resting on the girls “like the evening” making them tired. Mary is described as a physical presence, the “blood” out of which they “blossom” (96) and as the “something” that beckons their newly awakened senses at puberty to the red berries. She beckons from within the white ones (97). Rilke will fully execute this transposition of the transcendent into the immanent in his collection Das Stunden-Buch (1899). But what becomes clear here is that as the mystical union in the host of the Eucharist embodies Christ, earth in Rilke is thought to embody the divine rather than being God’s handiwork. Since it is unknowable from where the root-structures and to where the branch-structures of being extend, Rilke finds endless potentiality for the irruption and actuality of the divine in nature. The uncertain realm of twilight is the predominant mode of the poetry of Mir zur Feier and it becomes the ontological and phenomenological vantage point, which shapes Rilke’s entire oeuvre. Twilight furthers a shift in perception, a release of anthropocentrism and a reattribution of agency to the environment. The slow decrease in light manifests “indifference” between all phenomena as they become clothed in grey:

Auch du hast es einmal erlebt, ich weiß:  You once experienced it too, I know:
Der Tag ermattete in armen Gassen,  The day has tired in the run down alleys,
und seine Liebe wurde zweifelnd leis -  And his love turned diffidently quiet

 Dann ist ein Abschiednehmen rings im Kreis:  Then farewell spreads throughout the district:
es schenken sich die müden Mauermassen  The tired masses of walls are gifting each other
 die letzten Fensterblicke, hell und heiß,  With the last bright and hot window-glances

bis sich die Ding nicht mehr unterscheiden.  Until the things are no longer distinguishable
Und halb im Traume hauchen sie sich zu:  And half-dreaming to each other are breathing:
Wie wir uns alle heimlich verkleiden,  How we all secretly dress up in disguise
in graue Seiden  In grey silks
alle uns kleiden, -  All dress up
wer von uns beiden  Who of us two
bist jetzt du? (IF 1 108)  Now is you?

Personification, personal speech of non-human entities and apostrophe shape the poem. The city’s structure entertains itself with human rituals as the things enter a masquerade. This finally extends the question to the reader: “Who of us two now is you?” The poem opens in the mode of prayer, an address to a “you” is extended, which is first of all Mary. She is by the section’s title the implicit addressee of all apostrophes in this part of the collection. The speaker reminds her that she once also experienced the moment of twilight. At the same time, however, as Mary is nowhere directly named, the address is prolonged to the reader. The experience that the speaker believes to be a shared one, however, is described in unique and unusual metaphors, contradicting his assumption that “you once experienced it too, I know.” The love of the day, which becomes silent in doubtfulness, the tired walls, which throw final hot “window glances” at
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each other: these are very unique images. The mode of address and prayer breaks down as the speaker recounts the experience. Suddenly the things are masquerading.

What makes this masquerade unique, however, is not the variety of colourful masks but the unity of the “grey silks” in which the first person plural speaker-entity is clothed. It is “us” who masquerade, the speaker is assumed into this community of the half-dreaming things, via the uncertainty of the addressee: “who of us two now is you” comes as a shock. Instead what would be expected, is the question “who are you?” The question the speaker asks, foregrounds an inability to distinguish between self and other. If we remember the initial mode of prayer to Mary such a question could be seen as bordering on blasphemy. But Rilke has already departed from traditional religious confines and sentiments as Mary is immanently present in the natural phenomena of the preceding poems. Thus when the supplicant enters into prayer at twilight, this only brings to awareness the underlying reality of which the seeing of difference is a voluntary limitation. The things, gods, humans, dressing in “grey silks” at twilight extend the open question and include the readers’ position: ‘Who, indeed, now, is you, dear reader?’

Wolfgang Riedel reads this poem as an expression of turn-of-the-century oceanism á la Bölsche (276). Although I would not go as far as to suspect a discussion of biology or cell-formation in the womb in this poem as Riedel does, I do agree that the experience of unity is central. Furthermore, Rilke and Lou Andreas-Salomé’s companionship is one of the most important motivations for this whole collection. Mir zur Feier had a twin sibling, a complementary volume Dir zur Feier (1897-98) [For your celebration] containing poems Rilke sent to Lou but which he later asked her to destroy. Most of them were destroyed by consent of both and only a few verses remain. Both collections, however, “celebrate the couple” [“Sie feiern das Paar”] as a duo-unity: „I have unlearned the ‘I’ and only know we / With the beloved I became two /as two /together” [“Ich hab das ‘Ich’ verlernt und weiß nur: wir / Mit der Geliebten wurde ich zu zwein”]115 (Riedel 276). Becoming is absolutely central to Rilke’s notion of unity. However equally remarkable is the employment of the highly ambiguous construction “zu zwein” as it expresses at the same time togetherness and separateness. There is a dual process at play here, which has dissolution as well as instantiation of the I-you relationship at its heart.116

3.1.3. Taking Care with Words – Textual Strategies of Uncertainty

Rilke in Mir zur Feier searches for an adequate language in the face of the unknowable nature of the world and the impossibility of fixing differences, as well as the refusal of the things and beings to be named, mirrored and represented. One poem most clearly expresses young Rilke’s stance on language. “Ich fürchte mich so vor der Menschen Wort” clearly displays caution of discursive language and a great respect for the power of language to shape and destroy the things:

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115 From: Dir zur Feier, published posthumously (quoted after Riedel 276).
116 Most scholars focus solely on self-dissolution in the works of Rilke, especially of the later phase, without so much as noticing the re-instantiation of self within a communal or environmental dynamic (See Pott 368; Zwetajeva/Pasternak 159f; Fuchs 364).
Ich fürchte mich so vor der Menschen Wort.
Sie sprechen alles so deutlich aus:
Und dieses heißt Hund und jenes heißt Haus,
und hier ist Beginn, und das Ende ist dort.

Mich bangt auch ihr Sinn, ihr Spiel mit dem Spott,
sie wissen alles, was wird und war;
kein Berg ist ihnen mehr wunderbar;
 ihr Garten und Gut grenzt grade an Gott.

Ich will immer warnen und wehren: Bleibt fern.
Die Dinge singen hör ich so gern.
Ihr rührt sie an: sie sind starr und stumm.
Ihr bringt mir alle die Dinge um. (W 1 106)

I am so afraid of the word of man
They pronounce everything so clearly:
And this is called dog and that is called house,
and here is the beginning, and there is the end.

Their sense makes me anxious / calls me into question, their toying with derision
They know whatever was and will be;
no mountain to them is marvellous anymore
their gardens and properties border on god.

I always want to warn and oppose: stay away.
I love so much to hear the things singing
You touch them: they are rigid and still
You kill all the things.

Ernst Peter Fischer in his article “Vom Umbringen der Dinge. Die neuen Denkerfahrungen in den Naturwissenschaften um 1900” observes that around 1900 scientists of all disciplines were confident that they were approaching the final elucidation of things (“On the Killing of Things” 2002). Mathematicians were accumulating their “last questions” and the biologist Ernst Haeckel in his famous Welträtsel [world’s mysteries] of 1899 made tangible the disappearance of even the last of life’s secrets (“Verschwinden aller Geheimnisse” 53). The sciences, Fischer continues, believed in a singular, concretely visible reality which became ever more precisely measurable and ever more accessible. Fischer sees Rilke’s poem veritably crash onto this stage which should soon also witness the discovery of the unconscious through Freud and Jung and the discovery of uncertainty via relativity and quantum physics at the very heart of the hard sciences (55-56). Referring to Raymond Chandler, Fischer claims that the sciences without the arts would be inhuman [“ohn-menschlich” 55], lacking an experiential and embodied reality.

“I always want to warn and oppose, stay away! I love to hear the things singing” Rilke says. This imperative challenges the current dominant ideology which condemns the things and beings to serve and mutely comply. Fischer argues that in the face of sub-atomic particle research, the things, which could be killed by naming, do not even exist anymore [“daß es die Dinge garnicht mehr gibt, die Worte umbringen könnten” 58]. CERN spokesman James Gillies disagrees: “We have a theory that describes all the stuff around us, all the ordinary, visible matter that makes up the Universe. Except, the problem is, it doesn’t. It makes up around five percent of the Universe.”11 While we train future generations to become able to wield instruments and run tests, will we be able to make sure that they learn how to hear the things singing with the finest instrument and most unexplicable mode of participatory observation: the human body?

Rilke’s disdain for naming things did not translate into a vague language; on the contrary, his images are very clear. The obscurity, which he envisions and which he enacts in his poetry, is that of a conscious decision to call into question self-world, I-you dichotomies. The

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“uncertainty” that Rilke’s poetry embodies has to do with the transposition of things we thought of as material, rigid and bounded into motion, emergence, flux and exchange. Rilke’s images and Wendungen – turnings abound with minutest attention to detail. He celebrates the transposition of flowers into olfactory self-experience as in “Persisches Heliotrop” or the visceral experience of a stormy night as a personal encounter as in “Aus einer Sturmnacht.”

3.2. Figurations of the Unity of Human-Nature in the Early Critical Writings of Rainer Maria Rilke

The years 1897 to 1900 were especially turbulent and productive for Rilke. Some of the most formative experiences of his life happened in this short period of time. This transformative and profound phase began with Rilke’s meeting Lou Andreas Salomé on 12th of May 1897 in Munich. She is to be, for many years, one of the most important influences on his life and works as well, as being his beloved, his muse, his travel companion, his soul sister and his confidante. Not unlike Yeats’s love for Maude Gonne, however, she remained ultimately unattainable and overshadowed and prefigured Rilke’s other relations to women (See Leppmann Rilke: A Life 77-102). When Lou Salomé and Rilke met he was 22 years old and hardly known, while she was 36, “the grande dame of her age” and well known through her published short stories and essays as well as her close relationship with Nietzsche (Pfeiffer 3). The relationship with Lou had a profound impact on Rilke. Through her he accessed an experience of unity, which even after their romantic liaison had ended, shaped his thought and work until his death in 1926. She remained in many respects the “raison d’etre of his poetry” (12). When they met Lou had just left Nietzsche and was living in an open marriage with her husband Friedrich Carl Andreas, a Professor of oriental studies. Shortly after they met in Munich, Lou decided to return to her husband and young Rilke, who had changed his name from René to Rainer on Lou’s suggestion, came to live with them. From her memoirs we get the image of a “holy” union beyond traditional boundaries. In “Nachtrag, 1934” she directly addresses the dead Rilke:

If I was your wife for many years then the reason is that you were the first real thing to me, body and human were indistinguishably one […]. I could have said to you the same words you chose as a confession of love to me “you alone are real to me”. In this we became spouses, even before we became friends and we did not become friends out of choice but out of subterraneously consummated marriages. Not two halves sought each other in us but the surprised entirety recognised itself trembling with incommensurable wholeness. Thus we were siblings but as in ancient times - before incest became a sacrilege. And did not the incommensurable, which we “carried on our blood” and experienced in the

118 Langner claims, that the conjunction of love and art is important to Rilke at that stage on both a biographical and literary level (7). As this chapter will show, it also fundamentally shapes his poetological thought.
This sense of transgression into unity also characterises Rilke's texts from around this time. He took up extensive travelling with Lou, specifically to Italy and Russia. While in Florence, he met the German artist Heinrich Vogeler, who invited him to visit the artists' colony in Worpswede in Northern Germany. On all these journeys for Rilke the encounter with nature figured centrally. But art is just as important to him. He is later to write an account of the artists living in Worpswede and when travelling to Russia his hope is also to write about Russian painters (a project he never realized). While living in Berlin he enrolled in a University course in art history and his prolific essays and poetic writings of these years are shaped by an ongoing meditation on art and form, whether it be landscape or icon painting, poetry or theatre. These meditations are vitally linked to his elaborations on the human-nature relationship. Rilke uses each text anew to consider apparent differences and boundaries, only then to discuss the ways in which they are contingent upon perception where, in fact, all things are transmutable and all that can finally be attested is humanature.

For the description of this concept of an interspersion of here and then, of eternal and temporal, of time and space Rilke, like Yeats, chooses visual art and artists as his main point of reference. In this regard, Rilke radicalises the Jugendstil aesthetic into a holism suitable to his vision. The close conceptual relations between Jugendstil and pre-Raphaelitism reveal a common link between Rilke and Yeats. These movements must not be seen as retreating from politics into mere aestheticism. Rather, they represent an artistic response to the perceived evils of modernity and the manifold woes that manifested as a result of the age of industrialisation and the mechanistic worldview. According to Ferenc Szász both, Jugendstil and pre-Raphaelitism oppos[ed] capitalist societies in an attempt to reform society (18). Reform-movements like “vegetarianism” (to which Rilke adhered) and Freikörperkultur (exercise and swimming in the

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120 Ferenc Szász in “Der Jugendstil als Weltanschauung am Beispiel Rainer Maria Rilkes” (1987) observes that Rilke’s notion of an „all-embracing unity“ did not only begin with his reception of Rodin. Szász links his early works closely to Jugendstil and pre-Raphaelitism, to which “organic unity” between different arts and phenomena of experience is essential. In Wurzeln Rilke describes Heinrich Vogeler’s artwork: “Maybe it was the moonlight over his garden which first pointed him to silver, which he now masters like a poet his language. He understands its soft, congenial, girl-like quality like no other” [“Vielleicht war es der Mondschein über seinem Garten, der ihn zuerst auf das Silber hingewiesen hat, das er jetzt, wie ein Dichter seine Sprache, beherrscht. Er verstehet dieses sanfte, wahlverwandte Metal und seine mädchenhafte Art wie Kein zweiter.”] (W 4 396). The traditional relation of moon-feminine-silver is extended to include art itself, smith, poet and language. According to Szász, Rilke sees continuity between six disparate categories, without once naming what it is exactly that makes them alike. (14) Furthermore, plantlife is a dominant feature in Jugendstil- and pre-Raphaelite ornaments, the prevalence of natural processes, such as growing, becoming, ripening, are principles of composition as well as parameters of understanding the human self.
nude) attempted to strengthen the conscious link between humans and the environment. Jugendstile elevated and included crafts [Kunsthandwerk] and elevated them to the level of art in a manner parallel to the arts and crafts movement that spread through William Morris' efforts in Britain to Ireland giving an important impulse to the Celtic Revival. These movements had in common a focus on manufacturing items for everyday use, furniture as well as books, which were useful, of high quality, as well as aesthetically appealing. Central to both was the attempt to regain a personal relationship with items and the process of their manufacture and use. Pre-Raphaelite and Jugendstil artists, alike, took inspiration from 14th and 15th century art and culture. Not only the artistic topoi but also the societal ideals were embraced by this international movement at the turn of the 19th/20th century. They propagated the return to manufacturing and strove for artistic as well as societal unity (although in locating this ideal unity in the late Renaissance they displayed a partial blindness towards the evil of feudalism) (Ibid.). To Jugendstil and pre-Raphaelite artists, form was not subservient to content, the medium not silent beneath a message but their aspectual identity was revealed in arabesques and ornaments, shifting the gaze between figurative content and abstract form, form and medium, medium and material.

In Notizen zur Melodie der Dinge (1898), Rilke elevates the notion of ‘background’ to a poetological principle, pointing to the undifferentiated state of figure and ground, thus depicting a living canvas, an organic structure of which the creative weaving self’s process of becoming is part. This expresses the environmental dimension of Rilke’s aesthetics:

Evening. A small room. At a table in the centre two children are sitting, facing each other, reluctantly immersed in their books. They are both wide, wide. The books are concealing their flight. Every now and then they call to each other, so as not to get lost in the wide forest of their dreams. In this narrow room they experience colourful, fantastic fates, battling and winning, coming home and marrying, teaching their children to be heroes, possibly even dying. I am extravagant enough to call this action/plot. But what is this scene without the

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121 William Morris demanded integral unity of composition, suggesting that no item or line should be introduced that is not structurally sustained by the overall pattern, so that an overall effect of growing gives the impression that no other solution was possible. Rilke’s own early ideas of art are very much aligned with this notion, Szász claims (15).

122 Judith Ryan recognises Rilke’s debt to Jugendstil aesthetics: “The flowing lines and decorative surfaces of Jugendstil art give new shape to Rilke’s language and imagery. Jugendstil’s abolition of clear distinction between background and foreground, nature and the human figure, subject and object, presents a seductive but troubling vision for the young writer” […] (2004, 23).

123 Through all phases of Rilke’s creative process, in what he took from Rodin and in what comes to the fore in his Orphism, this unity and mysterious continuity of beings and phenomena remains central. In practicing the depiction of continuity, Rilke disengages from classical transcendental metaphysics. In Moderne Lyrik (1898) Rilke scoolds the “cosmic poetry” of Franz Evers who is mislead by his theosophical worldview to elevate the notion of eternity above and beyond the sensuous circulation: “Der Grundzug der kosmischen Poesie des Franz Evers, der durch seine theosophische Weltkenntnis verleitet wird, den Ewigkeitsbegriff über den sinnlichen Kreislauf hinauszuziehen” (W 473).

124 In Die neue Kunst in Berlin Rilke demands the artist to “lower himself / incline towards each thing,” listening: “What do you want to become? Then letting it simply ripen so that it can grow in beauty. All that becomes is becoming beautiful, only one mustn’t disturb it” “[Und neigt sich zu jedem: ’Was willst Du werden?’ Und dann läßt er einfach reifen und schützt es nur dass es in Schönheit werde […] alles was wird, wird schön, man darf es nur nicht stören]” (W 4 128). In the return to organic form Jugendstil and pre-Raphaelitism react to the societal and economic developments of the 19th century. Urbanisation and industrial labour have estranged humans from their environments and the items of their use, positivism and naturalism deepened the rift and thus it was the symbolists in writing and visual arts who restored into consciousness the unity of existence (17).
Rilke compares the idea of character to the process of weaving threads into a texture. To him, the environment not only forms and shapes character and plot, but it is alive. Breathing and sighing, the room becomes an actor, itself. Weaving and textures of antithetical threads are a central poetological image in Rilke: In his dramatic poem Die weiße Fürstin of 1904 he has the heroine say: “Look, thus death is in life. Both run thus through each other, as threads run in a carpet, and out of this an image emerges for someone who passes by.” The peripheral, moving viewer is essential to Rilke as the place of the actualization of the image. But the image itself is always an ‘entanglement’ of a human and nonhuman environment which cannot be clearly differentiated.

Embodied perception has also been shown to be central to Rilke’s notion of Weltinnenraum. Jana Schuster’s reading of Rilke’s poetry in the context of phenomenology in Umkehr der Räume (2011) serves as a foundation for my own reading. Schuster sees Rilke’s observations and hence his poetic positions of self and world as related to Merleau-Ponty’s thought, expressed in his essay “L’Entrelacs – le Chiasme,” published in: Le Visible et l’Invisible.

Merleau-Ponty describes human perception as an enfolding of the visible and tangible into a seeing, sensing body, describing a chiastic reversibility of perception (See Schuster 157). Merleau Ponty views the dense texture of the flesh (“la chair”) as a key element of the fundamental and fundamentally self-referential nature of the visible, enabling synergy and transitivity between one body and another. Thus perception proceeds as a ceaseless metamorphosis of the viewer and the visible world, as a permanent crossing of a threshold [“Übergang”]. It is the place of a process of mutual exchange. It is in this sense, Schuster rightly insists, that Rilke’s poems are staging the process of perception (See 156f). They stage this process as one in which the perceiver is involved simultaneously as world creator and inhabitant. But he creates what exceeds him and

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126 “Sieh, so ist Tod im Leben. Beides läuft / so durcheinander, wie in einem Teppich / die Fäden laufen; und daraus entsteht/ für einen, der vorüberläuft ein Bild” (W 1 133).

127 I will paraphrase, here, Jana Schuster’s line of argument, she quotes from the German translation: “Die Verfliechung – der Chiasmus” (for the entire argument see Schuster 172-203).

128 Jana Schuster sees Rilke’s poetic conceptions of embodied perception as related to Merleau-Ponty who views the body as “place of mutual exchange which is sustained by the communicational ‘medium’ of the flesh” [“Ort eines wechselseitigen Austauschprozesses, der für Merleau-Ponty durch das ‘Kommunikationsmittel’ des Fleisches getragen wird”] (157).
what he cannot fully comprehend or contain. Concerning the relation between the viewer and the viewed, the human and the divine, the human and the image, Rilke believes in a mutual possession of one antithetical pole actualising the other, thus creating a zone of shared identity. This process of emergence he describes in a letter from St. Petersburg to Frieda von Bülow on 27. 05. 1899, recounting how his visit to Florence prepared him for the immensities of Russia. Rilke describes the artwork and human life as equally alive:

Fra Angelico in front of the beggars and supplicants of an Iberian Madonna, who create their god with the same kneeling power, gifting and signifying him with their joy and suffering (small, indistinct emotions), lifting him with their eyelid in the morning and releasing him calmly, when tiredness rips apart their prayers like the strings of rosaries. Basically, what we are looking for in everything new (land, or human or thing) is an expression which helps one or the other of our confessions to become more powerful and responsible/mature. All things exist to become images for us in any one sense or another. And they are not suffering by it, because while they pronounce us/express us ever clearer, our soul is sinking into them, to the same degree.129

### 3.2.1. Unity of Figure and Ground - The Aesthetic of Vorwand

Rilke is convinced that art can break apart habitual perception and that it can participate in revelation – but a revelation of what? In *Aufzeichnungen über Kunst* (1898) Rilke defines art as the:

dark wish of all things to be images of our mysteries. They love letting go of their withered meaning, so as to bear our dark longings. They press into our trembling senses, and thirst for becoming Vorwand (excuse/subterfuge/smokescreen). They want to become what we hold them to be. They are like children, asking to be taken on a journey, they will not comprehend everything but the thousand random and scattered impressions will be simple and beautiful in their faces. Thus the things want to stand in front of the artist’s confessions, when he chooses them for the Vorwand of his work, at the same time secretive and revealing, dark but hemmed by his spirit, like the many singing faces of his soul.130

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130 “Die Kunst ist der dunkle Wunsch aller Dinge, sie wollen alle Bilder unserer Geheimnisse sein, Gerne lassen sie ihren weilten Sinn los, um irgend eine unserer schweren Sehnsüchte zu tragen. Sie drängen sich in unsere zitternden Sinne und dürsten danach, unseren Gefühlen Vorwände zu werden. Sie wollen sein wofür wir sie halten. […] Sie sind wie Kinder, die bitten, man möge sie mitnehmen auf eine Reise, sie werden nicht alles begreifen, aber die tausend zerstreuten und zufälligen Eindrücke werden einfach und schön auf ihrem Gesichte sein. So wollen die Dinge vor den Geständnissen des Künstlers stehen, wenn er sie zum Vorwand seines Werkes erwählt, verschwiegen und verratend zugleich, dankel, aber von seinem Geiste umsäumt, wie viele singende Gesichter seiner Seele” ("Aufzeichnungen über Kunst" W IV 91f).
Rilke first of all personifies the things that press into the poet's perception. This personification takes away agency from the human artist – it is the things that want and press – but the artist, in seaming/hemming them allows them to become “singing faces of his soul” and thus continuous with himself, internal. However, art in his definition does not merely become revelatory of essence or truth, but reveals necessary hiddenness. For Rilke, the things are not merely means to human wants and needs. Personified as children, we have to read the revelation from the expressive faces of the things, veiled in embodiment. Art is not conceived to serve the artist’s intentions, as children are exempted from total accountability. This revealing of concealment becomes crucial to Rilke’s concept of the turning point, *Wendung*, which, among many other attributes, denotes an inversion of the gaze. It has the power to change perception and alter behaviour: “You have to change your life” [“Du mußt dein Leben ändern”]. The imperative that issues forth from “Archaischer Torso Apollos” bears witness to this inversion of address and gaze.

Rilke develops here an aesthetic of the mutual consummation of artefact and humanity within and through each other. “Vorwand” does not only a story invented to conceal an actual fact, but also the “turning up” and “turning out” of a surface (*Vorwand* contains the root of “wenden,” to turn). Here again we approach the philosophical question of the arabesque or ornament, the paradox of a figure or knot-work shaped out of an infinite line. Rilke explicates *Vorwand* as diaphanous, moveable and mutable in *Moderne Lyrik* (1898) (*W* 4 66). Such topoi as “spring landscapes” or “evening scene” into which the “singular emotions project themselves from out of the twilight of his soul” are exposed to the emotions of the artist, who makes the figurative content of his images heavy with his emotions. Thus, an evening mood-scape can turn into the impression of an ocean (Ibid.). In trying to define poetry, Rilke suggests investigating the layeredness of a painter’s canvas to reveal that the evolution of an artwork might have encountered still-life, landscape and portrait, as equally adequate embodiments of the shifting of the artist’s intention and emotional state. Poetry, for Rilke, is much less bound by medium and convention and can perform these shifts much more freely and rapidly. Rilke thus metaphorises *Vorwand* as a cinematographic relation, as the shifting of *laterna magica* images accompanied by music. Foreground and background are fused into unity. He emphasises that the “secret, deep, causal relation of image and sound, this mutual waking and gifting cannot be explained or proven by any analogy.” The performative embodiment of the coincidence of a diaphanous image and an innermost confession cannot be pried apart.

131 Anthony Stephens in *Rainer Maria Rilke’s Gedichte an Die Nacht* (1972) is one of the few critics who note that Rilke’s early theoretical reflections on art are consistent also with his later views; he claims that his views on existence are closely interlinked with his reflections on art (96). However, Stephens argues that Rilke has no trust in a unity of language and world [“kein Vertrauen in eine selbstverständliche Einheit von Sprache und Welt”]. (Ibid.) Sascha Löwenstein questions Stephens’ assessment, asking “whether Rilke doesn’t with his theory aim at emotion rather than transcendence” (45).

132 “*in welches die einzelnen Spezialempfindungen sich aus dem Dämmer seiner Seele projizieren*” (*W* 4 66).

133 “*Der heimliche, tiefe kausale Zusammenhang von Bild und Klang, das gegenseitige sich Wecken und Beschenken läßt sich durch keine Analogie erklären oder beweisen*” (*W* 4 67). Hence, Ji-Ming Tang’s assessment of *Vorwand* as depiction of the exterior world as mirroring of the interior, cannot be followed (Tang, *Fenster-Geschichten* 180).
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Thus, the work of art, which in *Moderne Lyrik* Rilke frees in poignant words from the purpose of mimesis and socio-political commentary, becomes a form of life ["Lebensform"] (Ibid.). In the artist’s interior the mystery of the things merges with his innermost sensations “as if they were his own longings, audible” (Ibid.). Poetry occupies the foremost position because it is able to turn even emotion into *Vorwand* and thus make ever subtler confessions, approaching the “last silent sources of all life” (Ibid.). Sascha Löwenstein has to be followed when in his convincing analysis of Rilke’s earliest poetry in *Poetik und dichterisches Selbstverständnis* (2004) he describes even the very young Rilke’s notion of poetry as “emotional and experiential resonance” (52). Löwenstein sees a difference between Rilke’s understanding and Schlegel’s Romantic notion of nature requiring the poet to provide a key and solve nature’s mystery by speaking it out loud (See 61). His early poem “Waldesrauschen,” published in *Leben und Lieder*, admits to the inability of human language to express or anticipate the language of the forest:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Waldesrauschen</th>
<th>Wood-rustling/noise/static</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IV</td>
<td>IV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was sind Lieder, die die Saiten meiner Leier froh beseelen, gegen das, was deine weiten Wipfel, Hochwald, sich erzählen?</td>
<td>What are songs, inspiring joyously the strings of my lyra against that which your wide tree-tops, high forest, are telling each other?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was sind Lieder, aus den Launen müder Sinne, duftbetäubter stammend, gegen jenes Raunen deiner ewig grünen Häupter.</td>
<td>What are songs, born from the whims of tired senses, numbed by perfumes against the murmur of your eternally green heads?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meine Lieder, die wohl allen künden sollten, was die Zweige rauschen, meine Lieder schallen kaum als Echo, und ich schweige</td>
<td>My songs which should proclaim to all what your branches are rustling,¹³⁴ my songs are sounding hardly as an echo, and I am silent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schweige, so ich dich betrete, Hochwald, wenn Du auf und nieder wogest. Träume oder bete. Was sind Worte, was sind Lieder? (SW 3 425)</td>
<td>Silent I am, when I enter you high forest, when you surge up and down. I dream or pray. What are words? What are songs?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Unable to turn the veiled language of nature into human language and thereby solve the mystery and “proclaim what is being communicated in the song of nature,” the poet fails to perform the most crucial task Romanticism demands (Löwenstein 65). The poem gives up the Romantic dream and becomes modernist in performing speechlessness, the inability to speak the magic word, revealing its necessary concealment. The only answer provided in the face of the speaker’s silence can be found in part II of the poem: “I suppose the same signal/static/murmur/ has been sounding for a long time through my heart” ["Mich deucht das selbe Rauschen / tönt lang schon durch mein Herz"] (Ibid.). Sascha Löwenstein points to the heart as the locus of

¹³⁴ It is important to note the different dimensions this word evokes in German: murmuring, rustling, whirring, but also static or signal noise.
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understanding. The heart is a transit space, a reverberating medium which nature sounds. The rustling of the forest is not directed at the eavesdropping outsider. According to Löwenstein it is not to be understood as a communication; the poet is being left out of the “monologue of nature” (Ibid.).

However, it isn’t exactly a monologue. Communication still takes place. The poet witnesses this communication but does not comprehend it. He is not completely left out because he still partakes as the silent recipient of a phenomenon of sound. And it is not a monologue as the forest is depicted as an omniscient multi-agent listener and speaker, resounding and receiving. In the last stanza Rilke inverts the equation of forest and ocean that lies also at the heart of H. D.’s vorticist poem *Ornäid*. Rilke imagines the trees in terms of an ocean surging up and down, submerging the speaker. And the omission of the personal pronoun, which is replaced and indicated by use of the verbs “schweige”, “träume,” “bete” in the first person, emphasises this notion of the self being lost in process. The language of nature is no longer intelligible, the poet is not privileged to understand or interpret. Singing is replaced by silence, dream and prayer.

However, Löwenstein is correct in observing that Rilke’s “Chandos crisis” not only takes place four years before Hofmannsthal writes his famous letter of the same name, but also does not shake the poet so fundamentally as to halt his poetic speaking (128). This, I would claim, is due to the fact that Rilke is able to develop new modes of speaking that enable him to give expression to the altered way in which he perceives the relation between self, world and speech, rather than just mourn the loss of old modes and assumptions. I will claim in the following that Rilke criticises destructive and dysfunctional modes of relating to the environment. The idea of resonance and the symphonic co-habitation of beings, as the foundation of his poetics, are developed first in *Notizen zur Melodie der Dinge* (1898).

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135 The heart in early Yeats is no less pervaded by the elements and reverberating: In “Maid Quiet” “the winds that awakened the stars / are burning in my blood […] now words that called up the lightning are hurtling through my heart”(VP 171).

136 See Jana Schuster’s excellent study *Umkehr der Räume* (2011) on the inversion of stasis into process in Rilke’s poetry for a more thorough assessment of this question.

137 Rilke’s own years of silence will begin after the completion of his novel and with the onset of the outrage of WW I.

138 Marilyn Vogler Urion in *Emerson’s Presence in Rilke’s Imagery: Shadows of Early Influence* (1993) outlines the influence of R. W. Emerson on this particular essay. She points to Zinn’s documentation of the fact that Rilke read Oskar Dähnert’s 1897 translation of Emerson’s essays published by Reclam. She delineates the close link between Rilke’s “Dinge” and Emerson’s “things.” The similarity Vogler Urion sees, for example, between the image of a room full of people in conventional conversation and Rilke’s setting in *Notizen* is indeed striking: “In common hours, society sits cold and statuesque. We all stand waiting, empty - knowing, possibly, that we can be full, surrounded by mighty symbols which are not symbols to us, but prose and trivial toys. Then cometh the god and converts the statues into fiery men […]” (Emmerson, *Complete Works* 2: 311). However, Vogler Urion notes that although the general assumption is the same, in Rilke it is not God who creates transformation but a pentecostal storm” (W 4 107). The same rustle/static/signal noise which turned the poet silent in “Waldrauschen” now is defined as divine inspiration. Rilke comes closer to Boehme’s *Signatura* in his *Notizen* than anywhere else in his reflective prose.
3.2.2. Notizen zur Melodie der Dinge (1898): Overcoming Anthropocentrism

The central project of the Notizen (Notes on the Melody of the Things) is a shift from an anthropocentric to an eco-centric understanding of humanity. Rilke executes this transition through a comparison of different art forms: painting, drama and verse. He approaches humanist ways of “recognising man” via the “primitive” painting of icons:

we are still painting humans on golden ground, like primitive peoples. Humans stand in front of something undefined, sometimes in front of gold, sometimes grey. Sometimes they appear showered in light and often times with an unfathomable dark behind them. One understands that. Humans have to be isolated to be recognisable. But after long experience it is appropriate to place again into a relationship the single observations and to follow their broader gestures with a riper gaze.139

Comparing a Trecento icon with early Italian masters like Santa Conversazione who positioned the human figure against a landscape, Rilke views the landscape not as a mere decorative background but as omni-presence, glowing like a shared soul from which the depicted humans derive their smile and their love.140 Thus, the discourse on Renaissance and pre-Renaissance art is the means by which Rilke makes different forms of human-environment relationships visible. Rilke observes both the anthropocentric and the ecocentric mode of depicting humans as isolated against their background or integrated within it; he chooses the latter as the more adequate and beneficial approach. Art, in a second step assumes the task of furthering re-integration: “it must not stop at the individual, who is only the portal of life, it must journey through them, it must not tire. To realise itself it must become active where all are – One. When it then gifts the One, infinite wealth comes over all.”141 In the following, Rilke dismisses stage drama as an attempt to pose humans simply side by side, as the artists of the Trecento did.142

Rilke invokes the background as a witness. Only once a background appears behind the actors in a play, can they begin to communicate. The background validates their communications and actions; it is their shared home. Like a certificate that proves their identity it inscribes in them


140 “Die Landschaft glänzt hinter ihnen wie eine gemeinsame Seele, aus der heraus sie ihr Lächeln und ihre Liebe holen” (W 4 103-104).


142 “Dabei ergibt sich, daß sie die Menschen einfach neben einander stellt, wie die im Trecento es taten, und es ihnen selbst überläßt sich mit einander zu befreunden über das Grau oder das Gold des Hintergrundes hin” (W 4 108).
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“The identical sense and insignium of the same prince.”\(^{143}\) The common background guaranteeing their mutual understanding, however, must, itself, remain secretive. Another metaphor Rilke introduces for the shared background is that of an invisible altar. All we see is the reflection of the fire burning on it in the faces of those who celebrate a ritual at it. Contrary to Hillebrand’s claim, Rilke does not become the “namer of things and of the essences that inhabit them” but the one who abstains from naming [“Benenner der Dinge und der ihnen innewohnenden Substanzen”] (Gesang und Abgesang deutscher Lyrik von Goethe bis Celan 334).

Rilke’s approach to unity and his recourse to music have been variously read as a mere application of Nietzsche’s thought (See Rolleston 1970, Dürr 2006). However, Walter Büsch in Bild-Gebärde Zeugenschaft (2003) points to the differing viewpoints Rilke scripted into his marginalia on Nietzsche. Rilke is not a singer of intoxication and orgy; his realm is that of complaint of “suffering, oppressed and tortured souls” (Büs 93). I would further agree with Sascha Löwenstein that Rilke reflects on Nietzsche but does not, as opposed to Hofmansthal in the Chandos letter, adhere to his ideas. As Löwenstein points out, Nietzsche in Menschliches, Allzumenschliches (1878) views language as a world that is placed besides the actual world. This is incommensurable with Rilke’s notion of participation and reverberation. All that humans do, even their language, is “part of a melody inhabiting rightfully a certain space and being obliged to contribute to a shared work, in which the smallest is worth just as much as the highest. To participate and not to be superfluous [“überzählig”] is the first experience of silent unfolding.”\(^{144}\) For Rilke, it would be a fruitless endeavour to look for the deepest secrets inside ourselves rather than in the background which connects us meaningfully. In our beginnings and ends, in birth and death, the mystery of being can be glimpsed. Finally, Rilke arrives at a rhizomatic\(^{145}\) unity of humanity and nature:

and we are like fruits. We hang high up in strangely interlaced branches and many winds happen to us. What we own is our ripeness, our sweetness our beauty. But the energy that fuels them flows within one trunk from a root that grew wide across worlds into us all and if we want to be witness to its power we

\(^{143}\) “Erst bis ein Hintergrund hinter ihnen steht, beginnen sie miteinander zu verkehren. Sie müssen sich ja berufen können auf die eine Heimat. Sie müssen einander gleichsam die Beglaubigungen zeigen, welche sie mit sich tragen und welche Alle den Sinn und das Insiegel desselben Fürsten enthalten” (W 4 106).

\(^{144}\) “Es ist eine sorglose Sicherheit in der einfachen Überzeugung, Teil einer Melodie zu sein, also einen bestimmten Raum zu Recht zu besitzen und eine bestimmte Pflicht an einem breiten Werke zu haben, in dem der Geringste ebensoviel wertet wie der Größte. Nicht überzählig zu sein, ist die erste Bedingung der bewußten und ruhigen Entfaltung” (W 4 112). In quoting the book of Job Rilke promises that in realising this all-connecting background melody, mankind overcomes the inadequacy of Yahwe’s psychological state, who, in a vindictive rant, accuses Job of obscuring his counsel/decision from him: “daß man, sobald man einmal die Melodie des Hintergrundes gefunden hat, nicht mehr radial ist in seinen Worten und dunkel in seinen Entschlüssen” (Ibid.). For an insightful discussion of the psychological evolution of God in the Old Testament see C. G. Jung Antwort auf Hiob (1952).

\(^{145}\) This notion of a shared root system Yeats uses as well, in “The coming of wisdom with time” (1916): “Though leaves are many, the root is one; /Through all the lying days of my youth / I swayed my leaves and flowers in the sun; Now I may wither into the truth” (VP 261).
The ripe fruit already suggests itself as a very momentary and fragile state. As the fruit is not self-generated and self-sustained and is not an end in itself. In the same way humanity is dependent on the energy that substantiates it and the context in which it occurs. The organic unity envisioned here is not eradicating difference; each individual retains a unique singularity which instantiates the underlying unity in an incomparable way. Within this unique individuality unity consummates itself and can become visible. Rilke arrives at a reconciliation of antitheses.

3.2.3. Worpswede (1902) – The Emergence of Rilke’s Notion of Landscape-as-Face

As has already been mentioned, Rilke’s trips to Italy, Russia and Worpswede between 1897 and 1900 shape his works and perceptions profoundly. Russia will still be present twenty years later, when he writes the *Sonette an Orpheus*. In a jubilant letter to Lou he recounts the appearance of a horse on an evening in Russia which, after so many years of inner fermentation, he was overjoyed to have transformed into artistic expression (See Günther 93). Landscape became important for Rilke as more than a backdrop to human life.

The term ‘landscape’ corresponds with the ethymologically similar word *Landschaft* in German. And the term bears the same connotation in both languages. Whereas in the term “nature” the involvement of the human is not immediately apparent, the definition of landscape is already ambivalent and relational. Rachel DeLue and James Elkin point out the twofold character of the traditional definition of landscape derived from Dr. Johnson’s classical 1755 dictionary. Landscape is: “1) ‘a region; the prospect of a country’ and 2) ‘A picture representing an extent of space, with the various objects in it.’” Thus, landscape is always already man-made: selectively constructed within the frame of human perception and representation (159). The Middle English word *Landscipe* consisting of the word ‘land,’ as that which contains all living entities and the suffix ‘scipe,’ is located between the Germanic root *schaffen* (to create) and the modern English –*ship* indicating “association, partnership.” It also indicates mutuality: “people shape the land, and the land shapes the people” (160). Landscape, as nexus of nature, humanity, perception and representation, is radicalised by Rilke in the introductory essay he wrote for his

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147 Petra Raymond points out that the German word *Landschaft* can denote both the natural and the cultural aspects of the environment but also embraces urban, industrial or media “scapes.” But the suffix “schaft” also indicates an achieved, created union of either people as in “Sippschaft, Bruderschaft” or geographical districts “Grafschaft” (*Von der Landschaft im Kopf zur Landschaft aus Sprache*).
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monograph on the artists in Worpswede. Rilke’s writing itself is influenced by the outlook of the artist’s colony. The artists’ decision to live among the peasants did not, as Larson Powell contends, establish a sentimental move “back to nature, but entailed a critique of the classical landscape’s veduta perspective” (The Technological Unconscious in German Modernist Literature 2008, 68). According to Powell, the book is “a narrative of his own self-discovery as a poet, as well as an essay on the relation of nature to the aesthetic artifice and [it is] thus one of the earliest manifestos of modernism” (Ibid.). Bernd Stenzig observes the curious fact that this very substantial volume of theoretical prose has received relatively little critical attention, even though Rilke lays out a program for his own art in assessing the visual art of the Worpswede painters. (“‘Die Landschaft ist ein Fremdes für uns’” 112) Stenzig, however, claims that the text outlines the departure from a lofty and superior vantage point, the “sovereign panoramic perspective […] metaphorizing the historical distance between Eden and the present” and an emergence into a realm of uncertainty and exposure (69). It is here, as well, that Rilke for the first time programmatically talks of becoming. The artists he is about to introduce us to are all in the process of becoming “[‘Werdende’] (W 4 306). In this sense the relation between self, nature and artefact is already in Worpswede one of becoming. The book does not culminate in the proclamation of a fundamental difference between humankind and nature” as Helen Bridge suggests in “Rilke and the Visual Arts,” (2010) but begins with an interruption and consistently describes a dynamic unity of opposites (148). In a diary entry on the 06th of September 1900 Rilke recounts an evening walk with his artist friend Heinrich Vogeler:

We walked together through the heath, in the evening, in the wind. And walking in Worpswede always happens like this: for a while you walk ahead, in conversations, which the wind soon destroys […] At every moment something is being held into the clayey149 [“tonige”] air: a tree, a house, a windmill turning very slowly, a man with black shoulders, a big cow or a hard-edged, jagged goat walking into the sky. All abounds in conversation, in which landscape participates from all sides with a hundred voices.150

148 Rilke, for the first time in his life, experiences a joyful sense of being part of an artistic community in Worpswede (See Bridge “Rilke and the visual arts” 146). There he meets his wife, the sculptor Clara Westhoff. However, after financial support from his relatives ceases and he sees himself confronted with the need to provide for wife and daughter, he takes up a commission by Velhagen & Klasing, to write a monograph for their popular series on art (Ibid.). Even though “drudgery” might have been involved in the project, Rilke is happy to develop his own ideas on art, nature and mankind in the opening, which he does not expect to go down too well with the publisher (Bridge 148).

149 ‘Tonig’ – through the homonymous root ‘Ton’ also bears a dimension of sound and resounding. Rilke deliberates the ambiguity of wind as all-connecting medium and cosmogonic principle. Derived from the all-creating “ruach” the Hebrew concept for the breath of god, which births and inspires the world and instantiates human logos and language, appears to be a central topos in the literature of the turn of the century. Hugo von Hofmannsthal in his “Briefe des Zurückgekehrten” describes how the trees are birthing themselves [”gebären sich”] in a storm, the valleys are baring themselves [”gaben …sich preis”] and even in the stones there was petrified storm (quoted in Schneider 74).

150 Wir gingen zusammen durch die Heide, abends im Wind. Und das Gehen in Worpswede ist jedesmal so: eine Weile wandert man vorwärts, in Gesprächen, welche der Wind rasch zerstört[…]. Jeden Augenblick wird etwas in die tonige Luft gehalten, ein Baum, ein Haus, eine Mühle, die sich ganz langsam dreht, ein Mann mit schwarzen Schultern, eine große Kuh oder eine hartkantige, zackige Ziege, die in den Himmel geht. Da gibt es nur Gespräche, an denen die Landschaft teilnimmt, von allen Seiten und mit hundert Stimmen” (Rainer Maria Rilke Tagebücher aus der Frühzeit 2003).
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Wind and air – the element which disrupts and generates communication and relation - is significant, here. Powell’s observation that Rilke loses “the ability to personify” nature in Worpswede is obviously incorrect, as the narrated landscape is full of non-human presences and agencies, involved in actions habitually associated with humankind (69). However, the kind of agency nature assumes is not safe and idyllic. Nature is not a distinct persona to have a leisurely talk with, as it was still for Wordsworth and Goethe. No longer “Eichendorff’s schöne Fremde,” nature moves too close for comfort, in a shared zone of contagion (Ibid.). Delineation of self from nature becomes impossible. It is very revealing that Powell claims that Rilke depicts at the same time the “facelessness of nature” and a “face” of nature that is “too close for comfort” (Ibid.). The visual paradox of the invisible/too close presence of nature within embodied seeing, that is to say, nature’s insistence in the very curving of our lens is the vantage point that interests Rilke.

He opens the introduction to his book with the observation that a history of landscape painting has not yet been written (See W 4 307). However, if one undertook such a project this would necessitate a move away from creating an anthropocentric narrative: “wouldn’t [we] have to cease to see humanity as the most important issue, the essential core to which things and animals point silently and in unison, as to a goal and the perfection of their mute and unconscious life.” The lack of a question mark serves as an indication of an affirmative belief underlying the rhetorical question. He further describes the task in positive terms:

Those attempting to write the history of landscape would find themselves, at first, helplessly exposed to the strange, the unrelated, the ungraspable. We are used to reckoning with forms [Gestalten], and the landscape has no form, we are used to concluding from movements to acts of the will, and the landscape does not will [will nicht], when it moves. The waters are going [gehen] and within them the images of things are shivering. And in the wind, which is rustling in the old trees, young forests are growing into a future we will not experience. We are used to reading much from the hands of humans and all from their face, in which, as on the face of a clock, the hours are visible that are carrying or cradling their souls. But landscape stands there with no hands and no face – or it is all face and has, through the unsurveyable size of its traits, a fearful and oppressive effect on human beings, comparable to the ghost apparition on the famous sheet of the Japanese painter Hokusai (transl. in Powell 68f).
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With the totum pro parte synecdoche, turning nature into “all face,” Rilke contributes to the work of contemporary environmental ethics, which has long sought to reconcile environmental ethics with Levinasian ethics by calling for an inclusion of nature into the notion of the face.

The face, in Levinas’s works describes a moment of ethics. To Levinas the face is constituted within “absolute experience” in a moment of revelation:

[A] coinciding of the expressed with him who expresses, which is the privileged manifestation of the Other, the manifestation of a face over and beyond form. Form – incessantly betraying its own manifestation, congealing into a plastic form, for it is adequate to the same – alienates the exteriority of the other. The face is a living presence; it is expression, the life of expression consists in undoing the form, in which the existent, exposed as a theme, is thereby dissimulated. The face speaks. The manifestation of the face is already discourse (Totality and Infinity 66).

Landscape for Rilke performs a similar function in that it coincides with the human as the expressed coincides with expression in the face in its Levinasian conception. The face for Rilke moves, thus, beyond the (only) human. Anthony R. Stephens sees this paradox as the central characteristic of the face in Rilke’s poetry. The most important boundary of our being (“Grenze unseres Daseins”) is the face, since so many of our concepts of participation are tied to the visual sense, it is not surprising that “the physical location of this sense should come to represent the frontier between self and world” (178). Thus, Stephens claims that the human face becomes an image of separation inscribing the distance between self and object (Ibid.).

The notion of the face is closely related to the emergence of the modern idea of man. The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, whose theories will be discussed at length in chapter four and five, bases his entire oeuvre on the observation of a split between “bare” life (exposed, physical unprotected) and “good” life (human, worthy of protection, dignified). Connal Parsley in his article “The Mask and Agamben: the Transitional Juridical Technics of Legal Relation” (2010) explores the emergence of Agamben’s work against the background of European legal thought, especially that of Thomas Hobbes. He observes a “tightly sedimented” historic correlation of natural life and the mask as political artifice (“a device, dispositif or apparatus” 12). Techné lies at the very heart of the process of delineating bare life from political life – and only the latter enjoys legal entitlements. Parsley argues that this split is underlying Hobbes’ thought: Thomas Hobbes in Leviathan points out the importance of the face to human self-authorisation “across theatrical and political scenes”:

153 Joshua Shaw, in his review on the seminal collection of essays on the relevance of Levinas’s thought for environmental ethics, Edelglass et al, Facing Nature (2012), observes that Peter Atterton, Matthew Calarco, Edward Casey, Alphonso Lingis, and David Wood have struggled with Levinas’ notion of the face. They have “questioned whether Levinas’ account of ethical responsibility has any relevance for animal rights and environmentalism.” He observes a “growing consensus in these publications that Levinas’ account of responsibility is, at best, underdeveloped or, at worst, objectionably anthropocentric in its treatment of the ethical standing of non-human nature. Levinas is one of the leading figures responsible for inspiring the ‘ethical turn’ in continental philosophy. However, he unfailingly equates ethical responsibility with interpersonal relationships in his major works - face-to-face encounters with a human other” (Shaw n.p.).
The word Person is Latin: instead whereof the Greeks have πρόσωπον, which signifies the Face, as Persona in Latin signifies the disguise, or outward appearance of a man, counterfeited on the Stage; and sometimes more particularly that part of it, which disguiseth the face, as a Mask or Visard: And from the Stage, hath been translated to any Representer of speech and action, as well as in Tribunals, as Theatres. So that a Person, is the same that an Actor is, both on the stage and in common Conversation; and to Personate, is to Act, or Represent himself, or another; and he that acteth another, is said to beare his Person, or act in his name; (in which sence Cicero useth it (quoted after Parsley 14).

The Face enables its owner to a legal presence. It is the very foundation of the bearer’s entitlements in the social and legal realm. Parsley calls it an “avowed ‘Fiction’ of political appearance” which creates an “indissoluble relation between the creation of a fictional representation, to which is attributed a Leviathan’s power, and the juridical notions of the person in relation to authorship and authority” (15). The fundamental assumption on which this wielding of power works is the notion of nature as a work of art which mimetically represents rather than innately embodies divinity. The world is thought as divinely authored and the human spheres as mimetically related to this originary act of authoring. Thus, “not just the ability, but precisely the authority to handle the juridical and covenanting self — whether one’s own or that of another” is conferred (14). To the Hobbesian human self-relation of a “bare life” stratum of natural existence to a political artifice, “the primariness of the representability of the self (over the substance that is represented)” is essential (18). Personality since Hobbes, Parsley argues, is therefore not only modelled upon but “pre-supposed by the artificial devices of its representation” (19).

The face in a political sense is not a prop or prosthesis; it assumes the physical body of the bearer. The political face acts as a shelter, granting dignitas – precisely by differentiating life worthy of protection against “bare life,” which can be extinguished. Agamben suggests to decide not to decide on where the caesura runs between valuable, dignified life, endowed with a face, worthy of protecting and natural life ready to be killed or treated as resource. The very poles vanish if we refuse to create the caesurae and enter a “zone of non-knowledge” (Agamben [2004] 92). Parsley argues that Agamben understands the face as a threshold:

Agamben casts the face as at once a kind of extreme ‘zero-point’ of the capture and presupposition of the natural being by the linguistic structures of signification and, at the same time, a potentially transformative exposure of that process. […] This very threshold is the point of collapse between personated and natural life; the point at which one’s internal qualities or ‘predicates’ interface with the world; the ‘threshold of de-propriation and de-identification of all manners and of all qualities — a threshold in which only the latter become purely Communicable’. This is why he exhorts us to dwell, somehow, where nothing in us can be predicated: ‘Be only your face,’ he writes, ‘Go to the threshold. Do not remain the subjects of your properties or faculties, do not stay beneath them: rather, go with them, in them, beyond them’ (100).

In exactly this sense Rilke frees the idea of the face from being restricted to humans through the ascription of a face to nature. Landscape is “unsurveyable”: the concise contour of the face is broken into a presence of which the outline cannot be grasped. For Levinas, the transgression of
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form by the motion of the infinite, births the moment of speech. Rilke also employs a notion of nature possessing speech (in possessing a face) when he, later, in his Orphic phase, describes the “mouth of nature” [“Mund der Natur”] as Orpheus’ presence in all things, as for example in sonnet XXVI:

| Schließlich zerschlugen sie dich, von der Rache gehetzt,  
| während dein Klang noch in Löwen und Felsen verweilte  
| O du verlorener Gott! Du unendliche Spur!  
| Nur weil dich reißend zuletzt die Feindschaft  
| verteilte,  
| sind wir die Hörenden jetzt und ein Mund der Natur. (W 2 253) |

At last they shattered you, spurred by revenge,  
while your sound still lingered in lions and rocks  
and in trees and birds. There you are still singing.  
O you lost god! You infinite trace!  
Only because in tearing you apart enmity  
distributed you,  
we are the hearing ones now and a mouth of/to nature.

Through the self-giving of the divine into destruction, it transgresses its own form and every other limited form. Therefore Orpheus is a “lost God” an “infinite trace” – the addressee whenever nature is addressed. No longer transcendent, no longer a metaphysical object, but a dissembled all-presence, granting a mouth to all that exists, instantiating the boundless face. To this infinite divine expanse violence is integral, the violence of the maenads, those personified maidens, those forces which, according to the myth, were envious because Orpheus had refused to mingle with them. However, it is significant that Rilke in this passage uses images of the Eucharist of the distribution of the divine body through destruction, as Christ did, feeding the multitude by tearing to pieces [“reißen” and “verteilen”] the bodies of bread and fish.154 It is in this sense that for Rilke the path from “internality/intimacy to greatness leads through sacrifice” [“Der Weg von der Innigkeit zur Größe / geht durch das Opfer”] (SW II, 82-84). Rilke chooses thisaphorism of Rudolf Kassner’s for the motto of one of his most poetologically significant

154 The ecological dimension that is lost to present day Platono-Christianity becomes apparent when meditating on the early Christian identification with the ichthus — the acrostic of Christ identified as fish, the body of a non-human being given to nourish the multitudinous human. Paulinus of Nola says of Christ that “he himself is the true bread and the fish of living water […] panis ipse verus et aquae vivae Christus” […] while prosper of Aquitaine speaks of Christ as giving himself as food for his disciples by the sea shore and offering himself to the whole world as Ichthus” (See Lowrie, Christian Art and Architecture 232f).

155 Rudolf Kassner was a translator, essayist and cultural philosopher, with whom Rilke kept a lively and lifelong friendship and correspondence after they met in 1899. Kassner was the first to translate Blake into German and Blakean ideas became central to his own writings. Judith Ryan points out that Kassner’s Die Mystik, die Künstler und das Leben [Mysticism, artists and life] delivers a description of Blake’s prophetic books “that could almost pass for a description of the Duino Elegies” (Ryan [2004] 111). Ryan remarks that Rilke studied Kassner’s works intensely and recommended his books frequently. She observes that Kassner’s ethics are based on Blake’s system of ethics to which the only sin is that of “self-pollution” (112). Ryan sees Rilke’s angel as a mirror to the human, as a development of Kassner’s ideas derived from Blake as well, as his chapters on pre-Raphaelite painters (Ibid.).
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poems called “Wendung”[^156] [“Turning point”/ “Turn”/ “Twist”]. Greatness, here, is no longer achievable as self-actualising human heroism but as an endless dissolution of the embodied self into earth’s body. The only thing that is sacrificed is the human vantage point, the privilege of speech and the exclusively human face as the property of a subject.

The relevance of Rilke’s poetry to our thinking of being in the age of environmental crises is apparent. Language to him is no longer the privilege of humanity. The perception of world and self creates a shifting, shimmering, oscillating texture, which roots in the earth’s and atmosphere’s cycles of relating and exchanging. Emergence, transformation and destruction of form become meaningful aspects to unity. David Abram in his ground-breaking contribution to ecocriticism The Spell of the Sensuous (1996) delimits Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the ‘flesh’ developed in his last, and through his death in 1961 unfinished, work Le Visible et L’invisible, suivi de Motes de Travail (1968). Abram claims that Merleau-Ponty retains from Saussure the notion of language as an interdependent, webleike system of relations. But since our expressive, speaking bodies are for Merleau-Ponty necessary parts of this system – since the web of language is for him a carnal medium woven in the depths of our perceptual participation in the things and beings around us – Merleau-Ponty comes in his final writings to affirm that it is first the sensuous, perceptual world that is relational and webleike in character, and hence that the organic, interconnected structure of any language is an extension or echo of the deeply interconnected matrix. […] [T]he Flesh, […] an intertwined, and actively intertwining lattice of mutually dependent phenomena, both sensorial and sentient, of which our own sensing bodies are a part. […] The enigmatic nature of language echoes and ‘prolongs unto the invisible,’ the wild, interpenetrating, interdependent nature of the sensible landscape itself (84-85).

Our own form – the body and its senses – has in traditional humanism conceived nature as exterior. But in including the human in the “living flesh” of nature, Rilke moves the moment of estrangement to the inside, to the moment when the human self encounters its forgetfulness of how it is already one with its environment, which instantiates the body and its senses, which then, in turn, face it as an outside. Bestowing a face and personality to the environment can thus become a revelation of the a priori involvement: it is the environment which via human signification gives a face to itself.

Merleau-Ponty challenges this forgetting of the “expressive depths” of nature by observing “[t]hat the things have us and that it is not we who have the things […] that it is being who speaks within us and not we who speak of being” because language itself is not human alone “it is the very voice of the trees, the waves, and the forests” (See 125, 194). Based on this notion Abram observes that the complexity of human language is rooted in the complexity of earth’s

[^156]: I base my reading on Judith Ryan’s and Sandra Kluwe’s elucidation of the background of the term Wendung. Judith Ryan connects Rilke’s concept of Umkehr (turn-around) to Kassner’s notion of “In/wendigkei” (literally: in/turnability) (Umschlag und Verwandung 136f). The turning of the mind/spirit (“Geist”) from externality to internality, which is only fully achieved when recognition has freed itself from all that is external to it: “Erst wenn es sich von allem ihm Wesenfremden befreit hat, ist das Erkennen bei sich selbst” (Kluwe Kristi und Kairus 1999, 142). Kluwe mentions the great importance of Kassner’s book Zahl und Gesicht [Number and Face] on Rilke. In his book, Kassner ascribes to poetry the power to turn “number” into “idea” and “face” and thereby creates “centre,” a fourth dimension in which all-unity appears (See Ibid.).
ecology itself and that through technological civilisation’s diminution of biodiversity language and experience will be radically diminished: “For when we no longer hear the voices of warbler and wren, our own speaking can no longer be nourished by their cadences” (86). Our words will become “emptied of their earthly resonance” (Ibid.).

This earthly resonance is paramount to Rilke, to whom the animal’s cry has a vital function in closing the circuit of the earth’s “heart.” In the poem “Face, my face” [“Gesicht, mein Gesicht”] from the Middle period, he writes:

| Mein Dunkel, mein Dunkel, da steh ich mit dir | My darkness, my darkness, there I stand with you |
| Und alles geht draußen vorbei; | And all passes by on the outside; |
| Und ich wollte mir wüchse wie einem Tier | And I wish I grew a voice, like an animal’s, |
| Eine Stimme, ein einziger Schrei | One single cry |
| Für alles ;- denn was soll mir die Zahl | For all; because what of the number |
| Der Worte, die kommen und fliehn | Of words, they come and flee |
| Wenn ein Vogellaut vieltausendmal | When a bird's sound many a thousand times |
| Geschrien und wieder geschrien | Screamed and screamed again |
| Ein winziges Herz so groß macht und eins | magnifies a tiny heart, expanding it, making it one |
| Mit dem Herzen der Luft, mit dem Herzen des Hains | With the heart of the air, with the heart of the grove |
| Und so hell und so hörbar für Ihn, | And so light and so audible to him |
| Der vor uns allen sooft es tagt | Who rises before all of us at every day-break, |
| Aufsteigt wie lauter Gestein. | rises like pure stone, |
| Und türm ich mein Herz auf mein Hirn und mein Sehnen darauf und mein Einsamsein: | And if I tower my heart on my brain and my Longing thereupon and my loneliness: |
| Wie wird das klein | How small it becomes |
| weil er es überragt. (III 12) | because he protrudes/exceeds beyond it. |

The tiny heart of the bird is made one with the greater heart of the environment on account of the bird’s voice. The speaker wishes for an animal’s voice because, as opposed to the fleeting human words, the insistence of the voice as pure self-expression connects the bird to the greater heart-circulation [Herz-Kreislauf] of the world. Rilke’s personification of nature does not reduce nature to the role of vehicle in metaphoric self-aggrandisement. The one who “rises like pure stone” is no longer purely human he is not entirely landscape and not simply god. It is a figure of exceeding, it is a figure which gives cohesion to the community (human and bird) by rising “before us all.” Yet, it remains an undefined, empty place. Also, the final extended embracing rhyme: \textit{abbbba} structurally realises a considerable extension of relation and cohesion between diverse the environment, the human and the supernatural.

Rilke in \textit{Worpswede} observes that landscape appears “oppressive” to us: “landscape stands there with no hands and no face – or it is \textit{all face} and has, through the unsurveyable size of its traits, a fearful and oppressive effect on human beings, comparable to the ghost apparition on the famous sheet of the Japanese painter Hokusai” (W 4 308). The human body is a disruption, a dehiscence in nature, the site at which nature becomes paradoxically visible \textit{as} obscure. Perceiving unity naturally pre-necessitates the ability to also anticipate the death of the body, and it is in this sense that the formlessness of nature becomes oppressive. Rilke mentions in this context a print by the Japanese painter Katushika Hokusai (1760-1849). Hokusai was famous for his one hundred wood-cuts of Mount Fuji. Richard Lane remarks that the ghost prints are "[p]erhaps
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Hokusai’s most unusual productions of this frenetic half-decade of print activity in the early 1830s […] a species hitherto met with mainly as an adjunct to depiction of supernatural Kabuki tableaux” (*Hokusai: Life and Work* 217, 291).

![Fig. 3 Hokusai’s ‘Ghost Tales’ (Hyaku-monogatari), 1893 reproductions of original wood-block prints (c. 26 x 19 cms)](image)

Although, the third print is easily the most “oppressive,” one monstrous human-animal face smiling and pointing at the face of the severed head of a human child. It seems more likely that Rilke referred to either the first or second, since the porous and pervaded uncertain position of the face is most clearly visible in those. While the demon in the third image combines animality and culturality in the depiction of a tusked and horned human wearing an elaborate gown, the first two show:

(a) a discarded paper lantern through which reeds or saplings of trees grow. It has a big hole and the mouth of the face painted on the lantern coincides with this hole,
(b) an animated skeleton peering over a diaphanous curtain. It is likewise “pierced” by reeds or saplings and assumes a facial expression that hints at mawkishness, awkwardness.

The first two prints depict human-nature uncertainty, visible in the oscillating, liminal figures of death and the discarded object. Both, object and skeleton, bear living human features with animated eyes. However, the likeness to Rilke’s poetics of landscape and perception is only rudimentary, since the faces in the prints are still sufficiently delineated and graspable.

Seventeen years before Freud published his essay “Das Unheimliche,” centering on the notion of the chiasmic relation of the familiar and the strange, Rilke develops a notion of self-alienation through the realisation of all-too-close nature, coming into hiding on the site of the human body. Nature, which curves our lens, takes ownership of our eyes from the inside. Furthermore, it seems that the ability to anticipate destruction as an integral part of human existence enables Rilke to arrive at an eco-centric conception of human-nature continuity long before the mass-deaths of the world war made the uncanny relation yet more visible in
abundantly flowering fields. All attempts to put landscape at a safe distance, in Rilke’s view, are bound to fail because the atoms of its air already permeate us; the photons of light have already carried it into an immeasurable interior. From this vantage point experience itself, according to Rilke, becomes a mystery “not one that locks itself away, not one that demands to be kept hidden, it is a secret that is certain of itself, that stands open like a temple whose portals appraise themselves as being portals between pillars exceeding human size, singing that they are gateways.”

The mystery cannot be consciously entered and thus, although it is open, remains unrevealed. Rilke does not simply proclaim all-unity. On the contrary, the otherness of nature is retained within perception.

Because, let’s admit it: landscape is a strange thing for us, and one is terribly alone among trees that blossom and rivers that run by. Alone with a dead person, one is not as exposed as in being alone with trees. Because however mysterious death may be, a life that is not our life that does not share in us is more mysterious.

Rilke admits that this Otherness is not readily apparent at first glance but the deeper we climb down on our ancestral tree, the deeper we reach into a darkness that is inhabited by giant extinct animals, “monsters full of enmity and hatred” and ever crueler beings that suggest nature looms behind them “the cruellest and strangest of all.” Human traffic with nature tends to be one-sided because habitually humans only “see” nature as far as it relates to them, they see the surface of things and their own effect on them but they “seldom realise this mysterious and uncanny relationship” (W 4 309).

In Worpswede, Rilke describes how human eyes, focused on the useful only, see nature as something self-evident and given [“vorhanden”]. Rilke mentions the rivers whose course we change to guide them to our factories, the fields we till, the coal and metal that we take from out of earth’s “bark.” But all this is of little consequence to earth. We are playing with dark forces, which cannot be captured by our terms. Thus we are merely children playing with fire: “But again and again in millennia the powers are shaking off their names and are rising like a suppressed

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157 From a letter to L. H. on 8.11.1915: “[…] ist ein Geheimnis, kein sich verschließendes, keines, das den Anspruch macht, versteckt zu werden, es ist das seiner selbst sichere Geheimnis, das wie ein Tempel offen steht, dessen Eingänge sich rühmen, Eingang zu sein, zwischen überlebensgroßen Säulen singend, daß sie die Pforte sind” (see Rainer Maria Rilke, Über Gott. Zwei Briefe 21).

158 Anna Zsellér claims that in Rilke’s poetology of perception landscape is the radical Other. (See “Landschaft in der Dichtung als Anlass zu einer Poetologie der Wahrnehmung bei R. M. Rilke und Raoul Schrott” 2009, 192)

159 “Denn gestehen wir es nur: die Landschaft ist ein Fremdes für uns, und man ist furchtbar allein unter Bäumen, die blühen, und unter Bächen, die vorübergehen. Allein mit einem toten Menschen, ist man lange nicht so preisgegeben wie allein mit Bäumen. Denn so geheimnisvoll der Tod sein mag, geheimnisvoller noch ist ein Leben, das nicht unser Leben ist, das nicht an uns teilnimmt […]”(W 4 309).

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caste against their small masters, not even that, they simply rise and the cultures fall off the 
shoulders of earth who is great again and wide and alone with her mountains trees and stars.”

Rilke uses *protopoieia* to envision the rising of nature’s forces beyond us. The image of the giant 
who “stands up” and “shrugs” presents nature in terms of human activity. Nature “has 
humanity” even though it may know nothing of us and exists indifferently. Knowing and being 
are the key phrases. The difference between humanity and nature that Rilke observes in 
*Worpswede* is expressed as a cognitive impasse – neither “knows” the other, while they are yet 
uncannily and mysteriously participating in each other. Nature *is* human experience, underlying it 
as the unconscious self in self-experience on the site of the human but within this experience the 
knowledge of the unity gets lost. It is the privilege of children, especially lonely children, to be of 
one mind [“gleichgesinnt”] with nature. But to the habitual humanity of adults, who are 
preoccupied with their own tasks and concerns, this conscious relation is lost and it is the artist’s 
mission to find it again (See *W* 4 311).

For Rilke, it is only in art that humanity and nature can truly be put into a frame and their 
unity can come to consciousness. The artist does not want to let go of nature but tries 
“consciously and through the exertion of his concentrated will to come close to it.”

What is envisioned here (and can be seen consistently throughout Rilke’s oeuvre) is not a mimetic 
approach to closeness from the outside but a phenomenological approach to seeing closeness 
from within the body, on the site of the body. Thus, for Rilke, art does not merely produce 
artefacts but creates consciousness for the inter-face of human existence. It is “the medium in 
which form and world, human and landscape encounter each other [...]as if connected in a 
higher prophetic truth, invoking each other, completing each other to the perfect unity which is 
the character of the work of art.”

Rilke thinks it possible to find “the voices of a stormy day 
and the rushing of our blood” in, for example, a symphony. The following statement can be 
seen as the centre of the young Rilke’s ecological aesthetic. He asks:

And to make an image, does that not mean to see a human as a landscape? And 

is there a landscape without figures which is not entirely filled with and 

revealing of the one who saw it? Odd relations are emerging there: sometimes 

they are combined in rich, fruitful contrast, sometimes it seems the human 

emerges from the landscape, sometimes the landscape from the human, and 

then again they are equally, brotherly reconciled. At moments, nature seems to 

approach in the appearance of cities as landscape and with centaurs, mermaids

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161[Wir führen die Flüsse zu unseren Fabriken hin, aber sie wissen nichts von den Maschinen, die sie treiben. Wir 
spielen mit dunklen Kräften, die wir mit unseren Namen nicht erfassen können, wie Kinder mit dem Feuer 
spielen, und es scheint einen Augenblick, als hätte alle Energie bisher ungebraucht in den Dingen gelegen, bis wir 
kamen, um sie auf unser flüchtiges Leben und seine Bedürfnisse anzuwenden. Aber immer und immer wieder in 
Jahrtausenden schütteln die Kräfte ihre Namen ab und erheben sich, wie ein unterdrückter Stand gegen ihre 
kleinen Herren, ja nicht einmal gegen sie, – sie stehen einfach auf, und die Kulturen fallen von den Schultern der 
Erde, die wieder groß ist und weit und allein mit ihren Meeren, Bäumen und Sternen” (*W* 4 309).

162 “[…] die verlorene Natur nicht lassen wollen, ihr nachgehen und nun versuchen, bewußt und mit 
Aufwendung eines gesammelten Willens, ihr wieder so nahezukommen” (*W* 4 311).

163 “[…] daß sie das Medium ist, in welchem Mensch und Landschaft, Gestalt und Welt sich begegnen und finden[,] 
sich wie in einer höheren prophetischen Wahrheit, zusammenzuschließen, aufeinander zu berufen, und es ist, 
also ergänzen sie einander zu jener vollkommenen Einheit, die das Wesen des Kunstwerks ausmacht” (*W* 4 311).

164 “[…] es wäre sehr verlockend, diese Beziehung in verschiedenen Kunstwerken nachzuweisen; zu zeigen, wie eine 
Symphonie die Stimmen eines stürmischen Tages mit dem Rauschen unseres Blutes zusammenschmilzt” (*W* 4 
311).
Rilke mentions the hybrid and fantastic creatures of Böcklin, in which nature’s human and non-human physiology are reconciled. More will be said on this reconciliation, which was equally important to Yeats, who in hybrid figures, half animal, half human, depicts the same injunction. The invisibility of nature’s participation in the human moves into consciousness in the work of art and Rilke specifically describes “motion” as the central aspect of landscape as event [“Ereignis”], in which the regularity, “which never hesitates,” executes itself in every moment calmly and indifferently. Beauty and indifference are paradoxically linked in the notion of sublime indifference [“erhabene Gleichgültigkeit” (welche wir Schönheit nennen)] (W 4 318).

Rilke views the Romantic painters Runge and Constable as those who experienced the “revaluation of all values” [“Umwertung aller Werte,” traditionally associated with modernism after Nietzsche] (W 4 318). Thus, revaluation happens as the artist realises that no day equals another and no leaf on a tree is like any other. The modernist poet will have to stop travelling for the fear of missing the wide and yet encompassing presence of an ever-changing nature. Coming to this realisation as before the ruinous archaic Torso of Apollo “one has to begin a new life” (W 4 318f). The Rilke of Worpswede has no appreciation for the self-delighting tourist gaze, flying from one attraction to the next, unable to overcome ennui: “We need that which our fathers passed by in a closed carriage, plagued by boredom.” The openness of their yawning mouths is transformed into “our open eyes” which are opening to the rural plain [“die Ebene”]. The people in Worpswede live “in the sign of plain and sky” – not an exterior physical landscape alone but also “the emotion in which we grow” [“das Gefühl in welchem wir wachsen”] (Ibid.). Everything becomes meaningful and bound in communication, as sky and earth “communicate,” the shrubs and leaves “tell” [“erzählen”] of the sky (Ibid.).

Thus Rilke sees the painters and local inhabitants of Worpswede in contrast to the city dwellers. Urban life departs communication from its relation to nature. In the city “the gestures of most people […] have lost their relation to earth, they are hanging in the air, wavering to and fro and find no place to settle down, just like language which has nothing in common with the


166 “Die Gesetzmäßigkeit die niemals zögert und sich in jedem Augenblicke ruhig und gelassen vollzieht” (W 4 319).

167 “Woran unsere Väter im geschlossenem Reisewagen, ungeduldig und von Langeweile geplagt vorüberfahren, das brauchen wir” (W 4 319).
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Rilke, on the other hand, is after a rural theory of language, which is true to the uncanny relation of self, language and nature, a theory which does not mistake the perceived remoteness and absence of relatedness for an actual absence. David Abram almost literally transposes Rilke’s assessment of the cities and the way in which we shelter ourselves in them to the 21st century:

Caught up in a mass of abstraction, our attention hypnotized by a host of human-made technologies that only reflect us back to ourselves, it is all too easy for us to forget our carnal inherence in a more-than-human matrix of sensations and sensibilities. Our bodies have formed themselves in delicate reciprocity with the manifold textures, sounds and shapes of an animate earth – our eyes have evolved in subtle interaction with other eyes, our ears are attuned by their very structure to the howling of wolves and the honking of geese. To shut ourselves off from these other voices, to continue by our lifestyles to condemn these other sensibilities to the oblivion of extinction, is to rob our own senses of their integrity and to rob our minds of their coherence (22).

The invisible “self-execution” of nature’s Other within the procedural “Ereignis” of the human self’s embodiment becomes visible to Rilke in landscape painting. His philosophy of landscape in Worpswede is, in effect, also a philosophy of art. The Barbizon school of painting, especially Jean Francois Millet (1814-1875), who so greatly inspired Van Gogh, is of great importance to the development of Rilke’s understanding of human-nature relationships. In his many paintings of shepherds Millet locates the occurrence of “first man” [“der erste Mensch”] who entered into nature’s “immense/uncanny solitude” [“ungeheure Einsamkeit”] (W 4 314). Rilke describes the shepherd as a “thing” which the sheep knew for a long time, his clothes “heavy as earth and eroded as stone” [“schwer wie Erde und verwittert wie Stein”] (Ibid.). His life is not demarcated against the life of the landscape around him, rather his life is “that of the plain and the sky and the animals that surround him, his impressions are rain and mid-day and sunset and he doesn’t need to keep them because they are always returning” (Ibid.). Rilke describes the human figures of Millet as “bent by an everlasting wind” (W 4 315). The human figure becomes earth-like through hard labour on and with the land, Rilke observes. In quoting Millet he describes the figures as entirely expended/dissolved/opened into their situation [“als ob sie ganz in ihrer Lage aufgingen”] (Ibid.). Humans become tree-like [“still wie ein Baum”] in their exposure to the wind and in their expenditure in work, bent like a tree and rooted in the earth (W 4 315).

However, Rilke does not so much invest in a pastoral binary than reflect on it, critically. Rurality is not pictured as a nostalgic and idyllic antithesis to the city. Rilke observes that it is the city dwellers, no longer at one with anything [“mit nichts im Einklang”] who tend to see “heroes” in those rural farmers although both city-dweller and farmer are actually equally exposed to a nature which remains hard and indifferent [“hart und teilnahmslos”] towards both city and countryside (Ibid.). The city dwellers merely shield themselves from their exposure to nature. They erect the “likeness of nature in the sea of houses” [“scheinbare Natur des Häusermeeres”]

168 “Ähnlich wie die Sprache nichts mehr mit den Dingen gemein hat, welche sie nennt, so haben die Gebäuden der meisten Menschen, die in den Städten leben, ihre Beziehung zur Erde verloren, sie hängen gleichsam in der Luft, schwanken hin und her, und finden keinen Ort wo sie sich niederlassen können” (W 4 315).
which “with great mirrors repeats itself and the human” and thus shields its inhabitants from conscious communication with nature (W 4 315f). The city dwellers are closed off and bound in self-reflection while the country dwellers are still exposed to and shaped by the environmental forces, directly, so that their process of life becomes a weathering and merging back into the contexts into which they exerted their energies. Life in the open is a life of exposure, not one of anxiously trying to save oneself which only results in a de-contextualised perishing.

From describing images Rilke moves on to describe the landscape of Worpswede itself, embracing non-human nature, humans and their language. He begins with geological history of this stretch of Northern Germany which once was covered by the sea [“das Meer, das nicht mehr ist”]. Thus the sea is the land’s history [“das Meer ist die Historie des Landes”] (W 4 320). It has created the bogs through gradual regression and progression. The bogs are oscillating liminal spaces marked by “decaying fertility” [“vermodernder Fruchtbarkeit”], an “open wound” which began to close in certain places, but even now, after the settlers came and started to inhabit it and extract turf, it still remains “dark and fluctuating/swaying” [“schwarzes, schwankendes Land”] (W 4 321). The settler’s life, marked by labour and poverty “as if enchanted to a greater gravity,” has formed an uncanny identity, as all people share one face and this face in being worn out becomes porous to nature:

All have only one face, the hard, tensed/extended face of work. The skin of this face has expanded from the exertions and in old age became too big for the face, like a long-worn glove. You can see arms, which the lifting of heavy things has made overly long, and backs of women and very old men which have become bent like trees which stood always in the same storm.

Through self-expenditure humans become part of landscapes and the face through their exertions becomes a communal one. The wind, or in this case storm, is for Rilke a connecting force which shapes landscape and humans, alike. It is a central poetological element in Rilke’s work which has not yet received much scholarly attention. I would claim that here in Worpswede we can see the same wind that occurs in the night of the first of the Duineser Elegien “when the wind, full of cosmos, wears out/exploits our face.” The heavy work and the exhaustion in the evening makes the farmers silent and only when they take a break, Rilke observes, they speak: “This low-German [Platt - also means plain, flat] with its short tight/tensed words, has a natural growth process. It is walking laboriously like a bog-bird with its residual, withered wings and its long wading legs. It emulates sounds but it does not enrich itself from the inside: it agglutinates/inserts.” Rilke thus describes this vernacular as organic, living and progressive. He uses the word [“Vollzug”] abundantly which, similar to the English word execution signifies the ambiguity of actualisation and extinguishing. It is, indeed, appropriate for the description of a

169 haben nur ein Gesicht, das harte gespannte Gesicht der Arbeit, dessen Haut sich bei allen Anstrengungen ausgedehnt hat, so daß sie im Alter dem Gesicht zu groß geworden ist wie ein lang getragener Handschuh. Man sieht Arme, die das Heben schwerer Dinge übermäßig verlängert hat und Rücken von Frauen und Greisen, die krumm geworden sind wie Bäume, die immer in demselben Sturm gestanden haben” (W 4 322).

170 „wenn der Wind voller Weltraum / uns am Angesicht zehrt” (W 2 201).
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dying vernacular which, at this very moment is vanishing from the German landscape with its last
speakers. With it vanishes an unrepeatable way of being in the world.

3.2.3.1. “Our Face is Destroyed”: the Human-Nature Threshold in Rilke’s Poetry

As we wear out the things our own life-time and energy are exhausted. But this becomes visible
only in disruptions and interstices, as it first became apparent to Rilke, when he found himself
exposed to Worpswede and its human and non-human landscape. “What do the painters want
among these people?” Rilke asks. He observes that they are not living among them but all the
things that grow in the surge of this clayey/resounding air [“tonige Luft”] (W 4 324). Their task is
to “see everything in one breath, humans and things” [“Sie sehen alles in einem Atem, Menschen
und Dinge”] (W 4 324). And when Rilke progresses to elaborate on air, we enter Böhme’s realm
of theophany. The divine breath, ruach [ר֫וּחַ], a Hebrew noun, which becomes transmuted into
formations of breath, wind, spirit and the very mediality of the word but which in assuming
attributes (ruach elohim, ruach adonai) denotes the divine itself.171
With this loss of awareness for the linguistic permutations that the Hebrew root undergoes,
expressing both profane phenomena and the divine, Western Christianity has lost its ability to
anticipate the idea of continuity between the divine and the profane. Rilke rediscovers in the
wind some of its unbound world-creating and connecting ambiguity, which even impacts on
pictorial art:

As the strange, colourful air of these high skies makes no difference and
encompasses everything that rises and rests in it with the same goodness, so the
artists are exercising a certain naive justice, by sensing (without thinking much
about it) humans and things, in silent coexistence, as phenomena of the same
atmosphere and as media of colours which they make radiant.172

Rilke, ever conscious of humans impacting on the environment, insists that the artists in
Worpswede do not commit an injustice to anyone: “They do not help these people, they do not
teach them; they do not better them. They do not bring anything into their lives, which remain in
misery and darkness, but they fetch from the depths of this life a truth by which they themselves
grow, or, not to say too much, a probability that one can love.”173 More has to be said about the
markers of probability in Yeats and Rilke, but what seems clear is that these qualifying

171John R. Levison writes in The Spirit in First-Century Judaism (1997): “Only Psalm 51, which contains no less than
four occurrences of the word, רוח, permits the identification of the holy spirit with the human spirit” (65). See
also Joseph Abelson The Immanence of God in Rabbinical Literature (1912).
172”Wie die eigentümliche farbige Luft dieser hohen Himmel keinen Unterschied macht und alles, was in ihr aufsteht
und ruht, mit derselben Güte umgibt, so üben sie eine gewisse naive Gerechtigkeit, indem sie, ohne
nachzudenken, Menschen und Dinge, in stillem Nebeneinander, als Erscheinungen derselben Atmosphäre und
als Träger von Farben, die sie leuchten macht, empfinden” (W 4 324).
173”Sie helfen diesen Leuten nicht, sie belehren sie nicht, sie bessern sie nicht damit. Sie tragen nichts in ihr Leben
hinein, das nach wie vor ein leben in Elend und Dunkel bleibt, aber sie holen aus der Tiefe dieses Lebens eine
Wahrheit heraus, an der sie selber wachsen, oder, um nicht zu viel zu sagen, eine Wahrscheinlichkeit, die man
lieben kann”(W 4 324).
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statements, these “perhapses” and “maybes” keep things in the open, as a question we are faced with, still actual and undecided and maybe even unanswerable. The “probability we can love” is a specifically modernist occurrence of such openness. Rilke insists that he does not envision “the probability of the Romantics”, who beautify things by looking at them “[‘die Wahrscheinlichkeit des Romantikers, der verschönt indem er schaut’]” nor the inexorable, cruel “[‘unerbittliche, grausame’]” probability of the realists (Ibid.). Rilke views this modernist probability close to that of the sage “[‘des Weisen’], who is looking for silent, deep and uninvestigated contingencies “[‘Zusammenhänge’]” (W 4 324). But artists are yet posited higher than sages, because they are not there to solve these mysteries, because those who are creative are the “friend and confidante, the poet of things” “[‘der Freund, der Vertraute, der Dichter der Dinge’]” (W 4 325). Artists have a greater task since they may not go after solving the secrets they perceive. Theirs is “a greater entitlement” “[‘Recht’]” because: “The artist’s lot is to love”174 the mystery. That is art: Love which has poured itself out over mysteries “[‘Das Künstlers ist es das Rätsel zu lieben. Das ist alle Kunst: Liebe die sich über Rätsel ergossen hat’]” (W 4 325). The artwork is then, in turn, a mystery, “encompassed, embellished, and overwhelmed with love” (Ibid.). It is interesting that love is poured out over the things and certainly in this construction also in parts drenching or obscuring them. Thus, the artwork reveals whatever objects it seems to present only within the medium of the artists’ love, the act of self-outpouring.

Rilke concludes his introduction to the Worpswede monograph by saying that the artists took up the task of loving the mysteries – “the birch trees, the bog huts, the plains of the heath, the humans, the evenings and days of which no two are alike.”175 In as much, as the artists empty themselves over the things, give themselves away, their face expands. Four years later, while working for Rodin in Paris, Rilke will make visible the communal face on account of the dying poet. In the destruction of the artist’s form in death – unity “comes into hiding.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Der Tod des Dichters</th>
<th>Death of the poet</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Er lag. Sein aufgestelltes Antlitz war bleich und verweigert in den steilen Kissen,</td>
<td>He lay. His erected face was pale and refusing in the steep pillows,</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

174 The centrality of the notion of love to Rilke’s concept of art becomes apparent in Lou Andreas-Salomé’s recollections of their time in Russia. One afternoon she and Rilke were visiting the Tretjaków Art Gallery along with Russian farmers, and they witnessed a conversation of two farmers in front of a large painting of cattle: “One said impatiently: ‘Cows! We know them! What concern are they to us!’ [the German term angehen has a variety of shades of meaning which accumulate to an almost physical sense of relation: to address, to involve, even to attack]. The other rebuked him with an almost mischievous face: ‘These cows there are painted, because they are concerning you – because you must love them, you see, therefore they are painted. You have to love them even if they are no concern of yours – you see.’ Maybe puzzled over his own explanation, the little farmer turned to Rainer who was standing next to him. And the real event here was Rainer: how he stared at the farmer, how it broke out of him in poor Russian – rapturously: ‘You know it –’” “[Vor einem großen Bild ‘Weidendes Vieh’ äußerte der eine unzufrieden: Kühe! kennen wir! was die uns schon angehen Der andere verwies es ihm mit beinah verschmitztem Gesicht: ‘Diese da sind gemalt, weil sie Dich was angehn –. Weil Du sie lieben mußt, siehst Du, daraus mind sie gemalt. Du mußt sie lieben, obgleich sie Dich nichts angehn, – siehst Du’. Über seine eigene Erklärung vielleicht selber verdutzt, hatte das Bäuerlein sich drauf mit einem fragenden Blick dem neben ihm stehenden Rainer zugewendet. Und das wirkliche Erlebnis war hier Rainer: wie er auf den Bauern starete, wie es aus ihm herausbrach in seinem mangelhaft gemalten Russisch – hingerissen: ‘Du weißt es –’]” (Salomé Lebensrückblick 79).

175 “und da gingen sie nun daran diese Rätsel zu lieben […] die Birkenbäume, die Moorhütten, die Heideflächen, die Abende und Tage von denen nicht zwei einander gleich sind” (W 4 325).
This poem expresses Rilke’s notion of the destroyed and thus shared and permeable face. The poem creates a difference between self and mask. The mask in the poem is the body, which perishes “open and tender,” as the inside of the fruit decays in the air – but who wears the mask? “All this” expanse, the meadows and woods, wear the body as a human mask. In death the mask is wasting away and beyond the charade of the ego the face is revealed in perishing. The poet was instantiated by the expanse of the natural world, “diese ganze Weite,” which now in the death of the poet loses its particular human embodiment, was the actor behind the human mask. It is the moment of the destruction of the human body, which highlights the Otherness of the face.

A similar situation occurs in the ekphrastic poem “On seeing the drawing of John Keats in death” [“Zu der Zeichnung, John Keats im Tode darstellend”], which Rilke wrote ten years later, a day after seeing a reproduction of Severn’s sepia drawing of the dying Keats in the house of André Gide in 1914. The drawing of the face of the dead poet lingers on for a moment [“Und dies verharrt […] noch einen Augenblick”], despising, becoming and decaying alike [“das Werden selbst und den Verfall verachtend”]. The presence of the face within the artefact makes the drawing appear as continuous with existence, as an interface of which the speaker, echoing the pathos of Keats’ Ode on a Grecian Urn, asks:

**Gesicht: o wessen? Nicht mehr dieser eben noch einverstandenen Zusammenhänge.**

O Aug, das nicht das schönste mehr erzwänge der Dinge aus dem abgelehnten Leben.

O Schwelle der Gesänge,

O Jugendmund, für immer aufgegeben.

(\textit{SW} II 76)

**Face: oh, whose? No longer belonging to the cohesions, still consenting a moment ago.**

O eye that would no longer force the most beautiful of things from renounced life.

O threshold of songs,

O youth-mouth, given up forever

The key idea that emerges in this “ampler and more fluid variation upon his earlier ‘Death of a Poet’” is the porosity of the human body as medium (Mason 44). Rilke embraces the position of seeing the \textit{mysterium coniunctionis}, the “threshold.”\footnote{Ben Hutchinson observes that the “endless oscillation between the desire to roam and the desire for a home” characterize not only Rilke’s biography but also mark his “artistic development in all with a ‘latent liminality.’”} The poet’s mouth is being “given up,” the
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shared face of humanity and the environment is being destroyed and through the experiential reality of death as disruption of self-experience the “decaying mask” becomes porous. The conjunction of the human with the expanse of the earth becomes partly visible within its vanishing. The face is performed by a mutual consummation and destitution. Through the odal apostrophe, the drawing of Keats as well as the dead poet are summoned back into life. Ekphrasis becomes an ek-static release of voice and language from the pictorial medium.

The German painter, engraver and draftsman Casper Walter Rauh captures this idea of the uncanny coincidence of nature and humanity in terms of an eroded face, visually. Rauh fuses the barbaric aspects of the 20th century, especially the experience of WWII, suffering, death and destruction and the dream-like utopian idylls of possible forms of existing (see Schmidt-Hannisa 7). The collection of essays Zeitzeuge und Phantast (2011), edited by Schmidt-Hannisa, makes manifest this growing scholarly interest in Rauh’s works. It is interesting that Rilke’s notion of the eroded face emerged before the atrocities of either the First or Second World War occurred and before these atrocities impacted on modernist poetics. Caspar Walter Rauh was, like Rilke, not primarily interested in portraiture but in the face as “a problem” connected to the question of mortality of living beings and the perception of dying beings [“Sichtweise sterbender Wesen”] (Shields, (“In- und auswendige Blicke” 2011, 34). Michael Shields locates in Rauh’s images a de-centered gaze which emerges from the “dissolving moment of death” [“vom auflösenden Moment des Todes”] (Ibid.).

He further observes that Rilke translates “patterns of closure into moments of opening” Thus, the threshold experience for Rilke is integral to his poetics of the open, which, I would argue, are always realized by a procedural depiction of “opening” (“Ist das der Eingang in ein neues Leben?” Rilke’s thresholds as an inversion of passivity” 13).

I thank Hans-Walter Schmidt-Hannisa, for introducing me to Rauh’s works. He rightly describes the artist as one of the few figures of 20th century art that still remains to be discovered (7).
Rauh’s faces often appear hollow and Shields observes that the right eye of the face in “Unser Gesicht ist zerstört” [our face is destroyed] could be empty, a hole in the very materiality of the drawing, and a breach in the image’s fiction [“könnte hohl sein […] ein Loch im Papier, ein[en] Bruch in der Fiktion”] (Ibid.). There is, indeed, incongruence between the right, mask-like slit and the left eye, which is violently dislocated and exposed in detail, dangling from its optic nerve. This displaced eye is connected with an equally exposed “turned out” interior of nonfigurative shapes, reminiscent of organic material, plant life or tentacles. The picture’s German title suggests three dimensions of destruction: the ambiguity of “Gesicht” indicates a) the front of the human skull b) vision – especially in a religious/revelatory sense and c) social renown and respectability.

The open mouth indicates speech, but who is speaking? Landscape and humanity cannot be told apart. The size of the face is drastically blown up; we see a tiny tree growing on it, a land bridge creating continuity between the remnants of the face and the imaginary landscape into which it is dissolving. Odila Triebel calls the picture’s address to the viewer an “anamorphotic gaze,” one that unsettles our sense of perspective (“Das Alphabet des Niemandslandes” 54). However, it is not the ritual re-approaching of the skull from peripheral vision and the vanishing of the gaze, which Lacan describes in his elaboration on anamorphosis in Hans Holbein’s “Ambassadors” in
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his seminar on the gaze. The tableau interrupts and inverts the gaze which bounces between interior and exterior. The centred, non-human dimensions of the landscape, the trees and ground formations as well as the abstract organic shapes are reconciled with the “erected” front. Chapter four will explore in more detail this notion of the breaking of the form as part of an aesthetic of self-destitution, poetic kenosis.

3.2.3.2. The Destroyed Face in *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910)

In his article on experiential and sensual images “Empfindbild, Gesichterscheinung” (2006) Helmut Pfotenhauer refers to an inner vision emerging in German modernism, especially in Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s Chandos letter. In a state between conscious viewing of the outside world and the emergence of dream images, a new mode of viewing emerges, as ‘terms fall apart’ for Lord Chandos. He is lacking words for the things that he cannot get into a clear focus any longer as “the distance is lost which allowed for a focus and constituted a subject and object of perception” [“Die Distanz kommt abhanden, die ein Fokussieren ermöglicht und ein Wahrnehmungssubjekt und ein Wahrnehmungsobjekt konstituiert”] (8). Instead, the nameless moves into focus and a “revelation of the nameless” [“Offenbarung des Namenlosen”] takes place (Ibid.). This is a specifically modernist moment in which wakefulness and dreaming overlap.

Pfotenhauer’s description is essential for understanding Rilke’s ecological vision. We encounter many moments of face-loss in Rilke’s *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*, a novel which he wrote during his time in Paris. The novel centers around the alienation of life, its anonymity and objectification. Rilke breaks apart this objectification by creating poetic images that collapse distance and dissolve binaries. More will be said in chapter four on the notion of death emerging in *Malte*, it suffices here to mention that the partial dissolution of the face is a defining moment that shapes the novel from its very beginning. The human face is described as a boundary that imprisons the human interior, yet, it can be removed. Rilke exposes the impossibility of delineating humanity from nature to finally view the face as a “positive attribute of the external world […]” (Stephens 180).

Manfred Engel observes that Rilke was more daring and innovative than scholars give him credit for, as he created a poetics of the grotesque in the opening passages of *Malte*. He does this through the “personification of things” as well as the literal elaboration of actualised metaphors (Engel *Rilke Handbuch* 2004, 345). The terror and fear that emerges in Rilke’s text is taken up by the early expressionists, according to Engel. Rilke describes in realistic detail the disintegration, putrification and zombification of the human body in a number of poems in the second part of the *Neue Gedichte*. What seems clear is that the grotesque description of destruction functions as a moment of shock and disruption to bodily self-experience and re-integrates death.

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179 See Dempski „Die Anonymität und Verdinglichung des Lebens” 281f.
to the center of the body. Just as Rilke in *Worpswede* claimed that the rural community all shared the same face, the skin of which became too big, like a worn glove, in *Malte* Rilke repeats this deterritorialisation of the face in the opening. Faces once again assume the function of masks or clothes as they can be “worn,” “worn out” and handed on:

There are a lot of people but even more faces, because everyone has several. There are those who wear a face over many years, of course it wears out, it gets dirty, it cracks in the folds it expands like gloves one has worn while travelling [...] now the question is, since they have several faces, what do they do with the other ones? They keep them. Their children shall wear them. But it so happens that sometimes their dogs go out with them, and why not? Face is face. [180]

The sense of ridicule inherent in the image of dogs running away with their master’s face is a prime example of the ecological uncanny [181] – if not of horror – arising from the alienation of the most intimate and the bringing too close for comfort of the alien. However, in the indifferent phrase “face is face” it is automatically assumed that dogs have one and that there is no generic difference between theirs and ours. Rilke performs here a profanation of the face, which is traditionally thought to be inalienable and which, as was discussed earlier, grants humans the entitlement to legal representation and protection. [182] The destruction of the face goes hand in hand with the bestowing of personhood on the city-scape via prosopopeia:

The street was empty, its emptiness was bored and pulled away the step under my feet and folded/rattled around with it, over there and there, as with a wooden shoe. The woman startled and lifted herself out of herself, too fast, too forceful, so that her face remained in her two hands. I could see it laying there, its hollow form. It is an immense strain to remain with these hands and not to look what was ripped off in them. I was terrified at the thought of seeing a face from the inside, but I was even more afraid of the bare, sore head without a face. [183]

This passage reveals an oscillation and instability of the human which is not discreetly limited off against the world, as the personified street can run off with the speaker’s steps – presumably the sound phenomenon – to arrive at a lady sitting on a bench with her head in her hands. The


[181] Otto Friedrich Bollnow in *Die Unheimlichkeit der Welt* (1951) claims that the uncanny does not occur in Rilke before his novel *Die Aufzeichnungen des Laurids Brigge* (38). The preceding argument, however, has shown that, in fact, the uncanny was there from the beginning.

[182] In many European cultures “face” is synonymous with social standing. In the Old Irish law system the face inscribed one’s social standing and one’s general sense of obligation and entitlement in a community: “The Old Irish word for ‘face,’ *enech* was also the word for honor, persons whose *enech* had been reddened [...] had quite literally “lost face” before their peers” (*Stacey, Dark Speech* 107).

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‘lifting of self out of self’ which Malte observes is a moment of shock and horror. It is the literal realisation of a metaphorical supposition and the extended and executed metaphor is redolent with the violence that “bare life” suffers at the hands of humanity in the world of the Hobbesian split. “The world has fallen into the hands of man” [“Die Welt ist in die Hände der Menschen gefallen”], Rilke writes in a letter to Yvette Hauptmann on 18.08.1915. If the face is understood as a mask which humans can order and control, assign to each other or withdraw, if it is ‘taken off’ like a mask – what appears underneath it? ‘The horror’ of exposed bare life shows itself, a raw and open wound on the front of the skull becomes visible while the face, the living, animated and expressive presence crumbles into a dead item that has fallen into human hands.

In the very baroque execution of his applied and drawn-out conceit Rilke executes the idea of the alienability of the face. As the “inside” of the face becomes exposed its raw interior is accessible to the speaker’s gaze, making him dread to look through the ‘taken off’ mask of another human being from a position that should be inalienably hers: the inside. He dreads even more to look at the “faceless” skull - alive, bare, raw, and exposed. Rilke furthermore describes the wearing of faces in terms of habitual wearing of clothes. Some people wear through their set of faces very quickly.

Once these people have worn out their last face and are completely out-of-face by the age of forty what appears on the foreside of their heads is the Non-face [“das Nichtgesicht”] (W 3 457). Interestingly, Rilke also uses this term to describe the mountains, hills and rivers in his Improvisationen aus dem Capreser Winters. Against the claims of Manfred Engel, I would argue that this non-face which breaks through the human face is no longer contained in the neat binary Engel characterizes as “the facelessness of nature is opposed to the human face” [“die Gesichtslosigkeit der Natur dem Menschengesicht gegenübergestellt”] in his comments (W 3 914). In fact, Rilke destroys this binary:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hat der Wald ein Gesicht?</th>
<th>Has the forest got a face?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Steht der Berge Basalt</td>
<td>Doesn’t the mountain’s basalt stand?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gesichtlos nicht da?</td>
<td>Stand faceless?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hebt sich das Meer</td>
<td>Doesn’t the sea lift itself without a face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicht ohne Gesicht</td>
<td>From the seabed?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aus dem Meergrund her?</td>
<td>Is not the sky reflected therein without forehead without mouth without chin?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiegelt sich nicht der Himmel drin</td>
<td>Without forehead without mouth without chin?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ohne Stirn ohne Mund ohne Kinn ?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[…]</td>
<td>[…]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Und wir</td>
<td>And we,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tiere der Seele, verstört</td>
<td>animals of the soul, disturbed by everything in us, not yet ready for anything; we grazing souls,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Von allem in uns, noch nicht</td>
<td>do we not beseech the bestowing principle every night for the non-face which belongs to our darkness?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fertig zu nichts; wir weidenden</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seelen</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fliehen wir zu dem Bescheidenden</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nächterns nicht um das Nicht-Gesicht,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Das zu unserem Dunkel gehört?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

184 “Welches Grauen, die Welt ist in die Hände der Menschen gefallen, der alte Cézanne sah es kommen, Tolstoj sah es kommen, und die es kommen sahen, bekümmerte Greise, gingen vorher hinüber […]” (Rilke Briefe in zwei Bänden. 584).
3. The Environmental Self in R.M. Rilke's and W. B. Yeats's Early Poetry and Criticism

Humanity, just like the environment, in this poem is capable to bear a non-face and in “our darkness” we are already connected to it. However, this transition from holding on anxiously to a human face as a shelter to moving out into the open, Rilke manages carefully via a set of questions placed in front of the reader. He does not simply affirm any opinion or defend a position.

Yet, while there is the non-face, Rilke also bestows faces to environments. Returning, for a last glance to the earlier human-land-scape of Worpswede, even the houses have faces and are pulling trees in front of themselves to protect against the everlasting wind (“immerwährende Winde”) which they are exposed to. And their windows are looking through the trees like “envious eyes through a dark mask” (W 4 322). The interior of these personified houses, Rilke describes as one space (“ein Raum”) in which the smell and the warmth of animals and the smoke of the open fire mingle in a “wondrous/mysterious twilight” (“wunderliche Dämmerung”) (Ibid.). Twilight is a central moment of imagining this zone of non-differentiation, exemplified in this case by traditional pre-modern rural houses, which shelter animals and humans alike. And this is not only specific to late 19th century rural Germany but certainly also to Ireland at the time. This is the same shared co-habitation that constitutes the generative matrix of the birth of Christ. And certainly, when Yeats’ Magi, “In their stiff, painted clothes, the pale unsatisfied ones” come looking for the “uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor,” seeking this generative zone of non-differentiation (VP 318). Environmental Modernism is interested in these zones, where the shelter of the unscathed human face vanishes and the shared identity of beings, landscapes and elements emerges as a participatory mystery.

3.3. The Emergence of Unity of Being in W. B. Yeats Early Works

Although the term Unity of Being will become most central to Yeats only in the 1920’s, there are preliminary ideas and considerations which lead up to it. A short outline will be provided, here, so as to show vital continuities between Yeats’ early and later works, regarding this concept. The environmental poetic ontology which Yeats develops in his early works and which will be discussed in the following, in turn, is crucial to understanding Unity of Being in an environmental dimension. This dimension, although it has not yet been discussed in scholarship, is central to understanding the term.

There is hardly a term which Yeats defines so often and variedly as Unity of Being, and it is tempting to agree with Richard Ellmann, who in a comment on Yeats’s prose before 1917, claims that it amounts to an “evasion so skillful that the reader is never sure whether he is being presented with a doctrine or with a poem in prose” (Yeats: The Man and the Masks 223-43). The

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185 Evan Radcliffe observes that “none was more important to him than his concept of Unity of Being, which served as the focus for his thinking about unity in the 1920s. Yet although its importance has been noted by Yeats’s critics, they have usually given it only perfunctory attention, invoking it frequently but loosely, and chiefly as a slogan whenever Yeats’s poetry seems to join or reconcile opposites” (1985, 109).
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term Unity of Being cannot be defined in spite of the fundamental uncertainty and shape-shifting quality that Yeats places at its very heart. Rather than an intellectual hypothesis, it is an eclectic amalgamation of beliefs, thoughts and images. The only continuity that characterises Yeats’s various definitions of Unity of Being, hence, is the hybrid unruly and uncertain character of their combination. Unity of Being is after all essential, also, to what Margaret Mills Harper in “Yeats’s Religion” calls his “passionate relationship with belief” (1995, 49). The discussion of Yeats’s Unity of Being in this thesis will be divided in three parts and will focus on three central aspects of the term which are, at the same time, the guiding questions of each chapter. In this chapter, Unity of Being will be looked at as a principle of interrelation and resonance, close to its formulation in “The stirring of the Bones” to Romanticism but Modernist in that it is based on uncertainty, the renunciation of control or full knowledge of the mystery of being (see Au 267-286). In chapter four, Unity of Being will be assessed in connection with poetic passages which are most commonly associated with the term, as for example “Among School Children.” It will be understood as the paradoxical achievement of unity through self-consummation and self-relinquishment, as the body via infinition is broken up and the self is fused into a greater environmental circuit. Unity of Being in chapter five will be discussed against the background of Yeats’s occult system A Vision. The way in which A Vision is conceived already challenges traditional concepts of authorship and signals the emergence of a communal self, which will be further explored. This communal self embraces the living and the dead, consciousness and the subconscious, the author and the medium. In “A Packet for Ezra Pound,” opening the 1937 edition of A Vision, Yeats reverses the abjection of death, demanding that the “blessed spirits must be sought within the self which is common to all” (AVB 22). More will be said about the union of life and death which Yeats imagines as a non/difference of “death-in-life and life-in-death” (VP 497).

Neil Mann in his lucid essay “The Thirteenth Cone” published in the seminal first collection of essays dedicated exclusively to Yeats’s occult system: W. B. Yeats’s A Vision: Explications & Contexts (2012) mentions a “cancelled paragraph from ‘Notes on the Life after Death,’” which defines Unity of Being in a way that is consistent with my reading of Yeats’s poetry in terms of self-relinquishment and poetic kenosis: Yeats therein defines “Unity of Being, […] as that which only contradiction can express not ‘the lone tower of the absolute self’ but its shattering, ‘the absolute self’ set free, that unknown reality painted or sung by the monks of Zen.” Mann continues that Unity of Being was also “the form that interested [Yeats] most” as it was “personally possible to him,” being born at the antithetical Phase 17. Finally, Unity of Being is also a vision Yeats would like to see take shape in the world in a new era. In his late essay “If I were Four-and-Twenty” (LE 34-46) it becomes a stance against the abstraction of

Heather Martin outlines the paradoxical notion of a union which can only be experienced after human incarnation: “While he claimed that unity of being in its largest sense, as the union of all spirits at which all desire and all separation ceases, can only be achieved at the destruction of creation, he also claimed that individual unity of being, the union of the creator with the object of his creation, can be achieved by the subjective (antithetical) mortal, particularly at Phase 17” (W.B. Yeats: Metaphysician as Dramatist 21).

See Neil Mann “The Thirteenth Cone” footnote 99, 192 [manuscript source: NLI 36,272/12, p. 29, corrected typescript.]
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“modernity, logic and materialism, but also rhetoric, propaganda, marxism and much else” (Allison “Yeats and Politics” 194).

Unity of Being signifies the refusal to draw demarcation lines between the human self, the environment, the dead and the divine. It is very telling that Yeats, in an attempt to define the term in *Autobiographies*, contrasts Unity of Being with Goethe, putting himself, effectively in alignment with the early Romantics:

“I think that still within a species of man, wherein I count myself, nothing so much matters as Unity of Being, but if I seek it as Goethe sought, who was not of that species, I but combine in myself, and perhaps as it now seems, looking backward, in others also, incompatibles. Goethe, in whom objectivity and subjectivity were intermixed, as the dark is mixed with the light at the 18\textsuperscript{th} lunar Phase, could but seek it as Wilhelm Meister seeks it, intellectually, critically, and through a multitude of deliberately chosen experiences; events and forms of skill gathered as if for a collector’s cabinet, whereas true Unity of Being, where all the nature murmurs in response, if but a single note be touched, is found emotionally, instinctively, by the rejection of all experience not of the right quality, and by the limitation of its quantity (*Au* 268).

Yeats clearly recognises the enlightenment impetus which indeed marks Goethe as an author of German Classicism, not Romanticism, as Paul de Man incorrectly contextualises Goethe in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (1984). Yeats clearly identifies Goethe’s need to order experience and gather the world into his “collector’s cabinet.” De Man’s reading has led to a distorted perception of Yeats’s relation to the Romantics: “Yeats has described his own poetic development by opposing it to the concept of *Bildung* as it appears in the German Romantic tradition” (145). The Goethean concept of education has, in fact, little to do with Romanticism which was initially inspired by Goethe but soon rejected and overcame the confining frame established by Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister*. Such eclectic and syncretist creations as Novalis’ *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* or E.T A. Hoffmann’s *Der Goldene Topf* are eloquent witnesses of the anti-Goethean spirit of the Romantics (Goethe in fact despised the latter for its playful fusion of the fantastic and supernatural, alchemy and magic). Frederick C. Beiser in *The Romantic Imperative* (2003) points out that there is a long-standing misapprehension within British scholarship, categorising Goethe as a Romantic.\(^{188}\) He delivers crucial evidence of the refusal of one of the founders of the Romantic school in Jena, August Schlegel, to even call *Wilhelm Meister* a novel. Beiser points to the shift in perspective which, after Arthur Lovejoy’s influential article *Schiller and the Genesis of Romanticism* in 1920 appeared, made the influence of Schiller, rather than Goethe, on the Early Romantics “something of a dogma” (116). Paul de Man did not perceive this crucial shift.

\(^{188}\) Goethe was, in fact, critical of Romanticism as a literary movement as well as of its artistic program. Hartmut Fröschle points out Goethe’s predominantly critical relation with Romanticism ([vorwiegend kritisches] Verhältnis zur Romantik) (*Goethes Verhältnis zur Romantik* 509), while admitting that Goethe had large shares in the common philosophical background and was steeped in the same contemporary discourses surrounding the sciences, music, religion, mythology, orient- and historical studies. However, in *Nature and Art* (1800-1802) he writes “Only in limitation does the master reveal himself, / and the law alone can give us freedom.” For the Romantics, Goethe most often served as “a foil against which to register difference” (Murray “Goethe, Johan Wolfgang von,” in: *Encyclopedia of the Romantic Era* 1760-1850 431).
It is Schiller’s Über naive und sentimentalische Dichtung (1795) which is most important to the evolution of the Romantic notion of Unity, to which Yeats alludes here. Schiller negotiates two modes of poetic creation based on the observation of a divergence between ancient culture (unity with nature) and modern culture (disparity from nature through government of reason). He concludes that the “sentimentalische Poesie,” among which he counts the poetic efforts of Western Modernity, is longing to regain the ancient state if harmony. This is the origin not the ultima ratio of the Romantic quest for unity and Schiller’s dichotomy is replaced by a notion of unity of man and nature in the frame of which language regains its magical status.

Still impassioned by “Sturm and Drang”’s anti-enlightenment revolt, Romanticism mediates chaos and form, appointing primacy to the imagination as a locus of revelation. August Schlegel in his famous fragment on “Universalpoesie” views radical delimitation at the heart of poetry, combining and infusing all genres, human activities and disciplines. Poetry does not begin with the printed word but can be found in the laughter of a child, the lovers’ sigh. In this sense Yeats’ Unity of Being is indebted to the Romantics, to thinking of Oneness as Coleridge’s “Eolian Harp” invokes “the one Life within us and abroad, / Which meets all motion and becomes its soul, /A light in sound, a sound-like power in light, / Rhythm in all thought, and joyance every where – […] Where the breeze warbles, and the mute still air / Is Music slumbering on her instrument.” But Yeats’ definition of Unity of Being, “where all the nature murmurs in response, if but a single note be touched,” is also close to Joseph von Eichendorff’s “Wünschelrute”[191] [dowser/divining rod]: “There is a song sleeping in all things, which are dreaming on and on / and the world begins to sing, if you find/meet/hit the magic word.” Yeats aligns Unity of Being with resonance and hence with the Boehmian notion of reverberation as a divine cosmogonic principle which becomes a leading doctrine of Romanticism. It is clear however, that Yeats does not elevate poetry, itself, to the status of religion but prefers to remain in that “bothersome region of uncertain or ineffable faith” (Harper “Yeats’ Religion” 54). The symbol is crucial to Unity of Being within poetry. Symbols are not only “conduits through which that world can come to this” and vice versa (Harper Wisdom of Two 52). They are sites, where the poet and the reader likewise abstain from telling and thereby fixing the difference between the divine and the profane, the dead and the living, the human and the non-human, and thus, the world can exist on these sites as within a zone of non-differentiation.

To the philosophy of Giorgio Agamben these ‘zones of non-knowledge’ are a crucial pre-necessity for 21st century ethics (more on Agamben in chapter four and five). It is not only an above and a below that meet each other on the site of the symbol but it is the self and the Other,

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189 This short fragmentary deliberation became programmatic to German Romanticism (Schlegel “Athenäum Fragment No.116,” 182f).
190 The Eolian Harp endowed with divine energy is from the very beginning linked to Coleridge’s thinking of being, he wonders ”what if all of animated nature / Be but organic harps” (Lau Fellow Romantic 57). For the poem, see Coleridge’s Verse: A Selection (1973, 103f).
192 Eichendorff also greatly influenced Rilke, who read the Romantics from his school years on (see also Ryan [2004] 20).
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the human, the animal and the dead whose outlines are shifting and who are not clearly delineated from each other. The Boehmian notion of the divine, as has been argued, is founded on rest-less out-pouring of its perfection and abyssal immanifest perfect self into existence: a self-sacrifice that is at the same time a self-manifestation of the eternal within temporal processes of emergence and perishing of all forms and beings. To Yeats, as will be shown, Unity of Being is not so much an achievement of totality but a breaking apart of the illusion of discreetness of the human being so that infinite inter-relations emerge. Where the Romantic symbol was hopeful of discovering the hidden relations between all natural phenomena, the modernist symbol reveals their necessary concealment and obscurity, the futility of trying to grasp and understand them. Unity of Being, to which Yeats’ symbol aspires, is not an aspiration to attaining totality but to revealing that violence, destruction, the breaking of the perfect sphere of eternity into the processes of emergence and decay of the temporal as central processes of \textit{infinition} (self-destruction as integral part of self-instantiation and the breaking and exceeding of finite form as integral part of the infinitely timelessly present form). In this sense, the symbol can be understood as “ritual action, the devouring of a heart,” as Margaret Mills Harper writes, in which a greater circulation becomes manifest (2006, 52).

To the German early Romantics, in order to experience the divinity of All-Being, intuition, intimation [“Ahndung”] and sensory experience are all equally viable avenues. When Schlegel in Fragment 116 urges us to behold the poeticy of every sensory phenomenon he annihilates the concept of poetry as privileged cult. Truth is available veiled in bodily experience and not transposed into hierarchies of abstraction and knowledge, to Novalis, the Golden Age will not dawn before science is overthrown as the prime locus of truth-making: “When no longer numbers or figures / are keys to all creatures / when those who sing or kiss / now more than the deeply learned ones.”\footnote{This poem is part of Novalis genre-breaching novel Heinrich von Ofterdingen but becomes one of the central utterances of Romantic “Universalpoesie.” It is a clear disavowal from the Enlightenment tradition “Wenn nicht mehr Zahlen und Figuren / sind schlüsses aller Kreaturen, / Wenn die, so singen oder küssen, / mehr als die Tiefgelehrten wissen[…]” (Novalis \textit{Schriften} 344).} The following chapters will explore Yeats’s consistent strive for making “unknowability” and uncertainty the guiding principles of his art from his earliest creations to his last, rediscovering the primacy of the sensuous to both understanding communication and artistic expression. I agree with Margaret Mills Harper that Yeats opposes the reductionist way in which art in contemporary contexts assumes pseudo-religious and pseudo-scientific functions, thus becoming auxiliary to answering to human needs, creating order and beauty and made to answer questions (1995, 55). Harper rightly observes that “[i]n our century, the New Critical stress on the poem as a ‘well wrought’ object, the phenomenological interest in what the text-objet does, or the structuralist (and poststructuralist) hypotheses of systems of codes or laws that govern language and literary works, all participate in our need to make reading and interpreting a scientific endeavour” (Ibid.). Thus, we attempt to control texts and regulate their multifarious possibilities and impacts, thereby reducing the risks they pose to the reader in the direct encounter. Margaret Mills Harper’s notion of a text’s audience “being worked on” is particularly apt, not only with regard to Yeats’ occult material the readers “are in the position of the base
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metal in an alchemical experiment” (55). The porous and sensuous textures of Yeats’s works, abounding with animal voices, elemental, ancestral and spectral presences also expose readers to inherently open environments in the presence of which their own beliefs and ontologies may be risked. In this sense, a Bakhtinian dialogic understanding of the literary address as well as the act of reading itself can be fruitfully adapted to the understanding of a communal self in Yeats:

A word (or in general any sign) isinterindividual. Everything that is said, expressed, is located outside the soul of the speaker and does not belong only to him. The word cannot be assigned to a single speaker. The author (speaker) has his own inalienable right to the word, but the listener has his rights, and those whose voices are heard in the word before the author comes upon it also have their rights (after all, there are no words that belong to no one) (121f).

Yeats’s poetic texts exert an impact which cannot be thought as leaving the reader unaltered, while on the other hand in the creative act of reading, the text, itself, is exposed and endangered – ‘rent asunder’ into new views and relations. Yeats’s opinions on the confluence of many minds into one mind as expressed in his essay “Magic” furthermore destabilises any firm notion of who is reading or constructing images in whom, beyond any spatial and temporal confines. The Yeatsian Symbol exposes the reader to the mystery of being which cannot be intellectually disentangled. Yeats’s texts first and foremost create exposure, in which the reader has to face uncertainty, deliberate undecidedness.

Yeats lays down his final and in many ways definitive description of Unity of Being in “A General Introduction to my Work” the introduction to his collected works which were to be published by Scribner:

I am convinced that in two or three generations it will become generally known that the mechanical theory has no reality, that the natural and supernatural are knit together, that to escape a dangerous fanaticism we must study a new science; at that moment Europeans might find something attractive in a Christ posed against a background not of Judaism but of Druidism, not shut off in dead history, but flowing, concrete, phenomenal. I was born into this faith, have lived in it and shall die in it; my Christ, a legitimate deduction from the Creed of St Patrick, as I think, is that Unity of Being Dante compared to a perfectly proportioned human body, Blake’s ‘Imagination,’ what the Upanishads have called ‘Self’ nor is this Unity distant and therefore intellectually understandable, but imminent, differing from man to man and from age to age, taking upon itself pain and ugliness, ‘eye of newt and toe of frog’ (Ec&I 518).

Unity of Being is so overcharged with significance as to be useless as dogma: St. Patrick, Dante, the Upanishads mixed with Shakespeare; Blake and Druidism make it a very heterogeneous ‘body.’ The central move, here, leads away from the abstraction of dogma or religion towards the

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194 For a wider discussion of the following passage see Wisdom of Two 2006, esp. 59-64. Harper insists, rightly, that to ask of this essay what Yeats believed “without reflecting on our own beliefs is to be deceived” (63). The Hodos Chameleon of the “way of the Chameleon” changes its colours with the light and the position of the onlooker, this term does not only describe the adept but also the “uncertain” authorship of the automatic script (Ibid. footnote 52).
3. The Environmental Self in R.M. Rilke’s and W. B. Yeats’s Early Poetry and Criticism

“imminent” Self of embodied experience, which cannot be subjected to perfect intellectual comprehension.\(^{195}\) Unity does not reside in uniformity but in the multitudinous differences instantiated in flowing from man to man and from age to age. Unity of Being is that which “undergoes” existence. The personified Unity of Being – Christ, Dante’s perfect man fused with Blake’s imagination – takes upon itself suffering and ugliness as well as abject animal body parts ‘far-fetched’ from the imaginary witches’ incantation in *Macbeth*. “Eye of newt and toe of frog” are severed and thrown into a cauldron with other abominations of the human will to mis/appropriate.\(^{196}\) These violently severed body parts, in *Macbeth* are auxiliary to a spell that summons apparitions, uttering prophecies which compell the protagonist to consider himself invincible. Macbeth’s downfall is that he cannot use his imagination to envision violence even though he is willing enough to use it, even when he beholds a “child crown’d, with a tree in his/hand” he cannot anticipate the power of human ‘manipulation’, the axe that will transform the forest into utility and make it “descend” into the disguise of an approaching army (*Macbeth* iv, sc 2, 129). “Macbeth shall never vanquish’d be / until great Birnam wood to Dunsinane’s high hill descends” (Ibid.). And believing that “none of woman born / shall harm Macbeth” he fails to anticipate, yet again, the knife cutting open a maternal body to deliver an “unborn” child. Thus, the apparitions while visibly rooted in the cauldron’s contents of violent transgression against the integrity of life forms, have the power to “mislead and destroy” Macbeth by his willingness to ignore their medial conditions and replace them with his own wishful interpretation (see also Harper [2006] 60).

But these are not the logics Yeats perpetuates in transposing the passage into his definition of Unity of Being. On the contrary, “taking upon itself” eye of newt and toe of frog, “perfect man” relinquishes immunity and superiority. This perfect, because all-embracing body is at the same time whole and dis-figured. The cut off and abused animal body parts of the literary evocation are stitched into the living body of “perfect man” they transmigrate into living unity. Thus, also, Macbeth’s karmic burden acquired through instrumentalisation, subjection and abjection is “taken on” and reversed into living unity. From the page and into the reader’s imagination a “flowing, concrete, phenomenal” human-animal Upanishadic-Dantean Christ rises, perfect man, and looks at the world through frog’s eye and steps through the here and now on newt’s toe. This discussion will be further pursued in the third and fourth chapters.

\(^{195}\) “Most striking is that Yeats’s research and experiments clearly seem to have led him to the belief that this complete unity of being would include the body, indeed could not exist “in separation from the body” (YVP 2 41)” (Serra “Esotericism and Escape” 322).

\(^{196}\) Samuel Johnson’s annotation assumes the source for the ingredients in the Macbeth Incantation to be Albertus Magnus: “The propriety of these ingredients may be known by consulting the books De Viribus Animalium and De Mirabilibus Mundi, ascribed to Albertus Magnus, in which the reader, who has time and credulity, may discover very wonderful secrets” (Samuel Johnson’s “Shakespeare” Miscellaneous observations on the tragedy of Macbeth with remarks on Sir T. H. I’s edition of Shakespeare [1745], 125).
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3.3.1. W. B. Yeats’ Early Prose and Criticism – Exploring the Continuous Texture of Being

What emerges from the preceding argument is the observations that in modernist texts the self-environment relationship is conceived as a participatory and porous *Stoff*, a texture or cloth, a woven and self-weaving continuity of environments, beings, moods and works of art. Jacob Boehme’s definition of the cosmogonic principle’s permeating and co-instantiating the imagination, material existence and language forms a common base to both the early works of Rilke, which were discussed in the preceding chapters, and the early works of Yeats, which will be investigated in the following.

Looking back onto his own earliest works, Yeats characterises *The Celtic Twilight* (1893; 1902) as “a bit of ornamental trivial needlework sewn on a prophetic fury got by Blake and Boehme” (Ex 333). However, the ‘needlework’ of these early collections is not as trivial as Yeats would have his readers retrospectively believe. Yeats’s writing and collecting in the 1890’s is coinciding with his work as a critical reviewer of poetry as well as prose work engaging with fairy or folk belief. His reviews reveal that Yeats is not only conscious of the tensions between science and folk beliefs but that he is also willing to position himself against science’s ‘shallow enlightenment’ and its superficial dismissal of the spiritual. Yeats weaves his very own syncretist ‘belief’ out of his engagement with folklore, combined with Blake and Boehme. Both his poetry and prose of the Twilight years are not escapist or merely aestheticist artefacts but deeply engaged with the discourses surrounding science, myth, and modernity that shaped the turn of the century. Yeats follows his own advice, given to his readers in the introduction to *The Celtic Twilight*, and fashions himself a coat of belief against the weather of his day. In his final article on Fiona McLeod’s *The Dominion of Dreams* (reviewed for *The Bookman* in 1899) he condones the work of the collector-writer of folk stories and outlines a continuity of memory, landscape, imagination and art that is to shape the entirety of his oeuvre as he will phrase and rephrase in equally fluctuating and syncretist terms throughout his oeuvre:

> We understand in some dim way that her Amadan Dhu is some half-inspired madness such as marked men out in early times for a terrified worship, and that the shadows that gather about him like sheep are but our own memories the things that make us ourselves and bind us to the world, in some peaceful mood, that the shadows changed into curlews are our memories in some wilder mood; and because the links of resemblance are subtle and the full meaning beyond our reach, we understand with our emotions rather than with our reason, and the story is not allegory but symbolism, and not prose, but poetry. Swedenborg and Jacob Boehme have begun to cast off the manners of the schools, and to talk the fairy-tales of children […]. A change in thought in the world makes us understand that we are not walled up within our immediate senses, but bound one to another and to some greater life, by a secret communion of thought and emotion that can in a moment fling up into the waking mind some dream or vision of a far-off friend […]; and at once a kind of literature, which passed

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197 The German word *Stoff* denotes matter, substance, cloth, fabric but also subject matter of a text. It seems perfectly suited to denote the shifting, multistable concept of environment, self and text that Yeats employs from the very beginning of his works.
Yeats refuses to tell the difference between the eternal moods, the imagination, the animals, between the exteriority and interiority of memory, waking and sleeping, as he invokes a ‘revolution’ to which he does not claim ownership but which he claims was started by Swedenborg and Boehme. The Romantic hope of literature being ‘on the rise’ in European countries is infused with the environmentally present moods, which find a medium of expression in literature. Yeats sees in the revival of folklore a revolution of mind, which is also a spiritual revolution in that it reconciles the “study table” with the realm of nature and its spiritual emanations. In “The Message of the Folk-lorist,” Yeats writes:

William Blake has drawn a numberless host of spirits and fairies affirming the existence of God. Out of every flower and every grassblade comes a little creature lifting its right hand above its head. […] It is possible that the books of folk-lore, coming in these later days from almost every country in the world are bringing the fairies and the spirits to our study tables, that we may witness a like affirmation and see innumerable hands lifted testifying to the ancient supremacy of the imagination. Imagination is God in the world of art and may well desire to have us come to an issue with the atheists who would make us nought but ‘realists,’ ‘naturalists’ or the like. Folk-lore is at once the Bible, the Thirty-nine articles and the Book of Common Prayer and well-nigh all the great poets have lived by its light (UA 210).

This vision of an artistic and spiritual revolution from the beginning of Yeats’ career is not at all unlike the phrasing of Unity of Being in the introduction which Yeats wrote to accompany the Scribner edition of his collected works at the end of his life. Divinity is identified with the imagination. Thus, questions of style are not mere technical considerations. Atheism and the realist or naturalist mode of literary production are linked, yet on the other end of the spectrum where one could expect religion, Yeats posits the practice and tradition of folk-lore, metaphorically replacing the foundational texts of Anglicanism as well as Catholicism.

It is important to note, that Yeats does not subscribe to a Nietzschean all-out abolition of religion in that the divine is still central, the elemental spirits are “affirming the existence of god.” This passage cannot be read as an instance of art becoming religion but in its direct recourse to folk-lore appears as a form of divine self-expression.

Counting Homer, Sophocles, Shakespeare, Dante and others among the folklorists, Yeats goes on to claim that in his present day folklore is still alive among the people in rural Europe as a remnant of the age of faith, infinitely more important than lectures and science books. Yeats comments on the popular upsurge of folk-lore collecting all over Europe, which brings attention and validation not only to the customs and traditions of the ‘peasantry’ all over Europe but also to alternative ontological assumptions and belief systems. Yeats mentions T. F. Thisleton Dyer’s *The Ghost World* (1893) as a “classification and review of already collected facts of which we stand in great need” (UA 211). Thiselton Dyer’s is a book of comparative folk-lore, in which different chapters bring together folk traditions spanning, Australia, New Zealand, Europe, Africa, Asia and America, extrapolating the universal common denominator of the divergent beliefs about the presence and nature of ghosts. In this regard “The Ghost world” is, indeed, global. Yeats
criticises Thiselton Dyer’s method of browsing through world mythology and recounting stories aimlessly, placing them side by side “transfixed with diverse irrelevancies […] in much the same fashion that boys stick moths and butterflies side by side upon a door, with long pins in their bodies” (Ibid.). This explicit, extended metaphor criticises the undiscerning and unloving nature of turn-of-the-century folklore-collecting in its wish to abide by ‘scientific’ standards by comparing it to the ignorant and cruel habit of pinning insects; the mentioning of the door is a detail which suggests, that Yeats personally witnessed such acts of collecting. Folk-lore, via this metaphor, is understood as a living entity. Although, Yeats finds the author at times “hopelessly inadequate,” he still admits that “[t]he pages upon the soul after death are particularly interesting and have as much of the heart’s blood as had ever Dis or Hades” (UA 211).

This is, read in context, not a dismissive phrase. Here, for the first time, Yeats configures life and death in the paradoxical way for which his later works have become famous: Hades or Dis, Greek names for the god of the underworld and the place of the dead, ‘have’ blood, even though they are life-less. In harbouring everyone and everything that has ever lived and died, they contain the ‘heart’s blood’ of all of humanity, although containing no life, whatsoever. But, paradoxically, when fused with the folk beliefs recounted by Dyer, Hades and Dis bring forth again the blood of the world, by re-releasing human spirits embodied as birds and beasts: “in the folk-lore of almost every country the ghosts revisit the earth as moths or butterflies, as doves or ravens, or in some other representative shape” (Ibid.). Yeats takes up this supposition, suggesting that Dyer could have added “‘The Voyage of Maeldune’ of that great saint who dwelt upon that wooded island among the flocks of holy birds that were his relations” (Ibid.). In Thisleton-Dyer’s The Ghost World, the young Yeats finds inspiration to express moods which would have to remain unexpressed unless there be artists: “who dare […] to set the heads of beasts to the bodies of men, or to thrust the souls of men into the heart of rocks[…]” (CT 5). In the two chapters ‘Phantom Birds’ and ‘Animal Ghosts’ the author mentions numerous beliefs from all over the world in which the souls of the dead inhabit earth in bird form or animal form. And the passing of humans into birds becomes also a constant theme in W. B. Yeats’s poetry, from “The White Birds” to “Cuchulain Comforted.” The presences of birds in Yeats’s works, from the cry of the curlew to the shape of a heron, are eerie companions and participants in humanity they are not merely representing humanity in some aspects but they are seen as part of it.

In the notes on his play Calvary Yeats described birds, especially lonesome ones like “heron, hawk, eagle and swan” as “natural symbols of subjectivity” (VPl 790). The birds are better off than Christ in the play, they “increase [his] objective loneliness” because “unlike his” their loneliness can be “whether joyous or sorrowful, sufficient to itself” (Ibid.). In his immanence, God is both present and invisible to the birds: “God has not died for the white heron” yet at the same time “God has not appeared to the birds” (VPl 780, 788). Yeats describes his own Daimon as a bird, because he is a “solitary man” (VPl 789). The Daimon is a concept he develops in A Vision, and which James Olney explores in its relation to the Plotinian “timeless individuality” (The Rhizome and the Flower 334f). Olney describes it as an “[a]rchetype containing sub-archetypes […] a transmigratory daimon, itself always the same, no matter how many faces it takes on in the round of its incarnations” (Ibid.). According to Yeats, the daimon “contains all
possible existences whether of man or brute, and as it traverses its circle of allotted lives, now one, now another, prevails. We may fail to express our archetype or alter it by reason, but all done from nature is its unfolding into time” (Ex 368). This is a vital aspect to Yeats’s thinking of Unity of Being that needs to be taken into account. Against this background animal presences in his texts cannot be treated as merely representing man but appear as hypostases of a shared self.

In his review on Thiselton Dyer, as in much of his early criticism Yeats resorts to Boehme, who “held that every man was represented by a symbolic beast or bird, and that these beasts and birds varied with the characters of men” (UA 211). John P. Frayne and Madeleine Marchaterre could not “locate such an assertion in the works of Jacob Boehme” and came to the conclusion that Yeats refers to “William Law’s explanation of Boehme” (UA 555 footnote 17). They refer specifically to Law’s mention of a “peacock representing man.” It is, however, a Boehmian idea and Yeats was right: In the Mysterium Magnum, which Yeats read and made repeated reference to, animal nature is described as residing within man:

the bestial man does seek and labour only after the pleasure of this world, viz. after external honours, authority and beauty, and also how to pamper, fill and glutonise the beast; and so to vapour and proudly prank with the beast, as with a god, [The rough beast of man rises]as a proud peacock [in man’s stead]; and bravely trims,adorns and fattens his beast, that the devil may have a horse to ride upon, and thereby mock God: and he rides thereupon[…]there are now so many and various properties in man, as one a fox, wolf, bear, lion, dog, bull, cat, horse, cock, toad, serpent. And, in brief; as many kinds of creatures as are upon the earth, so many and various properties likewise there are in the earthly man; each of one or other; all according to the predominant stars [or planets] which make such a property in the seed, in the time of the seeding.198

This notion of the inner beast, although similar to the allegories commonly used in Christian pedagogy, must be read in the context of Boehme’s non-hierarchical concept of a unity of creation. Boehme scolds those who make images of God as an anthropomorphised maker [“wie man Gott als einen Mann mahlet”] who builds Adam and Eve, since such making of an image would not result in an adequate understanding but idolatry [“mehr abgöttisch als wahrhaftig”] (Boehme 1843, 105). For Boehme, God is the ens of Being which is only visible within the ene of the creatures (see 106).

Out of his expressed Word (which was essential in the Verbum Fiat) all things came forth into formings: first into an ens, or desire of a property, and out of the same property into a compaction of Sulphur, Mercury and Salt, as into a

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formed nature; and out of the same ens in the formed nature the Word becomes a creatural life […] it manifests itself as a plain, visible being; to which end God has created nature and creature. Thus each creature has a centre to its re-expressing, or breathing forth of the formed Word, in itself both the eternal and the temporal creatures; the irrational, as well as man.199

The “plain, visible” being, which in the German original is an audible and resounding being, of each creature is therefore, itself, the goal of creation, Boehme claims. Each creature is a unique manifestation of the divine self-instantiating word. It is not a word uttered by a transcendent creator but by a creator who fades into creation: “the image of the heavenly essence did disappear,” into existence as man and animal appear and become mysteriously bound up within each other. Through the reverberation, as a shared principle of existence, all that exists is connected.

Yeats fuses Boehme’s thought with the collected folk beliefs in Thiselton Dyer’s account to arrive at a definition of folk-lore that highlights a central environmental concern: “All these stories are such as to unite man more closely to the woods and hills and waters about him, and to the birds and animals that live in them, and to give him types and symbols for those feelings and passions which find no adequate expression in common life” (UA 212). Living folklore is born out of “intense subjective inspiration” coming from the particularities of a landscape’s natural phenomena and its unique heritage of tales and beliefs. Yeats uses Shelley as a negative example of someone who had “but mythology,” which “loses all the incalculable, instinctive and convincing quality of the popular traditions” (Ibid.). In contrast to this, writing a folk tale can bring “new life into literature,” whereas “no conscious invention can take the place of tradition.” and the writer and teller of folk tales who brings this new life into literature must, paradoxically, achieve it through self-expenditure, “must have the fatigue of the spade in his hands and the stupor of the fields in his heart” (UA 213). Yeats proposes that a revival of the arts will come from listening “humbly to the old people” and wait for the god-sent “primitive excellent imagination” to arrive. To this arrival the spirits of nature, visible to the imagination, are lifting their right hands in affirmation. It is apparent that to the young Yeats, the personhood and vital force of the earth are central to literary creation. Yeats does not, as is often claimed, lose this ‘romantic’ belief in his later works, but all-connectedness and non-hierarchical sharing in being of humans and non-humans are the ontological ground in which, as will be argued, even much later works are rooted. The happy amalgamation of non-orthodox traditions and beliefs in “The Message of the Folk-lore” is, in essence, already a preparatory approach to what later becomes his attempt at defining Unity of Being.

199 “Aus seinem ausgesprochenen Worte (welches im Verbo Fiat wesentlich ward) sind alle Dinge in Formungen gegangen. Erstlich in ein Ens oder Begierde einer Eigenschaft, und aus der selben Eigenschaft in ine Compaction des Sulphurs, Marcurii und Salis, als in eine geformte Natur, und aus demselben Ente der geformten Natur wird das Wort ein kreatürliches Leben, und führet sich aus der Compaction des Sulphurs, Marcurii und Salzes aus dem Körper aus, das ist, es offenbart sich im lautbaren Wesen, zu welchem Ende Gott die Natur und Kreatur geschaffen hat. Also hat eine jede Kreatur ein Zentrum zu seinem Aussprechen oder Hall des geformten Worts in sich, beides die ewigen und zeitlichen, die unvernünftigen sowohl als der Mensch” (Boehme Magnum Mysterium 117). “Plain visible being” is not the best translation, as “lautbar” denotes audible “sounding forth” rather than visible.
3.3.1.1. *The Celtic Twilight* (1893/1901) – Exploring the Sensuous Texture of Being

Rather than assuming the semblance of impartiality of an anthropologist, Yeats advocates the position of a sympathetic collector who perceives and respects the power of the stories he collects rather than subjecting them to scientific categorisation and reduction which would annihilate their energies, turning them into mere objects of study. The scholarly exegeses of *The Celtic Twilight* frequently criticise the collection’s pre-Raphaelite ‘vagueness’ but fail to appreciate the artistic mediation of uncertainty, in which topical as well as stylistic effects of oscillation, shimmering, fluctuating are merits and not defects. Yeats early anthology of Irish folk- and fairy tales [*The Celtic Twilight: men and women Ghouls and Faeries* 1893] and his expanded 1902 collection *The Celtic Twilight*, 200 are centred around liminality, texture and human entanglement: While Frank Kinahan rightly underlines that “[t]he image complexes through which these themes are given voice are early and late a constant: nets, looms, and thresholds,” I would argue that nowhere in either early or late Yeats is the “synthesizing vision of the natural world […] a gateway out of the net” (Hour of Dawn: The Unity of Yeats's "The Celtic Twilight" [1893, 1902], 191). For the duration of life “entanglement in the web of mortal limitations” is inevitable, the “cobweb veil of the senses” is part of the condition of embodiment, and cannot be quit, not even by “the openminded few […] seeing beyond the mere and immediate sensual” (Ibid. 191). On the contrary, vision is possible within this sensuous web, because its texture comprises of threads of the living and the dead, the natural and supernatural within the realm of embodied perception. Vision is spread without privilege or exclusion among the inhabitants of the Irish landscapes, supernatural occurrences surprising the unbelieving and unsuspicious as well as the ‘visionaries,’ disturbing the traveller on his journey and the working men and women at their labour. Yeats’s proclaimed aim is “to show in a vision something of the face of Ireland to any of my own people who would look where I bid them” (*CT* 3).

Yeats is already objecting any claim to representation, since the face of Ireland is already from the beginning marked as half-obliterated to human consciousness. The readers are clearly asked to go along and be shown a subjective vision of Ireland, inspired or spiritually ‘granted,’

200 Frank Kinahan’s description of the 1902 *Celtic Twilight* as “a coat of many colours” is very apt: “Yeats first published the earliest among its entries when he was twenty-three, the last among them when he was nearly thirty seven” and he included poems, essayistic elaborations, collected stories (190). Kinahan observes the variety of subject matters, forms and settings: “There are stories of ghosts, stories of the sí and their mortal friends and foes, stories in which Yeats plays the historian of his own moments of vision, and stories of the visions, the seances, and the dark invocations of others. There is also a story of ‘The Last Gleeman,’ most of which Yeats borrowed from a memoir about Dublin street poet Michael Moran […] and there is the brief, atypically Yeatsian tale of ‘The Thick Skull of the Fortunate’ atypical because […] it builds up to a comic punch line” (Ibid.). Edward Hirsch further informs that *The Celtic Twilight* is based on “a diary Yeats kept while walking through the west country of Ireland. It was substantially enlarged for the 1902 edition after receiving the impetus of Yeats’s collecting trips with Lady Gregory in the summer of 1897 and for some summers afterward” (Coming out into the Light: W. B. Yeats’s "The Celtic Twilight" [1893, 1902][1981], 1).
revealing no objective truth but an undefined and fragmentary “something” of the face of Ireland. Yeats uses the term “face” here in the same collective sense in which Rilke applies it to describe the unity of people, landscape, perception and artwork in Worpswede. As in Rilke, Yeats’ face of the landscape is half-destroyed, in that it is shot through with disincarnate presences. In “Village Ghosts” he writes: “The ancient map-makers wrote across unexplored regions ‘Here are lions.’ Across the villages of fishermen and turners of the earth, so different are these from us, we can write but one line that is certain ‘Here are ghosts’ (CT 10). The habit of medieval map makers decorating unexplored areas with all sorts of beasts deemed dangerous, labelling unexplored territories with *hic sunt dracones, here be dragons*, was both fascinating and repelling people from these wild areals. Yeats uses the phrase to reclaim wilderness from the otherwise charted territories. By stating that “here are ghosts” he renders the area unsafe to the curious tourist.

As Yeats proclaims in the introduction to *The Celtic Twilight*, “the things a man has heard and seen are threads of life” – perception is thus given immense value, as it is connected to life itself (CT 3). From life, then, these threads of human perception, pulled via the “distaff of memory” can be woven into coats of belief, which, again, have a vital not a merely decorative function: “any who will can weave them into whatever garments of belief please them best. I too have woven my garment like another, but I try to keep warm in it” (Ibid.). These living garments have practical value: Vision and supernatural encounters are readily available to all and most common in the tales of *The Celtic Twilight*.

In the same uncertain manner as Rilke, phrasing his convictions in questions, Yeats in “Belief and Unbelief” allows the readers to consider:

> Can we come to so great evil if we keep a fire in our hearths and in our souls and welcome with open hand whatever of excellent come to warm itself, whether it be man or phantom, […] when all is said or done, how do we not know but that our own unreason may be better than another’s truth? For it has been warmed in our hearths and souls and is ready for the wild bees of truth to hive in it, and make their sweet honey. Come into the world again, wild bees, wild bees! (CT 6-7)

The mere induction of an ‘h’ transforms the traditional metaphor of ‘heart and soul’ into an environmental fusion of self and house. Creating a unified image of hearth and soul, Yeats suggests that we warm our truths and welcome visitors to an inside that stretches through both the house and the body. Truth is not conceived as the attribute of one or the other of human convictions, but human “unreason” which was lived in, tried, tested, cherished and “warmed” in both body and environment becomes a shelter, an open, permeable and hospitable space for the truth of the non-human Other. Yeats invokes and invites the “wild bees of truth” to inhabit the unreason of this open internal space – man, phantom and animal. The pre-modern Irish hearth and its turf fire is a pre-condition for the warming of unreason and this homely image is not something Yeats casts off as his style matures but both the hearth and the connotation of hospitality resurface. A hearthstone features centrally in many of Yeats’ plays as well as in “Two Songs of a Fool” in Yeats’ 1919 collection *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1919), and again in *The Tower*.
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(1928), a collection in which, again, the bees are invoked and invited to hive (discussed separately in chapter four).

Bees and Yeats

As a source for the Yeatsian bees, A. Norman Jeffares mentions the bees of Porphyry’s *On the Cave of the Nymphs*, which are “symbols of two kinds of souls” but then Porphyry leaves the definition deliberately obscure, shifting between elemental spirits, souls before generation and actual animals for which bowls are placed – honey and water likewise being connected to the principle of generation. (Jeffares, *A Commentary on the Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, 1968, 303) Yeats elaborates on this idea in the second part of his early essay “The Philosophy of Shelley’s Poetry” (see *EE* 64).

The “unreason” becomes the hull and vessel of a generative truth which pours out as honey. Bees were a phenomenon Yeats could have witnessed easily in the woods of Coole Park. A hundred years before the deterioration of their numbers through the neurotoxins in pesticides, their hiving in the wild was a common occurrence. Maeterlinck’s immensely popular *The Life of the Bee* (1901) may have been a source of inspiration to Yeats, who had a great interest in the author already. But more importantly the bees’ buzz is a phenomenal, sensuous presence which Yeats finds repeatedly worthy of direct address. His odal apostrophe in “Belief and Unbelief” holds the bees answerable and not only that. The pathos of the imperative beseeching: “come into the world again, wild bees, wild bees!” implies that the address was made from the position of a supplicant, invoking a presence, divinity or muse in animal form. Alternatively, if we follow the lead of Prphyry, the ungenerated souls are asked to enter reality, which appears in need of their presence. The bees are buzzing between different plateaus of phenomenal reality and imagination. The poetic image, the concept of a soul before generation, the audible presence of an animal collective in the inner-space of individual hearing are simultaneous options available to the reader.

Bees evoke the synaesthesia that characterises the vision of “In the Seven Woods” the opening piece of *The Shadowy Waters* (1906) “where the wild bees fling /Their sudden fragrances on the green air” (*VP* 198). Yeats accounts on several occasions how vision and inspiration go hand in hand with sudden olfactory impressions. T. R. Henn observes that “Yeats was liable to these smell hallucinations” – a peculiar liability he had in common with Rilke (*The Lonely Tower* 158). This synaesthesia and buzzing presence Yeats also wants to see realised within art, when in “Speaking to the Psaltry” he demands that “a new art based on the subtleties of rhythm that are the glimmer, the fragrance, the spirit of all intense literature” should be invoked (Ross 407). Vision does not assume primacy any longer over the other senses, and that, I would claim, is exactly what happens in Rilke’s poetry at the same time. Where the eyes once delineated objects and granted certainty, the ear and touch call it into question and connect the perceiver to the phenomenality, the shivering uncertainty o the object perceived.

The bees are also welcome to hive on “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” (*VP* 117). Here, it is the longing for the buzz of their presence in the “bee-loud glade,” a shared, permeable, medial space, in which the resonance of the web of being can be felt. Sean Pryor remarks the importance of
sound, which for Yeats “may be credited with divine powers” as he already makes clear in his and Ellis’ edition of Blake where they remark the “symbolic value of sound” as a basis for the doctrine of incantations (W.B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, and the Poetry of Paradise 62). Thus, the “silence-filling hum of bees” allows humans to enter “the one great mind or imagination” (Ibid.).

Yeats invites the bees, again, out of very much the same desperate need for presence in “The Stare’s Nest by my Window” in his 1928 collection The Tower into an Ireland of civil war and turmoil in which there is zero visibility: “We are closed in, and the key is turned / On our uncertainty; somewhere / A man is killed, or a house burned. /Yet no clear fact to be discerned” (VP 425). A. Norman Jeffares points out the explanation Yeats gives of this poem, in which he recollects the first months of the Irish civil war spent in Thoor Ballylee, “his Galway house,” between March and September 1922, without newspapers or “reliable news” (Au 523). Death and destruction are visible and Yeats muses that “Men must have lived so through many tumultuous centuries.” Out of an “overmastering desire not to grow unhappy or embittered” Yeats writes this poem, inspired by a “stare” (“Our West of Ireland name for a Starling”) (Ibid.). But the poem also employs the synonymous notion of the stare as a directed, fixed gaze. Yeats recollects the presence of a starling and the poem mentions the “mother birds” bringing “grubs and flies” (VP 424). In how far, then, is the stare’s house empty? It is already an anthropomorphized stare, inhabiting a house rather than a nest. And the visual sense is evoked in the word stare. The visual sense is frustrated, just as much as the house of the stare is left empty. The description of the uncertain political situation of the Irish Civil War and zero visibility form the background for the invocation and invitation to the bees: “Yet no clear fact to be discerned: /come build in the empty house of the stare” (VP 425). Yet the uncertainty is not to be replaced by certainty, hearing replaces vision, the invocation of the bees is a cry for response-able presence, their living, organic structures can mend the “loosening masonry” of the human tower, of the cut off individual and of Ireland fallen into disunity: “O honey-bees / Come build in the empty house of the stare” (Ibid.).

3.3.1.2. The Wanderings of Oisin (1889) – Entering a Zone of Uncertainty

Daniel Albright calls Yeats’s The Wanderings of Oisin “the longest, the most complicated and almost the first poem that he ever published” (The Myth against Myth 60). This long poem, then, to Albright is a myth, “a generalised embodiment of some abstract principle […] a cyclical myth designed to refute the predominant myth of progress” (61). But Albright continues that the myth lies in its structural embodiment not in the knowledge, emphasising that it is “warm, loveable, concrete and not didactic” (Ibid.). R. F. Foster’s views The Wanderings of Oisin in its Irish context, as a “Fergusonian epic poem” (Words alone 138). He views Yeats’ poetic effort against the background of the “Irish need to combat Macpherson” and remarks that his sources were “impeccably Irish” (Ibid.). Foster responds to the pressing need to deepen the research into Yeats’s engagement with Irish literary traditions and sources. The appropriation of Yeats into the tradition of English poetry has been somewhat predominating Yeats scholarship ever since T. S.
Eliot’s memorial lecture in 1941 compromised the individual author for the abstract handiness of his literary greatness. R. F. Foster, however, deliberately divorces Oisin from the context of an abstract pre-Raphaelitism and contextualises it in the frame of Irish literary traditions. He observes that the framing device of The Wanderings of Oisin is the Agallamh na Seanórach, or the Dialogue of the Old Men – a “reconstituted imaginary conversation between Saint Patrick, Oisin, son of the Fianna leader Fionn Mac Cumhaill, and another member of the Fianna” (Ibid.). Derived from the “Christianising process at the hand of a monastic scribe” it became part of medieval poetry and prose and “by the early 19th century it was a well-established trope” (Ibid.). This tradition of the dialogue between Oisin and St. Patrick, according to Foster, was a way of advancing “robustly ant clerical views” (Ibid.). For Yeats, as will be argued, adapting the myth of Oisin was also a way of engaging with an ontology and phenomenology that were not based in British and European Enlightenment traditions but in the literary and philosophical traditions of Ireland as well as European mysticism and European Romanticism.

The Wanderings of Oisin in its Yeatsian version is first and foremost a tale of emergence. The genesis of the world within human perception is at its heart. Hence, shimmering, shifting, and twilight phenomena are integral elements on both the thematic and stylistic level. Objects never emerge fully demarcated from their ground. Personae, animals and objects are appearing as glimmering and wavering. They are only half-distinct from the vision that perceives them. The sculptures of Rodin come to mind, in which the in/difference of the figure and its medium are so apparent and integral part of the art work. Terence Brown in his lucid essay “Yeats and the Colours of Poetry” (2013) links the colour grey to the phenomena of visual oscillating and in suggesting that they are functional rather than merely decorative, his reading inspires my own:

Between white and such a colour as ruby, or gold, however, there are also half-tints, pastels, such as ‘pearl-pale’, ‘dove-grey’, ‘mouse-grey’, ‘cloud pale’. They seem the colour equivalent in the world of Yeats’s early poems of such repeated terms as ‘wandering’, ‘glimmering’, ‘glittering’, as if to suggest that the poised apposition of white and full colours in the Yeatsian cosmos has an excluded middle where process and change can operate, transformation (the theme of some key poems such as ‘The Song of Wandering Aengus’) can occur; one thing become another, the world dissolve and become an essence (2013, 63f).

Twilight is a mode of perception and a mode of literary creation that consciously includes uncertainty and unknowability. In the refusal to clearly delineate object from subject it assumes phenomenological as well as ontological and finally ethical significance, as shall be argued.

Russel Allspach points out that The Wanderings of Oisin is directly related to a poem by Michael Comyn: “The Lay of Oisin in the Land of Youth” which Yeats read in the translation of

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Harold Bloom, on this note, dismissed The Wanderings of Oisin on the grounds that it is “so far from mythology, and indeed so far in every sense from Ireland, that we need not be surprised that his poem, despite its Celtic colouring, is in the center of the English Romantic tradition” (Bloom Yeats 87).
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Brian O’Looney. Yeats’ later dismissal of his earliest work has inspired a majority of scholars to view *The Wanderings of Oisin* as an inferior creation. Terence Brown participates in the mild derision that is still quite common among Yeats scholars in saying that it risks being merely decorative, and that “[o]ne could imagine the poem inspiring a tapestry to be hung in some faux-medieval, celticised, Gothic revival hall” (2013, 61). I would object that the frequent occurrence of foam, froth, fog, and slime and the general poor visibility as well as the quick succession of metamorphoses would make it rather unsuitable for the medium of tapestry. Secondly, the general mood of the piece is entirely incompatible with the impression of grandeur which faux-medieval halls generally are designed to imbue on the visitor. The depiction of a tale of failure and loss, of a hero who cannot slay a demon, cannot keep his beloved and dies in total desolation would probably not be conducive to the hall’s general purpose.

This chapter will argue that *The Wanderings of Oisin* already contains key elements of the reflection on perception as well as on the human-nature relation which make Yeats’ poetry fascinating and philosophically relevant. Oona Frawley claims that the poem is “an early manifestation of Yeats’ Ireland of the mind” (*Irish Pastoral* 62). It is not only an Ireland of the mind. Firstly, because the tension between Oisin’s memory of pre-Christian ‘Fenian’ life and the clash with the confining, narrow and heartless interpretation of Christianity embodied by St. Patrick is relevant to the Ireland of Yeats’ time in the process of defining itself. Secondly, the scenes in *The Wanderings of Oisin* are not merely a shadow of “idealised nature, unspecific and vague,” but are expressive of Irish landscape phenomena (62). Yeats finished the book on a prolonged stay at his uncle’s, George Pollexfen’s, house near Rosses Point in Sligo. The one thing that characterises Irish coastal weather in autumn is fog and changing conditions of light and the changing outlines of the landscapes, revealed and concealed by moving clouds. Nothing cautions the perceiver more potently to the vulnerability and unreliability of his vision than a stoutly foggy

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202 “Comyn's poem, according to Nutt and MacCulloch, is the only written version extant of the old tale of Oisin's three hundred years of dalliance with a lady of faery and his subsequent return to Ireland in the time of St. Patrick. That the story is of ancient vintage in Ireland is proved by the fact that hints of it had gotten through the barrier of the Gaelic language to the English-speaking Irish as early as the time of Edmund Campion who mentions it in his history of Ireland written in 1571. Comyn's poem was available to Yeats in two translations—Yeats knew no Gaelic, one done by Bryan O'Looney […] a comparison of these translations with Yeats's poem in its original form has led me to the conclusion that he used O'Looney’s” (Allspach 850).

203 He later confessed to be “dissatisfied with its yellow and its dull green, with all that overcharged colour inherited from the romantic movement” its “vagueness of intention and inexactness of speech” (*Au* 127). But then again, his later disdain (which is in fact rather an ambivalent than a full-out dismissal) should not deter us from seeing the merits of these creations in their own right. While showing himself dissatisfied, in recounting Wilde’s admiration, who “praised without qualification, and what is worth more than any review, he had talked about it.” Yeats is professing the unwillingness to fully distance himself from it (Ibid.). There always is a degree of coterie in late Yeats' dismissal of early Yeats: “The Circus Animal's Desertion” scold as much as they bring back to the reader's attention the splendour of Oisín – and Yeats tacitly admits to the inner necessity of its emergence: “But what could I, that sat him on to ride […]” (*VP* 629).
The changing and limited visibility makes the world appear in a way that cautions the viewer to the conditions of his perception. Fog, naturally, makes us phenomenologists. The landscape out there is no longer simply given. The wavering and vague outline of landscapes and objects that most commentators have noticed is not necessarily attributable to an idealising withdrawal from nature but may be in correspondence with Rosses Point on a foggy autumn day.

The opening of Oisin’s recounting of events in Tír na nÓg presents the “cairn-heaped grassy hill / Where passionate Maeve is stony still” and thus creates the first image of mutual infusion of Queen Maeve being at once passionate and still, her stony stillness embraces the stillness of the cairn from which she is inseparable (VP 3). The ancestral human self has merged with the landscape. Only a second later, Oisin encounters Niamh, who is likewise a liminal, oscillating figure, situated “on the dove-grey edge of the sea” with lips “like a sunset” and her garment is at once white and “glowing” with “glimmering crimson” embroidery, heartening, as Terence Brown points out, to the “glimmering girl” that shape-shifts between trout and human in “The Song of Wandering Aengus” (Ibid.). The garment is bound with “a pearl-pale shell / that wavered like the summer streams” (VP 4). The shell that fastens Niamh’s garment is not only visually waverering but sits uncertainly between the status of an object of use, a piece of jewellery – the word shell rather than brooch denotes the living organism it once belonged to, and like its former habitat is still “wavering” – now placed on the rising and falling chest of the otherworldly woman.

William Morris’ arts and crafts movement and its altered relation to the objects of use and the artefacts comes to mind as well as the Pre-Raphaelite uncertainty of ornamental line and figurative shape, surface and depth, vegetal life, artefact, human and environment. Nature in TWOO does not merely serve as a soothing backdrop to human self-realisation but is an unbounded, permeable realm that is not clearly delimited from its personae. This submersion, however, assumes a positive and adventurous note from the very first moment Niamh and Oisin enter the country ‘under waves.’ Characteristically, the Yeatsian environmental conception of self relies on submerged and undifferentiated states. The Pre-Raphaelite preoccupation with half-submerged, drowning, dead-and-floating women is clearly evident in the abundance of Ophelias (but also mythical beings such as mermaids and sirens). These paintings have the sinister tone of the lure of Thanatos, whereas in Yeats’ poetry half-immersed states and spaces are full of life,

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204 John Kelly in the introduction to the Collected Letters vol. I writes: “In 1887 and 1888 he is still full of painful self-doubts. He is ‘going about on shoreless seas. Nothing anywhere has clear outline;’ it has been his misfortune ‘never to have faith in success or the future,’ and when he contemplates his boxes of unpublished manuscripts he feels that he has ‘built a useless city in my sleep.’ Such moods of despair oscillate with adolescent bravura: ‘I am no idle poetaster. My life has been in my poems. To make them I have broken my life in a morter as it were. I have brayed in it youth and fellowship peace and wordly hopes.... I have buried my youth and raised over it a cairn — of clouds’ (CL I, xxxiv-xxxx).

205 In 1886-7 Yeats visits Morris, at Hammersmith, listening to the debates of the Socialist League and soon makes him “my chief of men” (Au 131). The fervent pre-Raphaelitism of his early years is well and variously deliberated fact to deserve much mention, here. Morris’ famous demand that one should own nothing that isn’t useful as well as aesthetically pleasing and his wish to restore the production of such items into a meaningful relation to the humans who produce and use them was an attempt to overcome the industrial de-auratisation of the object, its reduction to utility and commodity. The notion of artistic/crafted object as a mode of participation obviously made an impression on Yeats.
buzzing with vibrant energy, motion and colour; they are inhabitable. As Niamh has come “through bitter tide on foam wet feet” she makes Oisin promises of paradise if he only came with her and ride “to shores by the wash of the tremulous tide” (VP 5, 8). Thus, they enter a reverberating, living space, where colour and vitality seem heightened and everything is abuzz with life. Paradoxically called the “shallowing deep”, this space is permeated by other beings: “pierced” by the light of personified “trumpet-twisted shells” dreaming themselves into existence (VP 13). Oisin and Niamh enter a liminal realm “among the foam drops of the sea” (20), in the “forgetfulness of dreamy foam” (24) riding over the “glossy sea” (14), the “glimmering purple sea”, immersed in the fabric of a space in which, likewise, the immortals dwell (VP 25). Oisin describes a semi-material realm of half-consciousness from which the reader occasionally awakes as Oisin directly addresses Patrick – in a present Ireland dominated by “the things that most of all I hate: / Fasting and Prayer” (VP 24). Oona Frawley claims that Oisin “frequently ignores (or at least fails to hear) Patrick’s very occasional comments and questions” (62). However, if they are so, Patrick’s interjections are likewise non-dialogic. He is automatically repeating church dogma and not in any way engaging with what Oisin is recounting. Oisin, on the contrary, beseeches and implores Patrick to listen. The frequent apostrophes bear witness to his acknowledgement of Patrick. But the latter is disinclined to consider Oisin’s story at all, insisting that his Fenian friends burn in hell “On the flaming stones, without refuge” (63).

In Oisin’s recollections, however, things are alive, buzzing and vibrating. No outline is clear and nothing is as it seems: As the riders arrive on the dry land of the first Island they encounter trees: “Like sooty fingers, many a tree /Rose ever out of the warm sea; and they were trembling ceaselessly, / As though they all were beating time / Upon the centre of the sun / To that low laughing woodland rhyme (VP 13-14). The image of the trembling trees changes yet again as on arrival it appears that the trees are buzzing with birds: “Round every branch the song-birds flew / or clung thereon like swarming bees/ While round the shore a million stood / And pondered in a soft, vain mood /upon their shadows in the tide” (VP 14). The transformative images at first appear as a progressive revelation but in the shifting of focus from one living being to the next, we encounter Yeats’ personified birds looking at their own image in the water. What Sean Pryor observes about the “Song of Wandering Aengus” is also true for the “temporal” transmutation of images in The Wandrings of Oisin: “A metamorphic, temporal poetry [...] may never catch the paradise of which it sings” (68). But not because it fails but because it is
already there, in the first place and has no need of pursuit. Quoting George Dekker’s remarks on Pound, Pryor continues: “Metamorphosis is a revelation of the godhead a ‘sign of the divinity which is immanent in the objects around him, whether they be works of art or works of nature’” as the “world of the floating gods […] passes from line to line even as Paradise has to pass” (Ibid.). This will also be central in “Fergus and the Druid.” The different beings and phenomena refuse objectification and are through prosopopeia continuous within the realm of the human, thus the vague contours and occurrences of glimmering and wavering are not a defect but an integral strategy of an ecological vision of a unity of human and non-human nature, to which uncertainty and unknowability are central. What the bird sees, looking at itself in the stream, is ultimately unknowable.

Hazard Adams observes a “curious irresolution” in The Wanderings of Oisin, as “Oisins voyage is ‘real’ in the text and not merely his subjective dream, making the land of the Sidhe “a halfway place” (The Book of Yeats’ Poems 31). The Wanderings of Oisin has many moments of reverie and dreaming, as for example the “Druid Swoon” of the youthful God Aengus whom Niamh and Oisin encounter. Here, we encounter for the first time the intensity of Yeatsian ‘reverie’ a delimited state of perception and identification with nature, which is essential to his early works and which was shown to also underlie Rilke’s understanding of art in his Worpswede monograph. In “The Philosophy of Shelley’s Poetry”, Yeats defines reverie as follows:

Those who are subject to the state called reverie, feel as if their nature were resolved into the surrounding universe, or as if the surrounding universe were resolved into their being,’ and he must have expected to receive thoughts and images from beyond his own mind, just in so far as that mind transcended its preoccupation with particular time and place, for he believed inspiration a kind of death; and he could hardly have helped perceiving that an image that has transcended particular time and place becomes a symbol, passes beyond death, as it were, and becomes a living soul (EE 114f).

In this sense, the “antitime” of the Aengus passage in TWOO feature’s the image, or “living soul” of Joy. Acosmogonic image emerges out of the Mage’s dream:

‘Joy drowns the twilight in the dew,
And fills with stars night's purple cup,
And wakes the sluggard seeds of corn,
And stirs the young kid's budding horn,
And makes the infant ferns unwrap,
And for the peewit paints his cap,
And rolls along the unwieldy sun,
And makes the little planets run:
And if joy were not on the earth,
There were an end of change and birth,
And Earth and Heaven and Hell would die,
And in some gloomy barrow lie
Folded like a frozen fly;

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Then mock at Death and Time with glances
And wavering arms and wandering dances.

‘Men’s hearts of old were drops of flame
That from the saffron morning came,
Or drops of silver joy that fell
Out of the moon’s pale twisted shell;
But now hearts cry that hearts are slaves,
And toss and turn in narrow caves;
But here there is nor law nor rule,
Nor have hands held a weary tool;
And here there is nor Change nor Death,
But only kind and merry breath,
For joy is God and God is joy.’

With one long glance for girl and boy
And the pale blossom of the moon,
He fell into a Druid swoon (VP 18-20).

These lines are presented in a twofold perspectival frame of Oisin recounting Aengus’ direct speech. The human child and the “infant fern” in this celebratory Ode are equally and non-hierarchically manifested by divine joy. The grand through-line connecting the peewit’s cap and the “small planets” all echo Schiller’s rapturous “Ode to Joy”, which was translated by James Clarence Mangan\(^\text{209}\) and published in the Dublin Literary Gazette and National Magazine in 1830 and subsequently in John Mitchel’s Collected Poems by James Clarence Mangan (1859), which suggests that Yeats read it. Schiller’s “Sturm und Drang” rapture is retained in the trochaic tetrameter. Paradisiacal perception of joyous all-unity is presented as the passionate dream of the God Aengus, sitting beardless chin on hand, in a simple abode that resembles Yeats imaginary refuge in “The Lake Isle of Innisfree”: “a house of wattles, clay, and skin” (VP 17). But unlike the latter reminiscence on an “elsewhere” far from the urban London pavements the relation is inversed, the vision by insisting twice on “here” invokes presence. It is opposed to the distant world of human toil, the world of the personified “weary tool,” its “law and rule” that confine the hearts which no longer imagine themselves as related to sun and moon. Interestingly, though, the “saffron morning” from which human hearts originate in the vision is indicating a hopeful future, by bringing to mind Boehme’s book Aurora – Morgenröte im Aufgang (literally: the red hue of dawn.

\(^{209}\) Andrew Cusack points out that “Mangan may never have travelled beyond his native Dublin, but as a reader he ranged far and wide plumbing the historical depths of Gaelic poetry and European mysticism — and moving outward to embrace the literature of contemporary Germany” (“Cultural Transfer in the Dublin University Magazine, James Clarence Mangan and the German Gothic,” 90). Cusack describes lucidly Mangan’s contribution to the evolution of a Modernist Irish notion of the supernatural by introducing German Romantic thought on supernaturalism and its rediscovery of medieval mysticism. The young Yeats had a marked interest in Mangan. On 12 March 1887 Yeats’ article on Clarence Mangan appeared in “Irish poets and Irish poetry” in The Irish Fireside.
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ascending). Yeats read Franz Hartmann’s *The Life and Doctrines of Jakob Boehme* in which the author emphasises the paradox of an invisible yet omnipresent divine. It is not intellectual ascension but the Druid’s dreaming consciousness which makes the divine visible in this song.

### 3.1.3.1. The Emergence of an Environmental Uncanny in W B. Yeats’ Early Poetry

Yet all-unity is not only celebrated, it also appears as an oppressive or frightening uncertainty, to which humans are exposed with no guarantee of their superiority to other beings in the landscape of *The Wanderings of Oisin*. The passage describing Oisin’s arrival in the land of the Sidhe outlines a vivid image of both animated trees and birds swarming in overabundance like bees around the branches, the “millions” of birds on the shore create a visual excess that, like the evening in “The Lake Isle of Inisfree” full of the disembodied “linnets’ wing”, tips a potentially idyllic succession of images of paradise into uncanny ones – uncanny in the sense of a lack of delineation of the human from the non-human, as well as an inversion of size, as is observable in Hieronymus Bosch’s “Garden of Earthly delights”:

![Fig. 5](details-from-Hieronymus-Bosch-The-Garden-of-Earthly-Delights-Oil-on-wood-panels-220-x-389-cm-Museo-del-Prado-in-Madrid)

Daniel Albright (1990, 618), and F. A. C. Wilson (1958, 16) confirm that Yeats had seen paintings by Hieronymus Bosch. They mention the similarity of Yeats’s poetic vision to Bosch’s painterly

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210 In Hartmann’s deliberations Yeats found Boehme’s “God” not as a blind force, indifferent to the suffering of the creatures but is described as “joyful, joy itself” – as Boehme had said in the *Signatura* that god is Self-enjoying. (Hartmann explains: “The Lord is the only true and real Self; the master of all the elusive “selves” or ego’s” that go to form the constitution of man” and further describes the world-god relation as one of differential identity: “he created the world of himself […] he is in the world (101-102). Hartmann insists that this notion has nothing to do with “Pantheism nor with rationalistic Theism”, for “you will not grasp with your eyes the pure and clear Godhead although god is there and within it” (Hartmann, 11).
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cosmos, especially with regard to the “terror” that is present in his works. The terror of Bosch’s images of the garden of paradise lies in the inversion of size-relations. The humans, while thoroughly enjoying themselves, seem fragile and minute in the company of beautiful robins that could easily feed on them. However, one minute human is seen to hug an owl the same size as him and the bird-human relations seem friendly. Dating from between 1490 and 1510, this image was created at a time in which Yeats assumed Unity of Being was still possible to be attained within human society and the painting illuminates a central aspect of Yeats’ Unity of Being (Au 227).

Landscape is not serving in a conveniently cooperative fashion as a backdrop to the anthropocentrism of Renaissance displays of human stature. The position of the human in Bosch’s painting is radically shrunk. The humans are submerged or permeated by the elements, non-human beings and organic forms. Humans are equal or inferior in size and they appear in continuous interaction with animals, egg-shells, bubbles, fruits and pods. Walter S. Gibson remarks the fact that the strawberry is a dominant motif in the picture: “At the bottom right of Bosch’s garden, a greedy little man bites into a strawberry bigger than himself […]. Herbalists of the period noted that cultivated strawberry plants produced larger fruit than those growing in the wild, but no amount of cultivation, surely, would have produced fruit as prodigiously huge as these two strawberries” (“The Strawberries of Hieronymus Bosch” 24). This size inversion Gibson understands in terms of Max J. Friedländer’s observation that “[w]hen you go looking for strawberries, you know what a strawberry looks like, but when you go looking for interrelationships, you do not know what they will look like” (Early Netherlandish Painting 4: 9).

The size inversions, then, are a potent way of making interrelationship and interdependence visible. Bosch makes nothing more obvious than the fragile position of humans within an endless web of ecological interrelationships. Bosch’s painting is ecocentric; it posits neither god nor anthropos at the center. God, somewhat weary and human looking, in conversation with Adam and Eve, is placed in the lower third of the left wing. He resembles traditional depictions of Christ, while the centre is occupied by a harmonious multitude of beasts and humans and the left is reserved to animal-headed demons, tortured humans and violent destruction. Bosch employs the traditional Christian triptych on the altar for the depiction of an image that does not look like the ideal candidate for a church altar. The inversion of sizes between animals and humans conjures the uncanny as the picture displays the familiar shapes of European birds in glorious detail and vibrant colour right next to and immersed with the familiar image of naked humans, only that the latter are shrunk dramatically. Bosch’s images trigger the ecological uncanny, in the sense in which Timothy Morton defines it:

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211 Bosch was recognized for the ‘modern’ aura of his art. In 1910 Claude Phillips published a review of a picture of Bosch’s that had only surfaced recently and had been auctioned for an unprecedented sum. He calls Bosch an “uncanny poet-humorist” and claims that it “would be vain to seek for an exact parallel to the genius and the art of Bosch in his own time. Not indeed in form, technique, or expression, but assuredly in the peculiarity of its morbid visionary quality, its commingling of grim humour with tragic pathos, its sinister element of cruelty and blood-lust, that art is intensely modern” (Phillips “The Mocking of Christ, by Hieronymus Bosch” 321).
Here shot through with there isn’t there something creepy about how the desolate streets, the empty forests seem to become entities in themselves? There isn’t there something sinister about discovering the mesh. It’s as if there is something else – someone else, even – but the more we look, the less sure we are. The uncanny stirs because total interconnectedness enables it.

I would suggest that the emergence of the ecological uncanny in the early poetry of Yeats (and Rilke as we have seen) relies on the moment in which traditional demarcation lines are challenged. Yeats’s refusal to differentiate between phenomena and the ground of perception which gives rise to them, his refusal to clearly depict them as objects makes his images unsafe. Human, animal, god and demon, as we shall see in the following, are not clearly bounded and it is not possible to gain certainty or distance. “To experience the ecological uncanny is to be engulfed by space without place” (Ibid.).

The emergence and dissolution of images and scenes into water, foam, slime, sea-bed and twilight, the ceaseless trembling of the bird-trees and the shell’s dreaming glimmer open up a space which is dependent upon perception, in witnessing its emergence the readers are cautioned to the oscillating, shifting nature of a polymorphous, shared space. The trees on the first island Oisin and Niamh visit are via simile transformed into the image of drummers, to whom the sun becomes a drum skin, and the land itself is personified as poetic expression, a “low laughing woodland rhyme” (Ibid.). The human visitors to the “land under wave” are portrayed as participants in a structure that they are not consciously authoring or controlling, rather, other beings are shown as woven into its texture, “piercing” it, animating it. In Book Two, the second island visited, the “Island of Fear,” features even more drastic images of submersion as Niamh and Oisin “rode between the seaweed-covered pillars; and the green / And surging phosphorus / On our dark pathway” (31). The humanoid statues to which they tie their horses are ruinous and “[h]alf in the unvesselled sea” (Ibid.). They enter a Kublah-Kahn-like vast oceanic hall covered in “green slime” that “made the way slippery, and time on time / Showed prints of sea-born scales, while down through it / The captive’s journey’s to and fro were writ” (VP 37).

“Writing becomes bodily trace. Animal and human traces make this a place of shared habitation. The reference to the sea god Manannan as the builder confirms its divine foundation. “[R]ooted in foam and clouds” its semi-material state is visibly situated on the edge of perception and imagination (VP 38). Finally, the structure itself seems a living entity: “Windowless, pillarless, multitudinous home of faces,” where “shadowy face flowed into shadowy face” (39). This hall in its multifaceted, organic integration of the disparate appears as the structure of nature, itself, with frightened ‘captive’ humans tracing through it, afraid of their vulnerability. It is worthwhile to linger for a moment in that hall. Here we encounter a human-bird situation that foreshadows the “Second Coming” in which “the falcon cannot hear the falconer” (VP 401): “I saw a foam-white seagull drift and float / Under the roof, and with a straining throat / Shouted and hailed him: he hung there a star, For no man’s cries shall ever mount so far / Not even your God could have thrown down that hall; / Stabling his unloosed lightnings in their stall” (VP 36). The sea-bird cannot hear the call, because the human call simply does not extend so far, does not extend...
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beyond its language and its embodied condition. In this sense, it is possible that the falcon of “The Second Coming” cannot hear the falconer, because it is still gyring in this enormous hall. However, the overarching structure of the hall is so immeasurable, that it can comfortably accommodate Patrick’s metaphysics, since not even his God could bring it down. Yeats is not pessimistic about contact with the ‘beast,’ as the bird is personified it becomes a recognisable other: “He had sat down and sighed with cumbered heart, / As though His hour were come.” The capitalisation of the H traditionally reverencing the majesty of God in the third person singular creates uncertainty as to whose hour has come round – that of bird, demon, human or god? In this refusal to differentiate between animal, human, demonic and divine we encounter what is possibly the strongest and most consistent distinguishing feature of Yeats’ ecological vision and what makes it so relevant to current discourses in ecological ethics and aesthetics.

But let us return for the moment to the demon-bird which suddenly has a “face.” The bird becomes a human Other via prosopopeia, as the demon-bird ‘sighs with cumbered heart.’ With the sword of Manannan, which is alchemically, magically conjured, Oisin enters into a “loud-crashing, earth-shaking fight” which lasts a hundred years. In contrast to the English tradition of man against (divine - demonic) nature (St. George vs. dragon, Gawain vs. Green Knight, which inevitably ends in human victory, here the battle ends in a draw. In the nature of the demon lies the crucial difference which makes it impossible for Oisin to win this fight. First of all, the demon is presented as a desolate human “dry as withered sedge, /Swayed, crooning to himself an unknown tongue: / In a sad revelry he sang and swung / Bacchant and mournful, passing to and fro, his hand along the runnel’s side, as though / flowers still grew there: far on the sea’s waste / Shaking and waving, vapour vapour chased” (VP 39). Soon, however the demon assumes multiform animality, “eyes first white, now burned/ Like wings of kingfishers; and he arose / Barking” (VP 40). At the sight of Manannan’s sword again the demon “changed / and ran through many shapes” (just like the druid in “Fergus and the Druid” flows from shape to shape). Oisin describes: “I lunged at the smooth throat / Of a great eel; it changed, and I but smote / A fir-tree roaring in its leafless top; / And thereupon I drew the livid chop / Of a drowned dripping body to my breast; / Horror from horror grew” (Ibid.). However many horrors ensue from this demon of metamorphosis, Oisin succeeds for only three days of celebration and rest at a time before the “unsubduable” demon is back with primordial slime and sea foam in its hair. For a hundred years they “so warred, so feasted, with nor dreams, nor fears / Nor langour nor fatigue” (VP 44).

It is clear from the above passage, that Oisin’s vision of fairyland has little to do with a traditional pastoral idyll, it is hard to find here the “wistful Elysium of his Irish theme” that A. Norman Jeffares saw in his early works (1997, 306). Through the emergence and dissolution of each scene into foam or “drifting greyness” perception itself is brought to the reader’s attention and also the process by which an object is lifted into awareness (VP 45). The blurriness of the sudden emergence and dissolution of images suggests the nature of dreaming. Oisin’s vision of the fight with the demon dissolves into “greyness, while this monotone, / surly and distant, mixed inseparably / into the clangour of the wind and sea” (VP 45). Even the solid structure of Manannan’s hall is “gather[ing] sea slime […] fall[ing] the sea-ward way.” “I hear my soul drop
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down into decay, / And Manannan’s dark tower, stone after stone […]” (Ibid.). It is interesting
that no distinction is made and building and soul are both falling in unison. Finally “lost Niamh”
oberves that the island “of Dancing and of Victories” has lost all power (VP 45-6). But what
awaits them on the next, the Island of Forgetfulness is no less of an uncanny vision of nature,
and again it begins with the “wandering and milky smoke” which is repeated twice making visible
the filmy medium of consciousness even more radically:

| Were we days long or hours long in riding, when, rolled in a grisly peace,
| An isle lay level before us, with dripping hazel and oak?
| And we stood on a sea's edge we saw not; for whiter than new-washed fleece
| Fled foam underneath us, and round us, a wandering and milky smoke.

And we rode on the plains of the sea's edge; the sea's edge barren and grey,
Grey sand on the green of the grasses and over the dripping trees,
Dripping and doubling landward, as though they would hasten away,
Like an army of old men longing for rest from the moan of the seas.

But the trees grew taller and closer, immense in their wrinkling bark;
Dropping; a murmurous dropping; old silence and that one sound;
For no live creatures lived there, no weasels moved in the dark:
Long sighs arose in our spirits, beneath us bubbled the ground.

And the ears of the horse went sinking away in the hollow night,
For, as drift from a sailor slow drowning the gleams of the world and the sun,
Ceased on our hands and our faces, on hazel and oak leaf, the light,
And the stars were blotted above us, and the whole of the world was one. (VP 47f)

Again, the trees are personified, “doubling landward” in metaphoric motion which then turns
into simile. Fleeing from the sea, and its vocal appeal –the “moan” – the trees are first likened to
“old men”, and then being metaphorically identified as human-trees by their “wrinkling bark,”
are depicted as fleeing the address of the Ur-ground. Murmuring and moaning here create the
acoustic equivalent of glimmering and foggy shiftiness. I agree with Terence Brown that the
occurrence of the colour grey in Yeats is “vested with the kind of full-blown symbolic presence
that white and red, for example, are allowed to possess” (2013, 64). In the light of the above
quoted passage this claim can be extended to his earliest poetry, as well. Grey is functional here

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212 Brown continues to observe the frequent occurrence of grey in Yeats’ poetry: “The grey wolf in ‘The Madness of
King Goll’ is made kin, in the force-field of the poetry, of the Druid ‘grey, wood-nurtured, quiet-eyed’ in ‘To The
Rose Upon the Rood of Time’ who ‘cast round Fergus dreams and ruin untold’ (100f). In ‘Fergus and the Druid’
he is a ‘thin grey man half lost in gathering night’ in a poem in which the imagined speaker comes to know ‘how
great webs of sorrow / Lay hidden in [a] small slate-coloured thing!’ In ‘The Man Who Dreamed of Faeryland’ a
‘lug-worm with its grey and muddy mouth’ sings of a transcendent dimension, while in the apocalyptic ‘The
Valley of the Black Pig’ grey and the sunset are raised to talismanic heights” (64).
as it marks a point of non-differentiation, as sea and land, perception and content are merged. The desolation of the immaterial grey, which marks the interstice between two colourful, solid images is just as integral and functional to Yeats’s creations of the “Celtic Twilight” phase as are the dark interstices to the new medium film, which was just being born as he wrote *The Wanderings of Oisin*. In January 1886, the Lumière brothers’ *L’arrivée d’un train en gare de La Ciotat* was first shown to audiences. The alleged “shock of the real,” which made the audience leave the room in terror, created singlehandedly the myth of the new medium as possessing the greatest degree of verisimilitude. However, just as much as seeing the interstices between the 24 frames per second would destroy the illusion in cautioning the viewer to the existence of the medium, so the grey in *The Wanderings of Oisin*, is a denouement which dissolves the objects of vision as well as the subjects of annunciation and merges them into the “whole of the world as one.” The world is brought back into material shape by the whinnying horse, the valley flowing from its hoofs.

This underlying notion of non-differentiation is systematic and in Book III the “immortal sleepers” are pictured as embodiments of the human-animal-divine nexus:

Till the horse gave a whinny; for, cumbrous with stems of the hazel and oak,  
A valley flowed down from his hoofs, and there in the long grass lay,  
Under the starlight and shadow, a monstrous slumbering folk,  
Their naked and gleaming bodies poured out and heaped in the way (*VP* 48). 
[...]  
And each of the huge white creatures was huger than fourscoremen;  
The tops of their ears were feathered, their hands were the claws of birds,  
And, shaking the plumes of the grasses and the leaves of the mural glen,  
The breathing came from those bodies, long warless, grown whiter than curds. 

[...]  
So long were they sleeping, the owls had builded their nests in their locks,  
Filling the fibrous dimness with long generations of eyes.  
And over the limbs and the valley the slow owls wandered and came,  
Now in a place of star-fire, and now in a shadow-place wide;  
And the chief of the huge white creatures, his knees in the soft star-flame,  
Lay loose in a place of shadow: we drew the reins by his side. 

Golden the nails of his bird-claws, flung loosely along the dim ground;  
In one was a branch soft-shining with bells more many than sighs  
In midst of an old man’s bosom; owls ruffling and pacing around  
Sidled their bodies against him, filling the shade with their eyes. (*VP* 46-50)

The “fibrous dimness” of these sleepers, pierced with non-human vision has become entirely continuous with its earthly environment as well as with the cosmic origin, as their knees are located in the furnace of stars. The immortals make good nesting material and habitats for owls. Their bodies are hybrids between bird and human. Although they are sleeping peacefully, the paraphernalia of war are still placed by their side, and as is revealed further on in the text the reason for their sleep is the fact that one of them, when they were all tired of war, took up the bell-branch (“sleep's forebear, far sung by the Sennachies”) (*VP*50). Thus, they brought on themselves “unhuman sleep,” bell-branch perception (Ibid.). The space they are part of, vibrating with the breaths of the ‘unhumans’ is accessible, as Oisin and Niamh both soon join the sleepers,
participating in their uncertain, dreaming state of being. In the first phase of “this long iron sleep” Oisin lived “and lived not, wrought […] and wrought not” (53), feeling the Fenians walking through them, the men of the Red Branch and the whole personage of Irish mythology. Occasionally they would be “[h]alf-wakening” (54) by the commotion of animals or elements, and, just like the horses whinny materialised the entire vision, so watching a starling brings Oisin back to his memory. Oisin’s half-waking consciousness, beholding a starling, summons memories of the Fenian past: “a starling like them that foregathered ‘neath a moon waking white as a shell / When the Fenians made foray at morning […] / I awoke” (VP 54). And awaking, conveniently “the strange horse without summons” returns, knowing that the “ancient sadness of man” once more moved in Oisin via a heart-to-heart or “bosom” connection (Ibid.). Going back to the realm of humanity for Oisin not only means the loss of his beloved but also leaving “the Immortals, their dimness, their dew-/ dropping sleep” behind (Ibid.).

This vision of an animated, unified living space, as the previous chapter argued, is also a central element in Rilke’s works. Literary modernism has a great array of similar poetic accounts of personification of the world and description of non-differentiation, which cannot be discussed in the frame of this thesis but certainly should be part of further studies in environmental modernism. May it suffice to mention the Welsh Modernist poet Dylan Thomas, especially in the way in which John Moriarty reads his “Fern Hill,” as evidence of a change in perception:

And nightly under the simple stars
As I rode to sleep the owls were bearing the farm away,
All the moon long I heard, blessed among stables,
the nightjars
Flying with the ricks, and the horses
Flashing into the dark.

And then to awake, and the farm, like a wanderer white
With the dew, come back, the cock on his shoulder: it was all
Shining, it was Adam and maiden,
The sky gathered again
And the sun grew round that very day.
So it must have been after the birth of the simple light
In the first, spinning place, the spellbound horses walking warm
Out of the whinnying green stable
On to the fields of praise (Thomas Selected Poems 171).

This altered state of perception for John Moriarty is the pre-necessity of an ecologically and psychologically reconciled dwelling: “In Fernhill sleep we travel back to the first morning of the world or, as a philosophical idealist might have it, in Fernhill sleep we travel back to paradisal perception […] How do you buy and sell the first morning of the world? How do you say of a field of praise that it is property? […] How do you take possession of a dimension of Ireland called Fódhla?” (2005, 126) Moriarty creates an imagined scenario of Yeats and Maude Gonne at the Hawk’s Well: “It is the question Yeats and Maude Gonne are struggling with at the Hawk’s Well. Either with your eyes or with your hands, you don’t apprehend Paradise. You don’t take it to hand, close your fist on it, and say, it is mine. That way we lose it. That way we lost it. Our fall
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to begin with, was a fall into apprehensive seeing. […] Shouldn’t we go back to the Hawk’s Well and let the apprehending raptor’s talons that are in them, fall out of our hands and eyes” (Ibid.)? Moriarty is optimistic about the ability of humankind to overcome the utilitarian mind frame, which inapprehending and pre-meditating delineates man from nature and reduces nature into object and commodity. What Yeats offers in *The Wanderings of Oisin* is a vision of a paradise that is realised in the sleep-relaxedness of the raptor’s talons: “Golden the nails of his bird-claws, flung loosely along the dim ground” (*VP* 50). Paradise is realised in the monstrous undifferentiated state of the sleepers, which are said to have faces “alive with such beauty unbeknownst to the salt eye of man” (Ibid.). A new vision becomes possible, one that does not kill its object: “Half open his eyes were, and held me, dull with thesmoke of their dreams” (51).

For Yeats, this non-apprehending vision comes from the mingling of the living and the dead, the unity of the human self and its environment. The “supernatural element,” which Edward Hirsch observes in the landscapes in Yeats’s collection *The Celtic Twilight*, turns what could be a homely pastoral into an uncannily shifting openness. This uncertainty is expressed in multistable images eradicating the difference between the human and the animal, this world and the Otherworld. It is a task too great to undertake in the frame of this chapter to count the instances of the occurrence of visual glimmering, wavering, flaring of acoustic rustling, fluttering, buzzing, of physical trembling, shaking and shivering in Yeats’ and Rilke’s work. Yet these effects come with the self-referential murmur of a textuality that is continuous with the animate structures of its environment and which gives its readers not only objects to revel in, but cautions them to their emergence from a texture of being. World and text, perception and matter enter into a dialectics that becomes instantaneous. In shivering, glimmering and trembling, phenomena escape certainty, the world escapes objectification and perception enters the Doppelbereich [double realm] of experiencing itself co-extensive and to some degree constructive of the perceived matter which substantiates it. By these phenomena it is possible for Yeats (and Rilke as well) to express the unity of humankind and the environment, the living and the dead without sacrificing the obvious experience of their disparity, of absence and death. *Twilight* is the description of a phenomenological moment. Through oscillation and uncertain shifting Yeats creates currency; his symbols reveal themselves as part of the trembling veil, the living, buzzing, sensuous texture of earth, the wall which is paradise.

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213 In 1887 Yeats has not yet joined the Golden Dawn, when he begins *The Wanderings of Oisin* in 1886 but he is already actively partaking in scances and this has evidently an effect on the poetry.

214 In his Introduction to *Certain Noble Plays of Japan*, Yeats views the measure of the greatness of art in its ability to portray intimacy between the disparate: “One realised anew, at every separating strangeness, that the measure of all arts’ greatness can be but in their intimacy” (W. B. Yeats *Introduction to Certain Noble Plays of Japan* v). This stance is pervading all of Yeats’ works – not only drama. This idea is in parts certainly derived from the metaphysical conceits of John Donne, whose figures, strained to the breaking point, exceed conventional metaphors, creating daring and unheard-of connections. In the process of the consummating of the audacious connection, intimacy is created also in the self-conscious perceptive process that the strain evokes.
3.3.2. Crossways (1889) – Into the Vocal Community

The interwovenness of beings and the texture of being are central to Yeats’s first collection of poetry. Both, the idea of the conjunction of threads in a woven texture or roads in a landscape as well as the veering off a beaten path, going cross ways, are implied in the title. Frank Hughes Murphy in Yeats’s Early Poetry: The Quest for Reconciliation (1975) remarks that “[u]nderlying the Crossways poems, and indeed all of Yeats’s works […] is the assumption that there is some transcendent unity which will embrace the seemingly irreconcilable antinomies of the real and the ideal” (8). On the contrary, already here this unity is imminent and embraces opposites within a continuous structure. The landscape, itself, is made up of animal and plant presences, the otherworldly Sidhe, luring away the “human child,” and the dead. All of these are present, not posited as transcendent. In the opening poem which formally hearkens to the pastoral, the “Song of the Happy Shepherd,” the truth of the telescope-wielding “starry men” is forsaken for song and dance and the alliance between the human shepherd, the “[m]urmuring sea,” the seashells and the dead faun. It is hard to perceive a poem as bleak as this as providing “escapist advice,” as Hazard Adams claims in The Book of Yeats’s Poems (1990) (38).

Go gather by the humming sea
Some twisted, echo-harbouring shell,
And to its lips thy story tell,
And they thy comforters will be,
Rewording in melodious guile
Thy fretful words a little while,
Till they shall singing fade in ruth
And die a pearly brotherhood;
For words alone are certain good” (VP 66).

The personified shell is not so much an ear or a mere medium for human speech. It is pictured as a companion in perishing. Adams observes that the way in which speaking is pictured here is “the antithesis to language as we know it. The happy shepherd’s poetic art is the destruction of his own medium. No voice will respond from the shell’s depth, and this is declared to be the best that the world can offer” (38). This, however, is too bleak a reading. The shell’s personified “lips” are receiving the shepherd’s confession. However, they are not portrayed as a perceiving and passive ear but “lips” that are immediately transposing, “rewording”, or as Yeats in Poems 1895 preferred, “rewarding” human speech. The shell is not a mere tool or medium to the human desire for self-affirmation. The shell is not mechanically reproducing human speech, neither saving nor transmitting messages. It is a personified agent, signalling above our heads, as Rilke’s forest did in “Waldesrauschen,” participating in the buzz of being through its own resounding embodiment, which warps human speech into “melodious guile” for a moment but vanishes alongside us (VP 66). The shell is not subservient to the human want for emotional edification. Murphy and Adams find it bleak or deficient. But then, they do not read the “inarticulate moan”
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as part of the realm of speech and therefore they see failure where Yeats in fact agrees with the early German Romantics, to whom the child’s laughter and the lovers sigh are already poetry.

Murphy observes that “the careful reader cannot fail to be struck by Yeats’s refusal to content himself with a separate peace either through art or dream or escape into nature” (10). Indeed, Yeats’s earliest poetry will “not exclude the ordinary and the dreary, but rather embrace all of human experience[…]” (Ibid.). It will also not posit the supernatural as transcendent but locate it within the landscape. These early poems have at their heart the mutual consummation of the living and the dead, as the happy shepherd dances on the grave of the dead faun, who is “pierced by my glad singing through,” indicating that the living and the dead are also passing each other or are passing through each other *crossways* (*VP* 67). The *vanitas* theme, the images of weariness, of vanishing and of death are too numerous to characterise the *Crossways* poems, as well as the majority of Yeats’ early poetry, as classical pastoral. Oona Frawley observes a “type of disillusionment and gradual displacement of the classical pastoral form” in Yeats’ early poetry, as “modernity has forced the poet into accepting truths about the world that utterly contradict the traditional pastoral dream world of the shepherd” (65).

Yeats’ notebooks, which demonstrate this increasing commitment to Irish literature, are filled, R. F. Foster notes, with ‘evocations and correspondences’. The holiness of Irish landscape, in keeping with the old bardic doctrine of *dindshenchas*, was stressed. Landscape unlike nature, Yeats discovered, was reliable (65f).

Landscape is reliable in that it participates in sensuous expression and landscape is certainly most important to Yeats’s early poetry. It is, as it is in Rilke, a shared ‘face.’ Landscape is at once the site of human passing as well as the transformed presence of the dead. The most central motive is the tension between *passing* and presence. We are not in an idealised, pastoral world but in a corrupt one, marked by disharmony and decay. “The woods of Arcady are dead,” and “sick children” are encouraged to do “dreary dancing” to the “cracked tune” of Chronos (*VP* 65). Yeats engages in the Baroque *vanitas* motive one finds for example in John Donne’s *An Anatomy of the World*.

However, it is not quite so straightforward. John Donne admits that the imagination is key to conceiving the world as either hopeless or hopeful, Yeats maintains this phenomenological interest in the preconditions of perception and compacts the dichotomies to be in a way ‘turning on the spot.’ The oxymoron of “dreary dancing” contracts into unity the opposites of sorrow and joy. Further, he shows the irony inherent in the cyclical unity of the warriors of bygone ages, men of deed and “word bemockers,” who are now turned into their own antithesis, passively feeding the trees, sleeping “by the Rood” (*VP* 65). Yeats creates continuity between the forest, the dead and the (literary) word: “An idle word is now their glory, /By the stammering schoolboy said, /Reading some entangled story” (Ibid.). The organic contingencies underlying signification and

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*Dindshenchas as the lore of places was a central element to the Bardic tradition. Kay Muhr points out that this tradition both rooted mythological features of the landscape as well as geographical landmarks which were crucial to negotiating territorial boundaries (“dindshenchas” in: Koch, John T. [ed.] *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia* 599).*
literary creation are honoured by the fact that the story read by the schoolboy is “entangled.” The word, likewise, is not devalued, and neither is the passivity of the dead, as “[t]he wandering earth herself may be /Only a sudden flaming word, / In clanging space a moment heard, /Troubling the endless reverie” (Ibid.). Yeats here understands earth as Boehme’s Verbum Fiat the spoken, manifest, divine word which in reverberation instantiates all, but which in its “sudden flaming” is temporally consumed, an ephemeral phenomenon, passing like any fluttering human word. Ambiguity and multistability are key aspects of Yeats’ understanding of the symbol put forward in his essay "The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry" (1900):

It is only by ancient symbols, by symbols that have numberless meanings beside the one or two the writer lays an emphasis upon, or the half-score he knows of, that any highly subjective art can escape from the barrenness and shallowness of a too conscious arrangement, into the abundance and depth of nature. The poet of essences and pure ideas must seek in the half-lights that glimmer from symbol to symbol as if to the ends of the earth, all that the epic and dramatic poet finds of mystery and shadow in the accidental circumstance of life (EE 128f).

Yeats employs the fourth type of ambiguity described by William Empson, namely “when two or more meanings of a statement do not agree among themselves, but combine to make clear a complicated state of mind in the author” (Seven Types of Ambiguity 133). Self-contradiction is at the heart of the poem. For example, “Words alone are certain good” can be read in contradictory ways (VP 65). The word certain can be read in its connotation of “determined, fixed, settled; not variable or fluctuating; unfailing.”

Then, words would appear as indisputably good. However, certain can also have a different, even opposite connotation. The OED documents this use of certain as “[u]sed to define things which the mind definitely individualizes or particularizes from the general mass, but which may be left without further identification in description; thus often used to indicate that the speaker does not choose further to identify or specify them.” And it is this possibility which has to be taken into account in a poem, whose general tone is that of vanitas. Words alone are of certain, not further identified and therefore disputable value, and clearly, also the euphemistic use of "certain kinds of people/women/locations" comes to mind, though it is not directly implied here. The poem actively invites to stop and ponder the value of words, alone. The speaker urges not to follow “the starry men” since they are under “the cold star-bane” (Ibid.). This is an “objection to Victorian scientific rationalism” as much as it is a cautionary remark against the fallacy of any observer’s longing for such a thing as objective reality (Watson “Yeats, Victorianism and the 1890’s” 37).

The poem is in its use of language as well as in its attitude and theme close to John Donne’s baroque Anatomy of the World, in which the futility and error of the “starry men” is mocked, likewise: “For of meridians and parallels /Man hath weaved out a net, and this net

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thrown/ Upon the heavens, and now they are his own."

The scientists have no truth to offer, only desolation. Their human heart has been compromised and is now inhospitable to truth. Again, the poem offers ambiguity rather than affirmation. There is two contradictory readings inherent in “there is not truth / saving in thine own heart” (VP 66). Because here two contradictory dimensions of the word saving are employed. Saving can be read as “the action of rescuing or protecting a person or thing from danger or harm.” If this reading were preferred, the line could be read as a pessimistic affirmation of the impossibility of retaining truth in one’s own heart. The other, simultaneous option available, however, would be the conjunction saving “expressing the condition for or respect in which the statement in the main clause is not applicable.” If, then, saving were read in the sense of exception, the heart would suddenly appear as the only possible retainer of truth: “There is no truth, except in thine own heart” These simultaneous options confront readers with uncertainty: In the absence of affirmed truth, they must decide for themselves or at least wonder at the oscillation.

Like Rilke who “so afraid of the word of man” wanted to “hear the things singing,” Yeats suggests the “humming sea” and the “echo-harbouring shell” for soothing company. Yeats describes a kiss, in which the human lips of the shepherd and the metaphoric lips of the shell are meeting. The personified presence of the shell transposes words into “melodious guile” and passes away alongside the human, “a pearly brotherhood” (VP 66). The shell is not a mere medium, transmitting and prolonging human messages. It destroys in its reverberating permutations the human word and has no regard for the intention that has formed it. Thus, in “The Sad Shepherd” the speaker may hope that his “own words, re-echoing, shall send / Their sadness through a hollow, pearly heart” but he will be disappointed as the personified shell, the “sad dweller by the sea-ways lone / Changed all he sang to inarticulate moan / Among her wildering whirls, forgetting him” (VP 68f). Nature is not available for leisurely conversation. It is not a pastoral safe haven, the shell’s reverberation is companionable to the passing of the shepherd but it is not remedial to his passing. No remedy is offered to passing except singing, dancing and thus celebrating consciously the self-expenditure.

Frank Hughes Murphy observes the “strange whispers and magical signs” which indicate that “nature could speak if she could only be induced to do so” (1975, 26). I would object that nature in Yeats’s early poetry already does speak, albeit not in a tongue humans are accustomed to understanding. The poet is not trying to induce nature to speak intelligibly but is happy to witness her buzzing and murmuring, to find himself in the presence of the “humming sea” in “The Happy Shepherd” and the “humming sands” in “The Sad Shepherd” (Ibid.). Murphy further remarks the unusual metaphoric equation of stars with “murmuring barbs” […] unusual since stars – unlike sea and sand – are for most poets soundless” (Ibid.). For Yeats’s works, inspired by


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Boehme, the reverberating and resounding presence of the divine word, forms the foundation of his poetic ontology. The signing and singing forth of the *verbum fiat* is present in each embodied manifestation, be they stars or hollow shells. All forms undergo change. And in Yeats’s early poetry nothing is spared transformation – in this alone all creatures are part of a “brotherhood.”

The motto for the collection, which Yeats adopted from Blake’s “The Ninth Night” of his prophetic and unfinished poem *The Four Zoas*:221 indicates that there is violence involved in this transformation: “The stars are threshed, the souls are threshed from their husk” must be read in this light (*V/P* 64). Alex Davis in “Irish Poetic Modernisms: A Reappraisal” (1996) claims that the mis quoation of Blake’s original line ‘And all the Nations were threshed out, and the stars threshed from their husks,’ ’denudes it of its social and political dimension, and emphasises, by way of contrast, the individual 'soul' at the expense of collectivity.’222 This, according to Davis, marks Yeats lyrics as modernist in a Baudelairian sense,223 because Yeats voices here his mistrust in a social community and “missing from Yeats’ text is any faith in the communicative possibilities of poetry” (Ibid.). Yeats’ misquotation is not, strictly speaking, denuding the original passage of its collectivity. Yeats is not speaking of the individual soul but of a plurality of souls, including everything that is endowed with *anima*. One could say that Yeats has transformed a (merely) political statement into an ontological one, which does not exclude nations as a form of collectivity.

The lack of faith in the one-directional wielding of language as a club to subdue the uncertainties of each named thing or creature that was observed in Rilke’s early poetry is expressed in Yeats’ work as well. This doesn’t mean that there is a lack of faith in communication, though. In considering the non-human world as “brotherhood” the exclusive claim to language is shared among the land community. The shell’s “inarticulate moan” is participating in it, a possibility of the human and non-human register of utterances. For the early Romantics, as for example expressed in Schlegel’s Fragment 116, the non-verbal expression of laughter and sigh are already poetry. The Modernists take up that supposition and embrace non-human speech, letting go of the idea that only humans are gifted with it. However, this speech is not necessarily a comfort. Desolation and self-destitution are part of the picture. Yeats’ early works become sociable in an environmental sense. Yeats disengages from the conventions of the

221 “There is nothing like the colossal explosion of creative power in the Ninth Night of *The Four Zoas* anywhere else in English poetry. ” Northrop Frye remarked. (*Fearful Symmetry* 305) The others are no less impressive. At the very beginning, in the “First Night” the speaker claims that “perfect Unity / Cannot exist but from the Universal Brotherhood of Eden, / The Universal Man” (Blake, William. *The Poetical Works of William Blake*, ed. by John Sampson. London, New York: Oxford University Press, 1908; Bartleby.com, 2011. <www.bartleby.com/235/>). The line breaks, here, signal a moment of hesitation or potential disunity, while the text affirms coherence. Blake’s “Universal Man” is crucial to Yeats as a planetary unity, stretching beyond the human, as was discussed with regard to his definition of Unity of Being, but already from his earliest poetry onward, this unity insists in transformation and self-expenditure of physical forms.


223 “Baudelairean symbolism is deeply imbued with a rejection of any correspondence of the poetic and the political. Instead, it postulates a correspondence between the poetic word, the symbol, and a realm that transcends the world of telegrams and anger (and Parisian barricades)” (Ibid.,n.p.).
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civilised, enlightened Western mind and its boundaries, already in these early poems, to enter into a shamanic rapport with the powers and beings of nature:

 [...] the same plants, animals, forests, and winds – that to ‘literar,’ ‘civilized’ Europeans are just so much scenery, the pleasant backdrop of our more pressing human concerns. [...] It is this, we might say, that defines a shaman: the ability to readily slip out of perceptual boundaries that demarcate his or her particular culture – boundaries reinforced by social customs, taboos, and most importantly, the common speech or language – in order to make contact with, and learn from, the other powers in the land. His magic is precisely this heightened receptivity to the meaningful solicitations – songs, cries, gestures – of the larger, more-than-human field” (Abram 1996, 9).

Crossways is not marked by a “tired and wistful aesthete language” as Margaret Newlin claims, but by a vibrant sensuous language of earthly beings and elements (Divided Image 137). Stars, birds, shells, leaves, dogs have their say. At the same time, Yeats does not abnegate human life but integrates it into a wider community. The luring song of the Sidhe that takes the child from earth leaves the reader with a sense of devastation. The homely, human-sized familiarity of rural life is lost: “He’ll hear no more the lowing / Of the calves on the warm hillside /Or the kettle on the bob / Sing peace into his breast / Or see the brown mice bob / Round and round the oatmeal chest” (VP 88). The Sidhe sing alluring songs of the wilderness, posited against a world “full of troubles” and “anxious in its sleep,” but the middle-realm of rural peace and reconciliation is lost (VP 87). In the detailed splendour of the images of the world that the child leaves behind is conveyed an enormous sense of sadness, the lowing calves and the bobbing mice are bereft of human company. The sadness is amplified manifold for 21st century readers of this poem. Children in the urban Western world may never have heard calves lowing on a warm hillside or seen a mouse other than in the media to even understand their sensuous bereavement amidst howling motors and honking horns. As the visual media’s phantasmagoric display of unspoiled wilderness forms the virtual tapestry of the metropoles, actual wilderness and actual rural life in touch with the land are vanishing.

While not explicitly mourning their passing, Yeats sides with the world of common, passing things, a world “full of weeping” (Ibid.). His poetry is not celebrating with Nietzsche a Dionysian cult of the re-emergence of brute forces, but invites to become companionable with the living and perishing creatures. Devoid of heroes who achieve and conquer, Crossways portrays a dying country gentleman, a poverty stricken priest, a woman who accidentally killed her child and leads an abject life, and a weary old Fisherman. Yet there is neither glorification nor condescension, nor is there judgement. These personae are each shown within ‘community.’ Moll Magee is a figure which actively seizes her lot and addresses a child, which had thrown stones at her to understand and to pity her. She does not turn away in resignation but tells her story, thereby reaching out and creating shared memory, granting her audience the chance to respond. The old Fisherman tells the purring, darting, dancing, personified waves of his life, allowing an image to rise to counterpoint his weariness, of “[w]hen I was a boy with never a crack in my heart” (VP 91).
Yeats informs his readers in his notes to *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* that Father O’Hart was the priest of the parish of Ballisadare and Kilvarnet, who died in 1739 and during his lifetime forbade keening. Thus, when his own brother died and he was seen mourning the villagers, allegedly asked him: “Why do you sorrow so when you forbid us to keen?” ‘Nature forces me, but ye force nature,’” he replied. Yeats duly observes that “to the present day there has been no keening in Coloomy” (Ibid.). This story obviously impressed Yeats enough to write a ballad, dedicated to a man who was beloved by all, from “the wives, and the cats, and the children, / To the birds in the white of the air” (I/P 92). Among the most moving instances of environmental personification in early Yeats are the three last stanzas in iambic trimetre. This form, used in ancient drama for passages spoken by a single speaker rather than a chorus, is used here to express a non-human community:

> There was no human keening;  
> The birds from Knocknarea  
> And the world round Knocknashee  
> Came keening in that day.

> The young birds and old birds  
> Came flying, heavy and sad;  
> Keening in from Tiraragh,  
> Keening from Ballinafad;

> Keening from Inishmurray.  
> Nor stayed for bite or sup;  
> This way were all reproved  
> Who dig old customs up (I/P 93).

What is remarkable, here, is that not only the emotion of sadness is witnessed in the birds, but that there is a gathering of mythic proportion, all the more powerful, since these birds come from human habitations. The inexorable repetition of keening, amplifies the fact that the birds do not come by randomly, they come not only for to do the keening they “come keening,” drawn by sadness, having no time for “bite or sup,” they are missing out on the very part of keening which made it attractive to many human mourners. Food apparently does not matter. What might have been a willed practice in the human community happens with inexorable force in the non-human community. Yeats re-appropriates the practice of vocal mourning: The poet grants the birds humanity. They do not come from an indistinct wilderness, but they come from places of human belonging, which are thus marked as being also their places. Like the heroes of “Easter 1916,” Yeats numbers these places in his song. He gives them a mysterious dimension, for what do we know about the nonhuman “world of Knocknashee,” the animal’s Inismurray, the Ballinafad from above? Yet, in reverse, as the birds are also from the well-known human places, they are no
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strangers. Their poetic presence foregrounds the response-ability of the environment. There is something very moving about these three stanzas. Father John’s wishes are mocked by the animals, yet their presence signals also reconciliation, since their mourning is not forced or lacking in genuinity.

In Crossways Yeats gives voice and agency to the non-human, but the greater community, again, provides no remedy for inevitable destitution. Marjorie Howes in “Yeats and the Postcolonial” (2006) observes that Father O’Hart is an “agent of imperialism,” since he tries to bereave the community of the practice of keening. Howes mentions the “devotional revolution” of the 19th century, in which popular customs and traditions were discouraged in favour of a more orthodox Catholicism. However, as Howes rightly observes, the priest’s attempt to “civilize and educate his flock” from the imagined superiority of his book learning is finally mocked by the keening birds: “This way were all reproved / who dig old customs up” (222). Howes suggests that the “all” includes both the Shoneen, the Anglo-Irish “upstart who stole O’Hart’s lands, as well as Father O’Hart “were to be ‘reproved’ for helping Britain dominate Ireland” (Ibid.). Howes sees Yeats chastise the figure of Father O’Hart and step in, in defence of “old customs” (Ibid.). This interpretation narrows down the ambiguity of the last two lines of the poem and takes a stance that Yeats leaves as a possibility but not as a prescription in the text. For ‘digging old customs up’ does not only imply the digging out of something that grows organically, for the purpose of destroying it, it also implies the digging up of something that was buried and gone, to bring it back to life: “Oh keep the Dog far hence, that’s friend to men, / Or with his nails he’ll dig it up again!” (Eliot The Waste Land 36) There is a respect for the wish of the individual not to be keened, as the human local community refrains from their custom and there is a respect for the natural and rightful rootedness of that custom, performed in that miraculous gathering of the non-human local community. The question who or what is reproved is extended to “all” humans with spades, whatever their purpose is to revive or to wipe out a custom, by the community of birds participating in vocal culture.

The speaker in “The Indian upon God” (first published in the Book of Kauri the Indian [1886], section 5), while in a liminal state “in sleep and sighs” perceives non-humans busy in creating their own versions of the divine (VP 76).

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I passed along the water's edge below the humid trees,
My spirit rocked in evening light, the rushes round my knees,
My spirit rocked in sleep and sighs; and saw the moor-fowl pace
All dripping on a grassy slope, and saw them cease to chase
Each other round in circles, and heard the eldest speak:
Who holds the world between His bill and made us strong or weak
Is an undying moor-fowl, and He lives beyond the sky.

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225 This is a common theme in the Irish language literary tradition, in Pádraig Mac Piaraí’s “Bean Sléibhe ag Caoineadh a Mhac” a poem which he published in the short story titled “The Keening Woman” in 1906, it is the vocal or voice-full curlew which tells the mourning woman of her loss “an crotcach glórach” as she goes on to bless the sods on the grave of her child because death lays “the green and the whithered together [“leagann sé úr agus críonn le chéile”]” (Mac Piaraí, Pádraig, “Bean Sléibhe ag Caoineadh a Mhac” <https://sites.google.com/site/donslibrary/donald-mahoney/100-favorite-poems/a-woman-of-the-mountain-keens-her-son>
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The rains are from His dripping wing, the moonbeams from His eye.
I passed a little further on and heard a lotus talk:
Who made the world and ruleth it, He hangeth on a stalk,
For I am in His image made, and all this tinkling tide
Is but a sliding drop of rain between His petals wide.
A little way within the gloom a roebuck raised his eyes
Brimful of starlight, and he said: The Stamper of the Skies,
He is a gentle roebuck; for how else, I pray, could He
Conceive a thing so sad and soft, a gentle thing like me?
I passed a little further on and heard a peacock say:
Who made the grass and made the worms and made my feathers gay,
He is a monstrous peacock, and He waveth all the night
His languid tail above us, lit with myriad spots of light (VP 76f).

In the initial description of the speaker’s embeddedness in nature, he is exposed to his environment and vulnerable. “Rocked” gently, like a child or a boat, by evening light between lake and wood, “rocked in “sleep and sighs” he begins to perceive the moorfowls as personified. As is customary in human negotiations of metaphysics, the “eldest” speaks and proclaims, in the traditional frame of monotheism and transcendence the “undying moorfowl” holding the whole world in his bill (mark the humour, here!), living beyond the sky. Natural phenomena are subsequently interpreted as indices of his transcendent existence. The Lotus, even more pompous, in King James’ English proclaims that the maker and ruler of all things “hangeth on a stalk.” The speaking Lotus reduces all tides into a drop of rain between the petals of the divine. Yeats reflects on interpretation as dependent upon the perceiving apparatus. He does not deny vision to any one, as the roebuck’s eye is “brimful of starlight.” Yet it is humour which makes all the difference. Where Ruskin fears and scolds fallacy, Yeats celebrates limited, embodied perception as an unavoidable condition of living beings, shaping their cosmologies in the face of the unavailability of objective truth. The metaphors of each non-human entity compete with each other in beauty and inadequacy: from the transcendent moorfowl to the creator roebuck to the immanent peacock, all are still man-like, in that they are filtered through the persona of the Indian, framed by the authorial signature of the poet. Neil Mann observes that for Yeats

Full anthropomorphism may in some ways be preferable to the insidious version that affects all human thought about the divine. True deity lies beyond whatever (mis-)conceptions are imposed by the limitations of consciousness or partiality, […] we have no idea and no language for the divine (“The Thirteenth Cone” 180).

I would object that “true deity” also lies within the limitations of consciousness, but is not accessible to the perception as abstraction or truth. Deity is only perceivable as veiled, in the sensuous tissues of earthly embodiment, which is why Yeats chooses successions of beings and images that withhold as much as they promise revelation. No mortal can lift the veil of nature, the veil is Isis. As much as he forms the abyss of nothingness, God resides also in the limitless plenitude of being. The desire to see exposed divinity is never attained in Yeats’s works, as Rilke desired to find at the ground of being a ‘probability that one can love’ Yeats feels he has failed when writing of God “coldly and conventionally” (quoted in Mann 180; Ex 305).
Jahan Ramazani observes that in this poem religion is firstly understood as “projection of one’s self unto the divine other and its own attribution of this perspectivist concept to the cultural other” and secondly that “the poem acknowledges that, by its own logic, the poet’s effort to imagine cultural otherness inevitably imposes a cultural self-image onto the other” (36). Thus, if truth is itself perceived to be dependent on the embodiment and form of each different perceiver, then any form of anticipating how it might appear to another is trespassing against its necessary hiddenness. Strictly, a human can never know how God appears to a moorfowl. The poem is a humorous take on the limited comprehension of embodied life forms, including the sage, and in turn the poet. Still, it “recognizes their beauty and sympathises with their lack of scope” (Lennon 261). Nicholas of Cusa holds the same stance as Yeats’s Indian, transgressing against hiddenness in deciding in what form God appears to other beings:

He, then, who looketh on Thee with loving face, will find Thy face looking on himself with love, and the more he shall study to look on thee with greater love, by so much shall he find Thy face more loving. He who looketh on Thee in wrath shall in like manner find Thy face wrathfull. He who looketh on Thee with joy, shall find Thy face joyful after the same sort as is his own who looketh on Thee. 'Tis as when the eyes of flesh, looking through a red glass thinketh that it seeth all things red, or, through a green glass, all things green. Even so, the eye of the mind, muffled up, in limitation and passivity, judgeth thee, the mind’s object according unto the nature of its limitation and passivity. Man can only judge with human judgement. When a man attributeth a face unto thee, he doth not seek it beyond the human species, because his judgement, bound up with human nature. In like manner, if a lion were to attribute a face unto Thee, he would think of it as a lion’s, an ox as an ox’s and an eagle as an eagle’s (The Vision of God 24f).

If this supposition were adopted for a moment that the divine manifests individually with each embodied being beholding it in a unique way, then it becomes apparent what losses are being incurred. The divine forever lost its face as a Pinta Island Tortoise when the last of its species “Lonesome George” died on June 10 2012. It has lost forever its face as a Japanese River Otter, as a Formosan clouded Leopard, as a Western Black Rhinoceros, and as a Baiji dolphin. Earth is poorer in veiled truth with every extinct species. Jeffrey L. Kosky in “Iconic Revisions of the Modern World Picture” observes that:

God would, as Nicholas says, look at me when I look at the icon. What is more, since all faces are patterned after God's face, every face may become an icon of God […]. This theological aesthetic is extended cosmologically such that the cosmos in each of its parts would be an image or picture letting God be seen: ‘Thou hast appeared unto me,” Nicholas writes of God, ‘as One to be seen of all, since a thing existeth in the measure wherein Thou dost behold it, and it could not exist in reality did it not behold Thee… Thus my God… Thou art visible in regard to the Being of the creature.”


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Yeats reveals this visibility of God as a specific hiddenness by interjecting the perspectival frame of the Indian monk’s witness account on which we have to rely before we hear what the animals say. Yeats’s animals are endowed with voice and speech in so far as a human gives an account of an individual act of perceiving it. There is no certainty and hence no pedagogy to their speaking.

In “The madness of King Goll,” the static noise of murmur, of speech beyond human comprehension, disturbs and unsettles both reader and speaker. The chorus at each end of the stanza: “They will not hush, the leaves a-flutter round me, the beech leaves old,” creates “anti-closure” (VP 82; Zimmerman “Singing amid Uncertainty: Yeats’ Closing Questions” 35). Lee Zimmermann puts forward an argument which traces the modernism of Yeats’s poems in their refusal to provide closure and certainty. With reference to Barbara Herrnstein Smith, he observes that Yeats commits “‘poetic sabotage,’ with his handling of, for instance stanzaic refrains […] [A] refrain repeated without change suggests continuation, while modifying it in the last stanza as is normally done signals closure but that, as an anti-closural device, Yeats often leaves a final refrain unaltered. The effect is intensified when the recurring line bears a puzzling relationship to the stanza and when it is ‘a question, a paradox, or some similarly unsettling utterance’” (Ibid. Smith Poetic Closure. A study of how poems end 246). The repeated refrain in “The Madness of King Goll” is unsettling in so far as it states the leaves’ refusal to be silent. It is the allegedly mad speaker who tells us so. His madness, however, is more trustworthy than the scientist’s certainties. It is the Merlinian, environmental ecstasy of a poet who went into the wild and imbruted himself, experiencing the non-human creatures and the elements as companionable: “The grey wolf knows me; by one ear / I lead along the woodland deer; / The hares run by me growing bold” (VP 84). It is not a fragmented self that thus perceives the leaves’ constant murmuring, it is a self that has broken out of modern solipsism and stepped into wider relations, including the non-human or no-longer human beings. I disagree with Frank Hughes Murphy's claim that “there is no real communication between man and nature; rather man interprets nature as a commentary upon his own mortality” (26). In writing that “Yeats’s stars laugh, sing, sigh as well as murmur,” an alternative reading already appears (Ibid.).

3.3.2. The Rose (1893)—Unity in Transformation

It is not possible to define the many ways in which the rose matters for Yeats in the space of a single chapter. With regard to the guiding question of this thesis, therefore, the rose will be viewed in its function as an ontological concept. An approach to understanding Yeats’s Rose must, first and foremost, consider the principle of interrelationship as its main distinguishing feature. The Yeatsian rose grows out of tensions and paradoxically unites in itself the living and the dead, the human and the non-human, organic growth and confining form. The paradoxical temporal consummation of eternity is invoked in the opening poem, when, in the mode of an invocation to the muse the poet beseeches the rose to come near: “Eternal beauty wandering on her way” (VP 101). Wandering, walking and footsteps are occurring repeatedly throughout the collection and not only do they self-reflexively indicate the metred process of poetry but the
passing-as-dancing of existence. The feet in Yeats’s poetry are sometimes those of humans, but also those of the dead or the Sidhe or even God’s (‘for God goes by with white footfall’ VP 139). Yeats’s is a heavily perambulatory poetry. Angela Leighton in her chapter “Yeats Feet” (On Form [2007] 144-169) has pointed out the importance of feet on a topical level for Yeats. And indeed, Yeats human and non-human figures’ feet dance, walk, slouch, limp, slide, and stalk.

The rose provides uncertain shelter “under the boughs of love and hate” (Ibid.). Eternal beauty must pass “in all poor, foolish things that live a day” – this beauty, thus, is given into destitution. The poet implores the nearness of the Rose to hear “common things”: worm and field mouse, the toiling and passing of humans. The Rose in Yeats must not be thought in terms of the wide-spread image of an amputated blossom. Yeats’ Rose has roots and stem, leaves, blossoms and thorns, it is alive and held response-able through the apostrophe. The passing and desolation of earth as a temporal process are part of the rose’s eternal self-consuming beauty. The unity that is approaching in the symbol of the rose is an earthly unity of transformation to which the breaking of individual form is integral. The rose combines the image of the temporal ‘cross’ of the passing of all embodied beings. In Yeats’s collection Michael Robartes and the Dancer, it will become a living Rose Tree, a green and vital unity of independent Ireland that is nurtured by the red blood of the self-sacrifice of the men of the Easter Rising.

It would not be possible to understand the Rose without considering Yeats’s meeting with Maud Gonne on 30th of January 1889. It was life changing and in many ways, Maud Gonne became the gravitational centre of his life and creations in the 1890s and beyond – even, and maybe especially, in her physical absence. Like Rilke’s love for Lou Andreas-Salomé, Yeats’s love for Maud Gonne was transformative, life-long, troubling and crucial to his poetic creations. It did not result in a real-life partnership, for which Maud Gonne believed the world was to thank her: “[p]oets should never marry. The world should thank me for not marrying you” (Jeffares A commentary 92). John Harwood, somewhat drastically, claims that “Maud Gonne did not overpower his imagination; his imagination overpowered ‘Maud Gonne’” (“‘Secret Communion’” 18). However, Terence Brown rightly points out the “existential contingencies” of their relationship, such as their shared interest in occultism, the genuine affection which Maud Gonne had for Yeats although she was, as Brown outlines, not free to express them due to her pre-existing liaison with Lucien Millevoye (1999, 49ff). Yeats proposed many times unsuccessfully, the first time in 1891. Her passionate presence, and also her political fervour were to challenge and inspire and consume Yeats. Many of Yeats’s poems are witnessing a sudden flashing image or memory of Gonne. Presences which will have their own life in his poetry, as Yeats foretells eagerly, decades after they both are gone. Maud Gonne was “the rose” in that Yeats saw in her the incarnational paradox embodied:

the beauty of myth and bygone ages, art and poetry, nature and eternity were radiating and passing away within and from a human being: “I had never thought to see in a living woman so great beauty. It belonged to famous pictures, to poetry, to some legendary past. A complexion like the blossoms of apples, and yet the face and body had the lineaments which Blake calls the highest beauty because it changes least from youth to age and a stature so great that she seemed of divine race (quoted in Brown 1999, 48).
Richard Ellmann’s view of young Yeats as an artist, whose unrequited love results in the emergence of a “concept of personal transformation through the agency of failure,” is described by Terence Brown as “too close to the romanticism of Yeats’ own re-creation of his experience in art” (Ibid.). “Yeats,” says Richard Ellman, “makes a cult of frustration, and courts defeat like a lover” (Yeats: The Man and the Masks 85).

While defeat and frustration are indeed central to Yeats, they aren’t an end in itself. They are the main avenue by which the individual self can overcome the adhesion to its own mask and the tyranny of projected desires. Through poetic celebrations of failure and frustration, of the releasing and out-pouring of the self instead of saving and guarding it, unity is achieved. With regard to his biography, many commentators, R. F. Foster being the foremost among them, emphasise the self-constructed, ‘engineered’ Yeats, who became who he was through self-stylisations, seeking “imaginative mastery” by making art a “voracious predator of the stuff of experience” (Brown 1999, 49). Such approaches forget the centrality of giving and offering in Yeats. If merely conscious control over self-image and artistic creation moved Yeats’s cosmos, we would not be reading him today. But through giving in, giving up and self-giving, through resistance and non-resistance and the observation of the destructive forces of ageing and the pangs of fate Yeats offers images of liberation from the chase for happiness and achievement, for consummate love or the execution of one’s schemes. Art is defined in terms of self-giving and self-exhaustion; it is, not unlike the rose, a passing beauty.

It is not mere coterie when Yeats in letters and notebook entries speaks of the exhaustion and depletion that comes with creating poetry or mentions the exhaustion of his wife, who was often depleted by the mediumistic work that went into A Vision. It is, of course, possible to understand the biography of a poet, as R. F. Foster does, as a mirror hall of consciously willed images and consciously mastered turns of plot. It is, however, also possible to understand biography as an emergence of human interactions, shaped by mutual interventions as well as conscious craft: A poet’s life may be understood in terms of the bestowing and receiving of a gift. “I have spread my dreams under your feet” lingers, in de Man’s understanding of prosopopeia, on the irresolvable edge of living, personified voice and preserved semiotic artefact. It continues giving, asking each reader anew to tread softly, because the images and tunes, rhymes and metres are the site on which the poet expended his energy. “While still I may I write for you” the apostrophe of the last stanza of “To Ireland in the coming times” is actualising the living voice, addressed at an imaginary future Ireland but also the reader in the moment of encountering it. This voice accounts that all the things experienced “are passing on.” And it may be, the voice contents with the gesture of uncertainty, that they pass into oblivion, that no “great memory” keeps them forever intact “in truth’s consuming extasy” where there may be “no place for love and dream at all / for God goes by with white footfall” (VP 139).

With the depiction of these obliterating, divine footsteps, the poet casts doubts on eternity as an infinite conservation of being. Therefore the final quatrain (the entire poem is composed in the even measure of iambic tetrameter and rhyming couplets, which gives each line a certain festive finality) implores:
I cast my heart into my rhymes,
That you, in the dim coming times,
May know how my heart went with them
After the red-rose-bordered hem (Ibid.).

Again, we are cautioned to care, reminded that these lines are not just dead semiotic items, but part of a desolating, transformative circulation into which the poet’s heart is cast like a spell or a stone, fading with the rhymes after the “hem,” which is not just a pars-pro-toto of a dress but the infinite liminality of the rustling, moving cloth of being, which cannot be observed or known as an overarching motionless totality. The rose moves and is emotive. The heart is lost within the act of casting, giving, as poetry and voice are generously squandered in and among a people and a country “where a man can be so crossed: / Can be so battered, badgered and destroyed / That he’s a loveless man” (VP 130).

Lewis Hyde claims, in The Gift. How the Creative Spirit transforms the world (1983) that the spirit of an artist’s gift can encourage this spirit of giving in the reader. “The work appeals, as Joseph Conrad says, to a part of our being which is itself a gift and not an acquisition […]. When we are moved by art we are grateful that the artist lived, grateful that he laboured in the service of his gifts” (xiv). However, Hyde cautions that “Even if a work of art contains the spirit of the artist’s gift, it does not follow that the work, itself, is a gift. It is what we make of it” (xv). Art can be destroyed by commodification, because it is a gift which is based on self-abandoning. The artist “is not self-aggrandizing, self-assertive, or self-conscious, he is rather self-squandering, self-abnegating, self-forgetful – all the marks of the creative temperament the bourgeoisie find so amusing. […] In art the self becomes self-forgetful in order to meet the demand of the thing seen and the thing to be made” (152). For Rilke, squandering is essential “this squandering of the heart” of the 7th elegy is a human way of celebrating being [“diese, des Herzens Verschwendung”] (W 2 222). There is no chance, as the “Happy Shepherd” declares, for finding the poets’ own words contained in the melodious guile of these poems. However, according to the temporal nature of transformation and gift giving, their ceaseless, living, companionable murmur, passing along with each individual reader will be comforting for a while and then move on.

The rose for Yeats is not an image of self-destitution, loss and frustration without also being an image of consummate unity and instantiation of self. The best visual expression for Yeats’s conceptual symbol can be found in Althea Gyles book cover for the Stories of The Secret Rose, which will be discussed in the next chapter. It “sets the mood and heralds the legacy of the poet’s affiliations” (Karen E. Brown The Yeats Circle 19). Karen E. Brown notes that Althea Gyles, who also provided the art work for The Wind among the Reeds (1899) and Poems (1901) was a fellow member of the Golden Dawn, and her art received lavish praise from Yeats in his 1898 article “The Symbolic artist and the Coming of Symbolic Art,” first published in The Dome. Here, Yeats states the inseparability of art and literature. (Ibid.) Likewise, the book itself was to become an appealing sensuous artefact: “The quality of production and craftsmanship in the blue cloth binding and gold embossing stems from pre-Raphaelitism, Ricketts and the Arts and Crafts movement.” (Ibid.) Yeats describes Gyles pictures as “so full of abundant, passionate life that they remind one of William Blake’s cry ‘exuberance is beauty’.” (UA 427) Gyles’s is “a passion for impossible beauty,” which cannot be depicted. I would argue that this “impossible beauty” is
rooted in the organic unity which places death within life, growth within decay, love and farewell into patterns that are not apprehensible from within embodied existence, wherefore we need art, in Yeats’ opinion, to make the impossibility of the beauty of this organic unity visible. Yeats’ article in *The Dome* is published alongside an image called *The Knight upon the Grave of his Lady*.

The same intricate interlacing of branches and roots, which Rilke admired about Heinrich Vogeler, dominates the image, and Yeats in his comment fuses nature with beauty and the work of art, leaving only uncertain demarcations: “The very richness of the pattern of the armour, and of the boughs, and of the woven roots, and of the dry bones, seems to announce that beauty gathers the sorrows of man into her breast and gives them eternal peace” (429). This eternal peace, however, is immediately contradicted by the promise of the hyacinths’ bloom in spring and the continuation of the cycle of life, springing from the grave: “when one has studied for a time, one discovers that there is a heart in the bulb of every hyacinth, to personify the awakening of the soul and of love out of the grave.” (Ibid.) Yeats’s appreciation for the engraving is similarly motivated and structured as Rilke’s praise for Vogeler’s “Melusinenmärchen,” discussed earlier. As the Vogeler bestowed human eyes to the forest, Gyles gives a human heart to the hyacinth tubers. Just as the tubers in T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* are bringing back the dead after the carnage of war and make April ‘the cruellest month,’ so Yeats observes the birth of a beauty which is terrible because it is feeding its life from graves and its achievement of one form or presence is rooted in the destruction of another. Humanity passes into non-human nature. It is the bio-physiology of decomposition which transforms the human into the nonhuman that Yeats here chooses to call beauty.

The rose on the cross was a symbol of identification for the members of the Golden Dawn, the occult Order which Yeats had entered in 1890 to “‘complete’ his sense of reality and explain to him his complex, multiple nature as a being in the world” (Brown 1999, 52).
Coote remarks that the rose sacrificed on the cross establishes a union which should remind the bearer that “intellectual, spiritual and eternal beauty [are] impaled upon the world and suffering with mankind as transcendence becomes immanence” (W. B. Yeats: A Life 96). But already in the first poem, “The Rose upon the Rood of Time,” Yeats fuses the image of the rose not only with the cross but with the living tree. Althea Gyles’ image for the cover of The Secret Rose describes this ontological concept vividly: Out of the dead knight’s skeleton, the rose-tree grows, its branches forming a Celtic ornamental knotwork of infinite interlacing, reminding of medieval illuminations. The kissing, human lovers are integral part of the tree, nourished by the dead knight. The rose is not static but its beauty radiates, as indicated by the multidirectional lines. The effect of the dazzling gold embossing also contributes to this effect of radiance. What is shown here is the environmental, biophysiological continuity that characterises embodied being on earth, which is invisible to the naked eye, and which art, through symbol elevates into an open secret. However, this unity of the rose is not a closed circle – or else the radiating would not make sense (another transposition encompassing the loss of form). The giving of self as a giving-up of self does not cease at any point: “the beautiful cannot from its own resources offer itself and man a closed world in which restlessness finds peace.

Hans Urs von Balthasar’s attempt to outline a theological aesthetics in The Glory of the Lord (1983-1991) is very relevant to understanding the notion of the beautiful in Rilke and Yeats. The refusal to differentiate between form and content, natural and spiritual phenomena, achievement and relinquishment are important. Balthasar stresses the importance of seeing beauty:

The question of form and matter can be discarded because once we confine the problem to them, we soon experience the tedium of a metaphysics of substance and, aesthetically, the boredom of artistic canons: ‘artistry, the Museum, Hellenism.’ The beautiful has its native atmosphere in the tragic myth, in the strife of the gods – from Troy and Thebes all the way to Worms! – and even in the mythless form of tragic human existence. The beautiful may take refuge (sich flüchten) and seem almost to disappear (sich verflüchtigen) in a mystical ‘All and Nothing’; it may become an abstract infinity and fascinate aesthetes under the form of ‘religion,’ but the peace attained in this way will be only a compensation and not a ‘victory’. The Greek agon may belong to the worldly form of beauty, but at the same time we must affirm, that ‘the beautiful brings into the foreground the cosmos’ background of peace.’ The beautiful can be the divine epiphany of that peace (59f).

Though in Yeats it “comes dropping slow / dropping from the veils of the morning [...]” (VP 117). Peace is not attainable as a rest or pause. The rose is permanently on the move, a rustling,
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liminal texture of being, and those who seek to understand it must venture “after the red, rose-bordered-hem” as “we and the labouring world are passing by” (“The Rose of the World” V/P 112).

In “The Sorrow of Love” the first stanza, humanity appears fragile, as even the sparrows “brawling” and the “famous harmony of leaves” acoustically “blot out” man’s image and man’s cry. The picture of annihilation of the first stanza is interrupted by the tragic beauty of the “red, mournful lips” of “a girl” subject to violent destruction and doom, as she rises, she is actualised within self-consummation, suddenly nature does no longer blot out but instantiate “mans image and man’s cry” that appear as composed by the personified “lamentation of the leaves” (V/P 120). The world creates anthropos as much as it destroys and blots out its face. In fact, in “The Rose of the World” Yeats outlines a shared, earthly face, made up of the “giving place” of humans, the moving waters, the passing stars:

We and the labouring world are passing by
Amid men’s souls, that waver and give place
Like the pale waters in their wintry race,
Under the passing stars, foam of the sky,
Lives on this lonely face (V/P 112).

The comparable longevity of the stars is reduced to “foam” as the “lonely face” with the definite article is moved out of abstraction and yet not assigned to any one species or individual. “This face” of earth is eternal in that it is shared, changing and moving. In so far the poet can anticipate: “I would we were changed to white birds on the wandering foam: I and you” (V/P 122).

Images of human passing via the loss of form are celebrated. Also, in the stories of The Secret Rose especially “The heart of the spring” which was one of the first stories of the collection to be completed but which ”becomes the heart of the 1897 collection”(Putzel 59). We encounter an aged Aengus, who is still a sage and magician but “has made his home in the ruins of monastic Ireland” (Ibid.). He is “[a] very old man, whose face was almost as fleshless as the foot of a bird” (Myth 171). Christianity is ruined and overtaken by the presence of nature and the remnants of paganism, as “cultivated, controlled and institutionalised spirituality” intermingle with the ferns, hazels and oaks – all of which were sacred in pagan Ireland and in the folk tradition” (Putzel 60). Steven Putzel sees the “relationship between Catholic and Celtic Ireland” reflected in the interactions of the aged Aengus and his young apprentice who wears the garments of 17th-century Irish peasants (Ibid.). However, the story cannot be exhaustively interpreted in this way. The story is also one of Unity of Being that embraces the varied forms of embodied being. The old mage is approaching his last day and Yeats marks this moment of passing from one form to another by the comparative connection of face of human and leg of bird.

The old sage has renounced life in his quest for Immortality, and bids his young apprentice prepare everything for his passing at the opportune hour which he has spent a lifetime divining, now he is approaching the end with jubilant self-confidence: “I was not happy in my youth, for I knew that it would pass; and I was not happy in my manhood, for I knew that age was coming; and so I gave myself, in youth and manhood and age, to the search for the Great Secret. I longed for a life whose abundance would fill centuries, I scorned the life of fourscore
winters. I would be—nay, I will be!—like the Ancient Gods of the land” (*Myth* 173). But, of course, as is the case in all the stories of *The Secret Rose*, such wishes are not granted. Instead, the reader is presented with a beautiful vision of “the heart of spring” a moment of paradisial, earthly passing. The young apprentice, who had filled the master’s chamber with flowers and rushes on his request, is sitting with an hourglass by the door at dawn, waiting for what he expects to be a rejuvenated and immortal master to emerge from his hut. He is to be disappointed but fails to realise that his disappointment, itself, is a voluntary act of interpretation. When he finds his master’s lifeless body, he believes his quest to have failed and gives in to Catholic fears: “‘It were better for him,’ said the lad, ‘to have told his beads and said his prayers like another, and not to have spent his days in seeking amongst the Immortal Powers what he could have found in his own deeds and days had he willed. Ah, yes, it were better to have said his prayers and kissed his beads!’” (*Myth* 176) Yet, this harsh judgement is the mocking antithesis of the beauty of the morning. The music of the birds animates the scene at the centre of which we find the old hermit dead:

[…] everything suddenly seemed to overflow with their music. It was the most beautiful and living moment of the year; one could listen to the spring's heart beating in it. He got up and went to find his master. The green boughs filled the door, and he had to make a way through them. When he entered the room the sunlight was falling in flickering circles on floor and walls and table, and everything was full of soft green shadows. But the old man sat clasping a mass of roses and lilies in his arms, and with his head sunk upon his breast. On the table, at his left hand, was a leathern wallet full of gold and silver pieces, as for a journey, and at his right hand was a long staff. The boy touched him and he did not move. He lifted the hands but they were quite cold, and they fell heavily (*Myth* 176).

Yet, the presence of a thrush indicates the passing of life from one form to another and thereby immortality: “a thrush, who had alighted among the boughs that were piled against the window, began to sing” (*Myth* 176). Phillip L. Marcus reminds that Yeats ends the story on a note of uncertainty as to what happened to the old man. Is he dead because he died, ironically, just a second before the most sacred moment arrived and the bird’s song is a mere mocking of his failure, or was the moment in which the spring’s heart could be heard beating liberating him so that now, “the old man’s soul, freed into immortality, took the form of the thrush” (*Yeats and the Beginning of the Irish Renaissance* 47)? It is the reader who decides.

*Approaching “Fergus and the Druid” with John Moriarty*

Yeats creates poetic visions of the continuity of an environmental self, making literature a “totem pole of who we elementally and phylogenetically are, indeed, of who we microcosmically are, right there before our eyes,” to adopt a phrase John Moriarty uses to describe the “Song of Amhairghín” (*Moriarty Invoking Ireland* 38). To Moriarty’s ecological philosophy the poetic thought of Rainer Maria Rilke and W. B. Yeats are central. He understands their writings as
3. The Environmental Self in R.M. Rilke’s and W. B. Yeats’s Early Poetry and Criticism

philosophically relevant to a quest for ecologically reconciled modes of human dwelling.\(^{227}\) His writings speak to this millennium in which dysfunctional ways of interacting with the ecosphere and understanding it are quickly becoming apparent as one of humanity’s biggest problem. For Moriarty, the syncretistic blending of evolutionary thought, pre-Christian Irish and Eastern mythologies as well as a Franciscan ethos allows for a view of nature as a continuum embracing humanity as “intimately and dynamically contiguous with our world” (Kearney xii).

However, this continuity is not necessarily an idyllic one. The naturality of man for Moriarty involves the torturous realisation that we are continuous also with nature in its bestiality, with the feeding frenzy of shark, wolf and dinosaur. He claims that through reason and humanist enlightenment certainties as well as scientific advancements the raptor has achieved its most staggering victory: humanity has become “Deinanthropos,” the terrible man, clubbing the land to death with instrumental reason like Hercules instead of singing it into being like Orpheus. Moriarty suggests that we need to become conscious of our continuity with nature to overcome the unconscious habits,\(^{228}\) which are playing themselves out to the detriment of non-human nature: “His diagnosis is that we have developed a dangerous and pathological way of seeing our world and ourselves. This way of seeing is so endemic that we are not even aware of it, yet it shapes our values and the choices we make everyday” (Kearney \textit{A Moriarty Reader} xiii). One way in which Moriarty wants to achieve the breaking out of “habitual humanity” is by creating awareness for the destructive impact of apprehensive seeing: “Either with your eyes or with your hands, you don’t apprehend Paradise. You don’t take it to hand, close your fist on it, and say, it is mine. That way we lose it. That way we lost it. Our Fall, to begin with, was a fall into apprehensive seeing […]” (Moriarty \textit{Invoking Ireland} 36).

Moriarty insists that the ecocentric “I am” s of the iconic poem accredited to Amhairghin Glúngheal, bard of the Milesians who invaded and took possession of Ireland according to the mythical history of the \textit{Leabhar Gabhála}, are more than ego-inflation:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Am gaeth I mmuir</th>
<th>I am a wind in the sea</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Am tond trethan</td>
<td>I am a sea wave on the land</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Am fuaim mara</td>
<td>I am the roar of ocean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Am dam secht ndreann</td>
<td>I am a stag of seven fights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Am ség i n-aill</td>
<td>I am a hawk on a cliff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Am dér gréine</td>
<td>I am a tear-drop of the sun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Am cáin</td>
<td>I am fair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Am tor car gail</td>
<td>I am a boar for valour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Am hé i llind</td>
<td>I am a salmon in the pool</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Am loch I mmaig</td>
<td>I am a salmon in the pool</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[…] (quoted in Moriarty 2005, 30-31)</td>
<td>I am a lake in the plain</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{227}\)Michael Kearney in his foreword to the recently published first collection of his works \textit{A John Moriarty Reader} lauded Moriarty as “one of Ireland’s most important thinkers whose work speaks poetically and powerfully to many of the critical personal, cultural and global crises we are facing […] a wounded healer, whose patient is Western culture itself” (xiii).

\(^{228}\) “Being human is a habit, it can be broken” is one of Moriarty’s radical reminders that the habitual enlightenment connection of “I am” to instrumental reason and juxtaposition to what is defined as non-human assumed a toxicity in our own age which is killing the planet and its species and in this sense, the breaking out of “habitual humanity” for Moriarty becomes essential to the journey “back to earth” (from: \textit{One Evening in Eden} quoted in O’Donoghue xii).
“Still liminal to sea and land, a neither this nor that between hawk and human, he sings” Moriarty writes (Ibid.). “But” he asks “how trustworthy is Amhairghin’s Song of Himself […]? We have of course heard the like before from Krishna […] ‘I am the Self established / In the heart of all contingent beings; / also, I am the beginning, middle and end / Of all contingent beings’” (Ibid.). These lines suggest entanglements and conceive an “I am” that cannot be thought without a ‘we are,’ at its root – the environmental self is not an expansion but a precondition of the human self:

The truth is such additions add nothing to us. […] The elemental energies of wind and wave and the animal energies of stag and boar are native to us […] Jacob Boehme puts neither a stag’s nor a boar’s tooth in it: ‘In man is all, whatsoever the sun shines upon or heaven contains, also hell and all the deeps.’ And it was as it were on a Mezozoic shore of his own mind that Nietzsche set his not so foreign foot: ‘I have discovered for myself that the old human and animal life, indeed the entire prehistory and past of all sentient being, works on, loves on, hates on, thinks on in me.’ When it comes down to it, Amhairghin Glúngheal, the poet who was prow to the Celtic invasion of Ireland, is claiming nothing particularly more than our common phylogenetic inheritance. The difference between him and Nietzsche is that while he parades it, Nietzsche is perturbed by it. Given what it is we are talking about, surely the perturbation is safer than the parade” (36f).

The “Song of Amhairghin” undoubtedly contains an element of celebration and thus parade, but the question is whether Nietzsche is so opposed to it. After all it is he who celebrates the “blond beast of prey” in the *Genealogy of Morals*, and the Satyric exuberance in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Nietzsche’s thought²²⁹ embraces the rapturous Dionysian self-delight of a humanity that may use and abuse power because it is possible to do so, leaving no room for care or sorrow. Nietzsche writes in *The Genealogy of Morals* (III 14):

> The sick are the great danger of man, not the evil, not the 'beasts of prey.' They who are from the outset botched, oppressed, broken those are they, the weakest are they, who most undermine the life beneath the feet of man, who instil the most dangerous venom and scepticism into our trust in life, in man, in ourselves…Here teem the worms of revenge and vindictiveness; here the air reeks of things secret and unmentionable; here is ever spun the net of the most malignant conspiracy – the conspiracy of the sufferers against the sound and the victorious; here is the sight of the victorious hated (88).

The departure of both Rilke’s and Yeats’ poetics from this stance could not be clearer. Yeats’s characters are worn and weary, from Moll Magee to Father O’Hart, Crazy Jane to Old Hanrahan.

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²²⁹ In *The Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche repudiates values such as pity, labelling them a “symptom of retrogression.” (6) To him, self-abnegation and self-sacrifice are “the great danger of mankind, its most sublime temptation and seduction – seduction to what? to nothingness? –in these very instincts I saw the beginning of the end, stability, the exhaustion that gazes backwards, the will turning against life […]” (5). The ever spreading “morality of pity” to Nietzsche is the ultimate illness (Ibid.). Nietzsche blames on it humanities failure to attain its highest power and splendour. He would rather see us fear “the blond beast at the core of all aristocratic races” than to condemn ourselves to the sight of an “ill-constituted, dwarfed, atrophied, and poisoned “humanity, which lingers in mediocrity (24). In this regard, neither Yeats nor Rilke follow Nietzsche, as their oeuvre does not abnegate human suffering and compassion.
Oisin “is weak and poor and blind, and lies / On the anvil of the world,” and collectively Ireland is not faring any better, its “courage breaks like an old tree in a black wind and dies” (VP 42). If infinity and holism become visible through Yeats’s poetry they only do so through the suffering finitude of its participants. The realisation of the phylogenetic identity of humanity with all of nature is not a triumphant realisation, nor does it appear to the rational mind. Only in letting go of rational self-possession in the liminal experience of half-dreaming may the greater self appear. Thus, I would suggest in Yeats’s early poetry *Twilight* is not merely a diffuse pre-Raphaelite moodscape\(^2\) but a phenomenological moment of uncertainty, a functional precondition and an integral aspect of perceiving the uncertain, instable and ultimately unknowable boundaries between the human self and the communal self of nature. Such entanglements of human self and environmental self can be seen in medieval illuminations, such as this:

\(^2\)Nothing could be more mistaken than to understand Yeats’ creations of the Celtic Twilight phase with Stephen Regan as a “regional variation of aestheticism and decadence” (W. B. Yeats and Irish Cultural Politics 71). This misconception was initiated by T. S. Eliot who dismissed Yeats’ early work in his Abbey Theatre memorial lecture in 1941 as mere craftsmanship. To Peter Childs for example Yeats’ Twilight “only seems modernist,” performing merely an “escape from urbanism and materialism” into folklore and myth (Modernism 101). On the contrary, Yeats early works are an arrival at ecological contingencies.
In “Fergus and the Druid” Yeats portrays the shape-shifting druid whose state of being is the antinomy to Fergus’ kingship:

Fergus. This whole day have I followed in the rocks,
And you have changed and flowed from shape to shape,
First as a raven on whose ancient wings
Scarcely a feather lingered, then you seemed
A weasel moving on from stone to stone,
And now at last you wear a human shape,
A thin grey man half lost in gathering night.

(FP 102)

Fergus addresses the Druid and claims that he has followed and observed him throughout a number of transformations: a featherless raven, a weasel, a “thin grey man half lost in gathering night.” In all of these instances he recognises the human Other. The humanity of the Druid is worn out, already desolate (“trembling like a wind-blown reed”), it is certainly not being paraded as a victory: “Look on my thin grey hair and hollow cheeks/ And on those hands that may not lift the sword,/ This body trembling like a wind-blown reed. / No woman’s loved me, no man sought my help” (FP 103). Fergus himself, in “despair” of his kingship, unable to get rid of the impression his crown makes on his head, seeks out the druid’s “dreaming wisdom” to help him overcome his identity – and it is essential for Yeats that the phylogenetic realisation of self-hood is not graspable in the bright light of the rational mind but in the half-consciousness of dreaming – for only the druid’s enchantment lifts the communal Self into consciousness:

Fergus. I see my life go drifting like a river
From change to change; I have been many things -
A green drop in the surge, a gleam of light
Upon a sword, a fir-tree on a hill,
An old slave grinding at a heavy quern,
A king sitting upon a chair of gold -
And all these things were wonderful and great;
But now I have grown nothing, knowing all.
Ah! Druid, Druid, how great webs of sorrow
Lay hidden in the small slate-coloured thing! (FP 104)

231 One of the noteworthy characteristics of these initials is the eager, peering, often mocking faces, which peep out, ubiquitously, from the fronds of the background patterns […]. The fronds in this new decoration style are formally organised, not naturalistic; but the animals and birds of prey…are, like the human faces, if not naturalistic, certainly intensely alive. Their savage fighting often involves, perilously, a human creature hardly escaping their mutual attacks, entangled as he is in the twisting growth of the pattern” (Oakshott 230).

232 Yeats writes in the notes to the 1895 edition of Poems of The Rose. “He was once the king of all Ireland but he gave up his throne that he might live at peace, hunting in the woods” (see Lester I. Connor A Yeats Dictionary, “Fergus” 62-63). Yeats traces the figure of Fergus back to the Táin Bó Cuailgne and the poems of Fergusson.
3. The Environmental Self in R.M. Rilke’s and W. B. Yeats’s Early Poetry and Criticism

Fergus’ retrospective “knowing all” in the poem is only brought by the oxymoron of “growing nothing.” Fergus’ desire and the druid’s dream are bringing ruin – in exactly the sense of destroying the individual form to make it able for the non-human. The seeing of all implies the end of the human venturing point. The infinity and immortality of the environmental self can only be experienced in the anticipation of a field of vision in which the non-human partakes. And even then it is anticipated and projected, not directly experienced. In “Aedh thinks of his Past Greatness when a Part of the Constellation of Heaven” from The Wind Among the Reeds (1899), Yeats invokes yet another character with a double consciousness of past lives. Mongan, entranced by otherworldly wine, says: “I have been a hazel tree\(^{233}\) […] / I became a rush that horses tread:/ I became a man a hater of the wind” (VP 177). Thus nature comes to language on the site of the dreaming human, abolishing hierarchy in that the speaker “must endure” human existence, longing for release of its grief in animal existence\(^{234}\):

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Knowing one, out of all things, alone, that his head
May not lie on the breast nor his lips on the hair
Of the woman that he loves, until he dies.
O beast of the wilderness, bird of the air,
Must I endure your amorous cries? (VP 177)
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“Past greatness” is not greatness in the sense of superiority and achievement but is the “nothing” into which one grows by metamorphosis and death, passing “from change to change.” Imagining himself as a hazel tree among whose branches “they” (i.e. humans of past times) hung the constellations of the stars, the speaker views himself as given to human signification,\(^{235}\) just as the speaker in Byzantium envisions his post mortem objectification in the “artifice of eternity” (VP 408). The human is posited between plant and animal life. Fulfillment and completion appear available only to the animals, whose “amorous cries” torture the speaker. It is this incompleteness of the human which urges the poet also to acknowledge and address beasts and birds in his imploiring question and in the address to transform them from object into vocal Other:

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\(^{233}\) Yeats in his notes to the poem again views the tree as natural and supernatural at the same time: “The hazel tree was the Irish tree of Life or of Knowledge, and in Ireland it was doubtless, as elsewhere the tree of heavens” (CW 177). Anthony Cronin, on a somewhat humorous note in a commentary in the Irish Independent reminds us that “The hazel was his favourite tree though if he really had become one himself he would have been outlawed in the 1780s when the landowners, fearful of the hazel’s tenacity and its encroachments on the new pasture land, made it an offence to permit its growth. By this barbarous act they brought to an end the beautiful clay and hazel-wattle building tradition which dated from pre-historic times. An example of how beautiful and functional this was is on display at the National Museum at Turlough, Co Mayo” (Cronin, Anthony: “He thinks of his Past greatness when a Part of the Constellations of Heaven,” Irish Independent online, 22. April 2012, <http://www.independent.ie/lifestyle/he-thinks-of-his-past-greatness-when-a-part-of-the-constellation-of-heaven-26846166.html>).

\(^{234}\) I do not agree with Heather Martin that Yeats outlines a "hierarchy of being […] through which all souls descend and ascend" (W.B. Yeats: Metaphysician at Dramatist 55, e.a.).

\(^{235}\) This can be seen as an instance of what Todd A. Borlik calls the “ecological uncanny” in that it “erases the distinction between sentient human subject and callous natural object” (92). It is this stance that impressed Ezra Pound even before he met Yeats, he adopts Yeats’ stance in his poem “The Tree” (see Tryphonoupolos The Celestial Tradition: A Study of Ezra Pound’s the Cantos 67).
When *Thou* is spoken, the speaker has no thing for his object. For where there is a thing there is another thing. Every *It* is bounded by others; *It* exists only through being bounded by others. But when *Thou* is spoken, there is no thing. *Thou* has no bounds. When *Thou* is spoken, the speaker has no thing; he has indeed nothing. But he takes his stand in relation (Martin Buber *I and Thou* 12).

The poetic apostrophe or within other modes of personification is based on the recognition of continuity between the human and the non-human. This stance, indeed, becomes central for modernist eco-poetics. To stand in relation begins with speechlessness. The most radical expression of which can be found in Dylan Thomas: “The force that through the green fuse drives the flower/Drives my green age; that blasts the roots of trees / Is my destroyer./ And I am dumb to tell the crooked rose / My youth is bent by the same wintry fever” (*Selected Poems* 9). Thomas’ is another poetic attempt to describe the inexpressible mystery of one’s own participation in the mystery of all-unity that brings about the identity of antinomies: “And I am dumb to tell the hanging man /How of my clay is made the hangman's lime” (Ibid.). Struck dumb by the realisation that their articulators are made of the same substance as the objects they desire to address or describe, the poet-become-medium recognizes the inability to consciously master expression. The same principle that Eric Sundquist sees in Rilke and Thomas can be seen as being at work in Yeats:

Rilke’s earth, like Thomas’, is conspicuously the making of both the living and the dead, a fruit whose language is mastered by both and which issues out of the love of both reciprocally. It is clearly marked as a system of elementary impulses, as though it were a gigantic organism aspiring and decaying into itself simultaneously, and an object of the artist’s aim ‘to prove beyond doubt, ’ as Thomas puts it, ‘that the flesh that covers me is the flesh that covers the sun, that the blood in my lungs is the blood that goes up and down in a tree’ (“‘In Country Haven’” 66).

This holds true also for Yeats and could be seen as a shared feature of environmental modernism. The early poetry of Yeats from *The Wanderings of Oisin to Crossways* to *The Rose* can be seen to be abounding with instances of vision at its limits, of seeing the multi-stable texture of being. Poetic depictions of glimmering and wavering deprive the reader of a concrete grasp of objects. Instead, these poems thematise the notion of a shared participatory texture of being, a mystery of which, by way of disfiguration and transformation also the literary text partakes.

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236 Michael Wood in *Yeats and Violence* writes: “Yeats like Blake believed in contraries but not negation and he distinguished carefully between life creating conflict and logical error: ‘I had never put the conflict in logical form, never thought with Hegel that the two ends of a see-saw are each other’s negation, nor that the spring vegetables were refuted when over.’ In his several repetitions of Heraclitus’ phrase about ‘dying each other’s life, living each other’s death,’ what finally seems appealing is not living after death (since dying after life is just as important) or even the interpenetration of all things but the ideal, unending symmetry of the arrangement” (79).
3. The Environmental Self in R.M. Rilke’s and W. B. Yeats’s Early Poetry and Criticism

3.3.3. Comparing the Rose of W. B. Yeats and R. M. Rilke

This paradox of eternal beauty consuming itself in temporality, a personified selfhood that embraces at the same time a multitude of individuals, is also at the heart of Rilke’s rose, and there is hardly another poet in Europe who can compete with the splendour of their celebration of the rose. The symbol begins in the corporeality of the plant and extends to embrace the human, all its forms of being, incarnate and discarnate as well as the infinitely moving divine. No other definition needs to be found for Rilke. His poem Die Rosenschale (1907) [The bowl of roses/ The rose’s Peel] sees the rose as a coincidence of exterior and interior, woman and plant, containment and radiance:

Through personification, the rose is suspended between plant and human, casting off her petals in human ways: as burden and mask, the rose is doomed to perish, as it is in Yeats, only through fading does it become the mystery of being, containing in its vanishing all that vanishes with it. Here, Empson’s seventh ambiguity of two simultaneous possibilities of reading which exclude
4. Delimiting the Sacred

each other help, to portray the antithetical nature of Rilke’s ontology, the *Rosenschale* – is at the same time a container of dying roses (rose-bowl) and a liminal, living bodily texture (rose-rind or peel). Its radiant beauty is not diminished by its dying. Its radiance is the rose’s unique *way* of perishing. Rilke is doubtful towards the end of his life, as he confesses in the prose poem *Cimetière*, whether the roses are happy to be burdened with human futurity in personification. As the gardener’s effort has to vanish without a trace into the rose, and the presence of the dead who nurture it, so the artist’s self has to disappear and not create a burden to the rose, Joachim Woff claims (see *Rilkes Grabschrift* 153).

In his famous epitaph: “Rose, oh pure contradiction, desire/pleasure / to be no one’s sleep under so many lids” [Rose, oh reiner Widerspruch, Lust, / Niemandes Schlaf zu sein unter soviel / Lidern”] (W 2 394). Rilke resolves the dilemma in paradox. The word “Lider” [eyelids] evokes the homonymy of “Lieder” [songs]. A number of contradictory readings emerges: “Lust” can imply a desire which longs for fulfilment as well as consummate, present bliss or enjoyment. Thus, it remains uncertain whether the rose desires to be no one’s sleep or enjoys being no one’s sleep, and also we do not know if the rose is no one’s sleep because it is everyone’s wakefulness, or because it is sleep as a principle that is not attributable to any one, alone. The rose is addressed, and even if it is personified as a contradiction, it is still acknowledged as an *utterance* of being: *Widerspruch* – even if it contradicts being, it speaks.

4. **DELIMITING THE SACRED**

As has been discussed in the previous chapter, the poetry of W. B. Yeats and R. M. Rilke gravitates around the depiction of uncertainty and continuity of the human self with the communal self of the environment. Man and animal, the divine and the mundane, nature and culture are conceived within poetry as part of a unity. This, unity, however, is consummated through temporal processes of emergence and breaking of the various forms of embodiment of earths’ beings. Visual, acoustic or physiological irritations – glimmering, fluttering, and trembling – all deprive the senses of clearly outlined objects, providing the perceivers with the experience of the participation of the senses in the emergence of the world and its objects – contingent upon their own embodiment. Thereby, the phenomenological dimension of the early poetry and thought of Yeats and Rilke was explored. They conceptualise the ecological self as an infinite ‘texture’ of body, environment and perception. Yeats’ *Twilight* and Rilke’s *Dämmerung* were demonstrated to be environmental poetic ontologies rather than aestheticist escapism. They are part of an aesthetics and ethics of uncertainty, foreshadowing the philosophical questions which, through the thought of Emanuel Levinas and Giorgio Agamben, have become central to ecological and ethical discourses in the early 21" century.

The human is not given up for the post-human in the poetry discussed in the previous chapter but it is being seen in a continuity and progressive unity with the non-human. Through prosopopeia – the poetic act of “giving a face” to the non-human – the world is included in
4. Delimiting the Sacred

humanity and raised into ethical considerability. As the ways in which humans view nature are clearly essential to the way they treat nature, perceiving oneself as part of an uncertainly shifting unity is conducive to an attitude of hesitancy, care and concern. Just as one would drive more carefully in fog, there is a hesitancy invoked in the readers of these glimmering shape-shifting texts.

Attempting to negotiate the ecological crises of the early 21st century needs exactly that questioning hesitancy if traditional and habitual modes of self-understanding are to come under serious review. The intricacy and unknowability of the inter-dependencies of ecosystems across local and global levels is moving into consciousness only in this century in the West as a result of the gravity of man-made imbalances and loss of wildlife as well as ecosystem health. By reducing nature to commodity and resource and forgetting the fact that it is always already on the inside, nature has vanished from common consciousness through discourses of profitability and utility that dominate all layers of collective decision-making. Yet it becomes increasingly necessary to understand earth and its ecosystems, elements and beings as partaking of the same sensuous fabric. Bio-physiological facts of cyclicity, metabolism, becoming and decaying must create a more self-conscious criticism. Perceiving earth as a shifting and instable zone of uncertain forms and boundaries is more than just a fanciful reverie. This perception was fundamental to the ontological vision of Rilke’s and Yeats’s poetry.

This chapter will analyse in greater detail this relation between the finitude of form and body and its destruction via infinition. On a topical as well as on a poetological level this relationship is inscribed in the poetry of R. M. Rilke and W. B. Yeats. Their textual figurations and performances of the simultaneity of worldly form and divine presence negotiate and overcome traditional notions of the sacred. The historical notion of the sacred encompasses both the “saving, setting aside” of places, animals and humans from utilisation, from profanation and destruction and at the same time, in the notion of the “sacrifice” foresees their destruction for the praise or appeasement of a divinity. In crying, like Blake, that ‘everything is holy,’ the poets arrive at a notion of divine presence within the texture of life, which overcomes this dichotomy.

In the following, Rilke’s *Das Stunden-Buch* and the radical delimitation of the notion of god performed in its poems will be discussed. The divine Other which surfaces on the site of self, neighbour, animal and world is addressed in the mode of prayer. This religious form, however, is profaned to include the apostrophe to each and every thing. The divine is addressed as absolute Other - within nature, human and non-human others. Likewise, the presence of the divine and the notion of the sacred in the early poetry of Yeats will be discussed in connection with his collection *The Wind among the Reeds* (1899). Through the delimitation of the sacred the self-giving, self-manifesting divine, the individual is included in its self-emptying – a process which in theological discourses is called kenosis. When Rilke and Yeats celebrate poverty and failed quests, personae who are broken down, placed on the ‘anvil of the world’, they actively challenge the cult of celebrating human greatness. On the structural level as well as on the level of poetic images, self-emptying is depicted as well as performed. Rilke and Yeats create poetic monuments to human destitution. In fact, the giving up of self and entering into transformation is the achievement. The poem thus also self-reflexively acknowledges the poet’s loss of self into his
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verses. *The Tower* (1928) will be discussed under the aspect of poetic kenosis in so far as these textual strategies directly imply the human-environment relation. Yeats’ and Rilke’s symbols are precarious embodiments, performing acts of “self-consummation,” a concept Stanley Fish developed for the understanding of the baroque aesthetics of the metaphysical poets, such as John Donne, Andrew Marvell or George Herbert which will here be considered with regard to modernism.

The two modernist poets evoke uncertainties and open up space for questioning being and human-environment relations, which are now, in the age of environmental crises, becoming urgently central to philosophical discourses. The relevance of ‘the sacred’ to these questions might not be immediately apparent, but both a short overview of ecocritical thought and specifically a brief overview of Giorgio Agamben’s thought will hopefully provide fruitful points of access.

4.1. Giorgio Agamben’s Notion of the Sacred and its Relevance to Environmental Ethics and Literature

Lynn White Jr. in his seminal essay “The Historical Roots of our Environmental Crises” locates the roots of the present ecological crises in the Platono-Christian notion of transcendence going hand in hand with a hierarchical notion of being. Through the devaluation of non-human life and the reduction of existence to a mere shadow of eternity and the installation of anthropos as steward and crown of creation, White suggests, Christianity became “the most anthropocentric religion the world has ever seen” (80). The human sense of entitlement and duty to wield stewardship over the planet is indeed a problem to which ecocriticism responds ambivalently. Debates surrounding sustainability and management of natural resources continue to operate on the basis of an unquestionable understanding of nature as utility and reserve. The secular world has gladly maintained this privilege, not questioning either its mythological or psychological implications.

Tom Regan in *All that Dwell Therein: Animal Rights and Environmental Ethics* (1982) insists that environmentalists should try to work out an environmental ethics not a management ethics: an ethics of the environment, not an ethics of the use of the environment (discussed by Callicott in *Beyond the Land Ethic* (20). The basis of this ethic for Regan is the intrinsic value which non-human life has in and of itself and not only according to its value for us. In this attempt to base an ethics on notions of value the environmentalist effort necessarily encounters a dead end, as J. Baird Callicott observes: “little unambiguous progress has been made on that problem in the secular arena” (1999, 192). An alteration of human action toward nature will never be achieved by asking the question of value, because that question automatically asks “towards whom or what”? The Oxford English dictionary defines value as “the regard that something is held to deserve; the importance, worth, or usefulness of something.” While animal ethics insists on the
animal’s value in and of itself, the dilemma of ‘value’ remains unaddressed. On the one hand there is humanity, assigning value and then there is the environment as that which is regarded to have or bear value. This process of assigning and bearing value is not only a mechanism functioning between humankind and the outer environment but also functions within the individual self. There, constantly the human is siphoned from animality, resulting in a continuous self-judgement and an exclusion of the animal from man on the very site of the human. It is clear that the search for a foundation of ethics cannot begin with the assignment of value but must begin elsewhere. The previous chapter argued that modernist poetry’s environmental relevance lies in its abolition of the human-nature dichotomy. The sacred, as will be argued now, plays a traditional and functional role in these segregations of humanity from animality and likewise, Modernist poetry reacts against it. Giorgio Agamben has dedicated the majority of his philosophical works to elaborating upon the question of what function the formerly religious and legal notion of the sacred has for the secular age. In *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998), the opening of his series of discussions of the role of the sacred, he describes the ambivalence of the term “sacred” in ancient Roman and Jewish law. It embraces the practice of consecrating, viewing something as holy or untouchable, delineating something against the profane and thus it creates by exclusion the category of the profane, exploitable, unprotected (13). For Agamben, this mechanism creates “bare life” an exclusion zone on the very site of the body, which, then, comes to shape the polis and continues to shape modern societies. Agamben elaborates on Foucault’s observation of the close link between modernity and biopolitics, stating that “at the threshold of the modern era, natural life begins to be included in the mechanisms and calculations of State power, and politics turns into biopolitics” (1998, 10). Agamben takes as a starting point of his own elaboration Foucault’s observation that it was possible to bring about bestiality within civilisation through the sophistication of contemporary political measures and techniques, at the same time protecting the ‘sacred’ life of the citizen and creating a holocaust. Agamben observes that the “very primacy of natural life over political action” is a question which Hannah Ahrendt develops without coming to the conclusion that there is an innate link between the conception of the human condition and modern biopolitics, “the concentration camp and the structure of the great totalitarian states of the twentieth century” (Ibid.). To Agamben, “the entry of zoẽ into the sphere of the polis – the politicization of bare life as such – constitutes the decisive event of modernity” (Ibid.). And where Foucault showed how power and the human body are linked, Agamben broadens the question to “bare life” and claims that the enigmas that our century “has proposed to historical reason and that remain with us (Nazism being only the most disquieting among them) […] will be solved only on the link between bare life and politics, a link that secretly governs the modern ideologies seemingly most distant from one another” (Ibid.). The investigation of this link leads Agamben first to the Aristotelian definition of the polis as the

237“The protagonist of this book” Agamben claims “is bare life, that is, the life of homo sacer (sacred man), who may be killed and yet not sacrificed, and whose essential function in modern politics we intend to assert. An obscure figure of archaic Roman law, in which human life is included in the juridical order [ordinamento] solely in the form of its exclusion (that is, of its capacity to be killed), has thus offered the key by which not only the sacred tests of sovereignty but also the very codes of political power will unveil their mysteries (12).
opposition between life (ζην) and good life (ευζην), an opposition which is “at the same time an implication of the first in the second, of bare life in politically qualified life” (Ibid.). This leads Agamben to the question: “What is the relation between politics and life, if life presents itself as what is included by means of an exclusion” (12)? For Aristotle, man is a living animal “with the additional capacity for political existence;” for Agamben, however, this additional capacity becomes problematic (Ibid.). Agamben views the relation between the Western polis and bare life as parallel to the differentiation between phonē and logos, which founds the “metaphysical definition of man as ‘the living being who has language’” (Ibid.).

The question ‘In what way does the living being have language?’ corresponds exactly to the question ‘In what way does bare life dwell in the polis?’ The living being has logos by taking away and conserving its own voice in it, even as it dwells in the polis by letting its own bare life be excluded, as an exception, within it. Politics therefore appears as the truly fundamental structure of Western metaphysics insofar as it occupies the threshold on which the relation between the living being and the logos is realized. In the ‘politicization’ of bare life – the metaphysical task par excellence – the humanity of living man is decided (Ibid.).

Thus, Agamben sees Western societies adhering to the metaphysical traditions they believed to have overcome. Qualifying Aristotle’s statement he defines man as “the living being who, in language, separates and opposes himself to his own bare life and, at the same time, maintains himself in relation to that bare life in an inclusive exclusion”238 (Ibid.). This mechanism of distinction also underlies modern democracy as trying to “transform its own bare life into a way of life” and create freedom and happiness in the very place – ‘bare life’ – that marked their subjection (13). However, according to Agamben, democracy fails to save or satisfy the ‘bare life’ to which it gives political structure as it gradually converges with totalitarianism in “post-democratic spectacular societies” (Ibid.). The contradictions implied in the fact that politics knows no other value than life and yet has to create this value by exclusion of bare life, are not solved. Nazism and fascism “which transformed the decision on bare life into the supreme political principle” are still “stubbornly with us” (13 e.a.). While not claiming that there is any historiographical convergence between democracy and totalitarianism, Agamben insists that there is a politico-philosophical one and that a new politics remains to be invented. Agamben insists that this new politics will have to overcome the Aristotelian distinction between the “‘beautiful day’ (ευεμερία) of simple life” and the “‘great difficulty’ of political bios” which after twenty-four centuries still lies at the foundation of Western politics (Ibid.). Western politics has not yet established a workable reconciliation of ζην and bios, voice and language and thus the fracture remains unhealed (Ibid.).

The poetry we have so far discussed performs and embodies the impossibility of these distinctions – in that non-human voice and human language are seen as continuous. The fact that

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238 This thought becomes the foundation for his later work The Open Of Man and Animal (2004) and this paradoxical rendering of bare life from life is in essence the function of the anthropological machine, which Agamben outlines in this work.
Yeats and Rilke at one stage in their lives were fascinated by fascism, that they believed in a hierarchy of being when it came to the ordering of human society yet in an equality as regards planetary matters is one of the paradoxes, which to most critics are hard to forgive. Rilke’s short and private endorsement of Mussolini in a letter to Marie von Thurn und Taxis as well as Yeats’ public involvement with the blueshirts have been commented upon extensively. It is our own age in which fascism is still latent in structures of exclusion which condemns itself when it condemns past generations for their poor judgement and their lack of political resistance. The poets are making themselves and their fascination available to the reflective process of poetry and so they allow us to engage with that fascination and bring the reader in touch with what otherwise smoulders below the level of consciousness. Also, their political opinions however gravely wrong, are not to be equated with what is put forward in their works. In the very structures of an open and ambiguous and inclusive poetics, their continuous engagement with the animal-man divide and their consistent effort to negotiate and bridge that divide in a weary, careful and uncertain manner is diametrically opposed to fascist philosophies.

Agamben makes clear that the mechanisms of the relation between sovereignty and the “state of exception” – that which came to the fore most clearly in 20th century fascism – are not fully understood and the resulting dilemmas are not solved. On the contrary, in the face of the dissolution of the great State structures, ‘emergency’ – or shall we call it austerity? – has “as Walter Benjamin foresaw, become the rule.” (14) As Agamben demonstrates through the entirety of his oeuvre, the fundamental demarcation of life against bare life is still the dominant aporia underlying global governance. More precisely the sacred serves as an exclusion mechanism that legitimates power and runs through the centre of the human body. The sovereign and the outcast are bound together by these binary logics, the one who may not be killed because he is above the law and the other who “may be killed but not sacrificed” because he is outside it, describe the two poles between which modern states run their course (12). This notion of the sacred is an exclusory and hierarchising device which the modernist poetry of R. M. Rilke and W. B. Yeats figuratively overcomes.

Poetic texts have the capacity to call into question conventional certainties, they can move readers and move them into exposure to questions, and it is this power to open things up rather than to answer and take sides which makes them matter. They are not merely a document of their time or a means to define collective identities or canons of tastes or museums of forms. They can be a potential force of change in societies in which otherwise “every theory and every praxis” – including literary creation and reception – “will remain imprisoned and immobile” confined to “the perfect senselessness to which the society of the spectacle condemns it” (Ibid.).

In the 1930’s Yeats experienced the same fears that had large parts of the populations of many European countries in their clasp. He “had his own obsessions, of course, not least of which in the early 1930s was the need for ‘public order, which brought him strange bedfellows, including the Blueshirt General Eoin O’Duffy, in the most damaging and futile episode in his political career” (Allison “Yeats and Politics” 198). Most univocally critical and in its assessment of Yeats’ interest in Rilke wildly off the point is W. J. McCormack’s Blood Kindred: The Politics of W.B. Yeats and his Death (2011).
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4.1.1. Ecocriticism’s Need for a Re-Negotiation of the Sacred

Lynn White Junior is right in assuming that since religion lies at the root of the current ecological crises it will certainly, whether consciously or unconsciously, be part of the solution. By understanding the sacred as a mechanism for the hierarchisation of life, Agamben makes a valuable contribution to this project. However, within environmental thought and philosophy the concept of stewardship is celebrating an unexpected comeback in the form of sustainability and environmental management discourses in which the underlying assumptions of entitlement to power and exclusion remain unchallenged. Environmental philosopher J. Baird Callicott,240 for example, performs in his 1999 study Beyond the Land Ethic: More Essays in Environmental Philosophy a conversion to this concept of stewardship: “As one who struggled for two decades to formulate a persuasive and adequate secular environmental ethic, […] I would like to say that the Judeo-Christian stewardship environmental ethic is especially elegant and powerful” (192). Callicott sees the need to reintroduce God as an “objective axiological point of reference independent of human consciousness,” conferring “intrinsic value on the world and all its creatures” (Ibid.). However, he does so mainly to reassure his human readers that being created as imago dei “also confers on us certain complementary privileges” (193). After all, since we need to deplete, kill and exploit in order to live, we should be entitled to a cosmology that allows for a good conscience. Callicott views the stewardship model as effective since it entitles us to the “usufruct of our dominion as long as we rule it benignly and not draw on its capital reserves” (193). This sounds like a truce rather than a solution, since the punishment for not ruling benignly is seldom ever directly carried out on those who fail to comply. Robin Attfield in Environmental Ethics (2003) argues along the same lines as Callicott, namely that nature is there for human benefit but it comes with responsibility since: “Human beings cannot help drawing their food, clothing and shelter from the natural world, and if in doing so they attempt to throw off all ethical constraints

240Calicott’s early ecocentric environmental ethics moved along the lines of Aldo Leopold’s famous dictum "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise." (Leopold A Sand County Almanac 262) He came under attack for favouring the system over the individual organism, observes: ‘Tom Regan, for example, accused Callicott and (assuming Callicott had correctly interpreted Leopold’s holistic tendencies) Leopold of ‘environmental fascism.’ Callicott quickly retreated to a weaker form of holism whereby ecosystems and species could have legitimate claims and interests, but since the obligations to land community were ‘layered upon’ obligations to family and other humans, those obligations could not override the more intimate and prior obligation to family, clan or humanity generally” (Norton Sustainability 218).
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[...] the outcome is likely to be the exercise of power without any pretence at responsibility” (23). It becomes apparent that we cannot save ourselves by trying to save ourselves.241

The assimilation of the myth of stewardship into secular structures is still operating on the logics of its foundations: the expulsion from the Garden of Eden and its teleological horizon, the total devastation of earth preceding the messianic return. The explicit promise of a clean, paradisial world waiting in the afterlife in Islam, Judaism and Christianity alike has contributed to a devaluation of the living environment. The perceived loss of paradise and the hope for its miraculous reappearance in the future makes humans view earth despite all its visible, audible, tangible splendour as a fallen and faulty antechamber turning the myth of the loss of paradise into a global reality. According to scientific estimates, “over the next 100 years [...] one half of Earth’s species [...] will functionally if not completely disappear” (Meyer The End of The Wild 4). The other half will in all likeliness be genetically modified to meet human demands.242

The unquestioned subscription to the sacredness of human life and human entitlement to dominate earth, the model of stewardship in both secular and religious discourses, effectively gives free reign to the unconscious, fearful animal inside using its reason as a weapon in the fight for survival. As C. G. Jung noticed, the archetype of the bird of prey is ruling from the unconscious, from within the rational structures underlying warfare and border policing. The relaxed bird-claws of the ‘Immortal Sleepers’ in Yeats’ depiction of the otherworld in The Wanderings of Oisin form a compelling counter-image. The modernist re-negotiations of the myths of pre-modernity, their self-conceptions as alchemist, shaman (or priests, in Rilke’s case) are part of a renegotiation of the sacred and the secular.

Modernist poetry addresses, questions and overcomes epistemological traditions and inherited ways of perceiving earth. Caroline Merchant in Reinventing Eden (2003) observes that

241 Derrida in his book Acts of Religion identifies the desire to save oneself as the primum mobile of religion which became part of the very foundations of modern secular societies: “Should one save oneself by abstraction or save oneself from abstraction? Where is salvation, safety?” (italics in the original, 3) Stating that it is impossible to divorce a discourse on religion from a discourse on salvation, safety and the sacred he asks “Where is evil <le mal>? Where is evil today, at present?” and in response to his own question locates it in “the derrision of abstraction, passing by way — but only much later - of those sites of abstraction that are the machine, technics, technoscience and above all the transcendence of tele-technology” (Ibid.). Derrida then continues by contrasting the compulsion to save oneself via abstraction with the more viable notion of kenosis.

242 The flight from inherent animality results in the beastial: Mira Fong, an environmental activist outlines a startling vision of the future of industrial animal breeding and slaughter in the age of genetic manipulation for human benefit. “Someday, chickens might be engineered with genes from centipedes, giving the birds more than two legs, so we can have more drum sticks for our dinner table. Or the chicken may be further modified into a kind of tube, without head, wings or tail, but with many legs, so it will produce more meat for us and be easier to manage for commercial exploitation” (in West “Economics and Ethics in the Genetic Engineering of Animals” 408). Chad West optimistically observes that the FDA is “unlikely to permit any genetic engineering processes extreme enough to produce tubular chickens” however, he admits that “the point is an important one: How far should humans be allowed to go in genetically engineering animals?” (Ibid.) At the same time he admits that transgenic animals are fact, not fiction: “In Ireland an activist group, Voice of Irish Concern for the Environment (“VOICE”), specifically targets the transgenic Atlantic salmon as an example of how science acted immorally and exceeded ethical boundaries. VOICE notes that, while the genetically-increased size of the salmon will deliver huge economic benefits to salmon producers, “the cost to the salmon is horrendous [as][l]he experiment produces ‘profound morphological abnormalities’” (Ibid.). We are a far cry from the “Song of Amhairghin’s” identification of human and salmon if we consider its ribonucleic text our intellectual property and decide to manipulate what we do not understand for economic benefit.
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From Christopher Columbus’ voyages, to the search for the fountain of youth to John Steinbeck’s *East of Eden*, visions of finding a lost paradise have motivated global exploration, settlement and hope for a better life. The Recovery of Eden story is the mainstream narrative of Western culture. It is perhaps the most important mythology humans have developed to make sense of their relationship to the earth. Internalised by Europeans and Americans alike, [...] this story has propelled countless efforts by humans to recover Eden by turning wilderness into Garden, “female” nature into civilised society and indigenous culture into modern culture (3).

It is important to see the complicity of this myth of the absence of Eden to the global devastation of ecosystems. The “overarching metanarrative of recovery” operates on the underlying assumption of being cast out of Eden (Ibid.). This cast-out state is directly linked to the perception of the transcendental absent divine, which in turn enables man's place-holdership as steward and the devastation of bare life. What characterises Biblical Eden as well as indigenous cultures as opposed to Western culture is the presence – however differently negotiated – of the divine. The passage of the eviction begins with divine presence: with God walking in the garden in the cool of the day:

> And they heard the voice of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day: and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God amongst the trees of the garden.
> 9 And the LORD God called unto Adam, and said unto him, Where art thou?
> 10 And he said, I heard thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.
> 11 And he said, Who told thee that thou wast naked? 243

The fall manifests as separation – the turning away of man from the face of god, the covering of nakedness, the installation of a zone of prohibition by the angel with the flaming sword which makes Eden inaccessible. These lines of prohibition, inscribed in Genesis, have since resulted in practices of controlling and limiting divine presence and within secularisation these logics have not been disabled. It is in view of these borders and habitual definitions of divine absence or presence, the policing of exclusion zones, that Modernist poetry poses its questions. While garden still may imply cultured place delineated against wilderness, Rilke’s and Yeats’s notion of landscape, as was demonstrated, relies on a texturedness and mutual participation which subverts these boundaries, thus, making the divine present go hand in hand with their dissolution.

In her book *An Altar in the World. A Geography of Faith* Barbara Brown Taylor describes nomadic life and religion without consecrated places:

> Without one designated place to make their offerings, people were free to see their whole world as an altar. The divine could erupt anywhere, and when it did they marked the spot in any way they could, although there was no sense hanging around for long, since God stayed on the move. For years and years the Divine Presence was content with a tent – a “tent of meeting” the Bible

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calls it – which was not where God lived full-time but where God camped with
people who were also on the move (8).

This narrative attempt at capturing nomadic life nevertheless highlights the different habits of
dwelling in relation to different conceptions of the sacred. Brown contrasts the moving, present
divine, which could spring up anywhere and would be encountered on the move, to religions in
settled cultures who build temples, shrines, domes and mosques, asking: “Do we build God a
house so that we can choose when to see God? Do we build God a house in lieu of having God
stay at ours? Plus what happens to the rest of the world when we build four walls – even four
gorgeous walls – cap them with a steepled roof and designate that the House of God? What
happens to the riverbanks, the mountaintops, the deserts, and the trees? What happens to the
people who never show up in the houses of god? The people of God are not the only creatures
capable of praising God, after all. There are also wolves and seals. There are also wild geese and
humpback whales. According to the Bible, even trees can clap their hands” (8f). Barbara Brown
Taylor provides another argument for Saint Francis being the “patron Saint of all ecocritics”:

Francis could not have told you the difference between the secular and the
sacred if you had twisted his arm behind his back. […] For him the leper was as
kissable as the bishop's ring[...] Francis had no digression. He did not know
where to draw the line between the church and the world” (9).

4.1.2. Profanation rather than Secularisation

Within secular practices the structures of the sacred are still intact, Agamben claims. For
privileged life, there are zones of safety set apart and policed while by exclusion there are vast
areas laid open to devastation. This becomes particularly apparent in the notion of, for example,
the nature reserve – serving as an alibi that masks the irresolutionbehind the steadily increasing
loss of wilderness as well as arable land due to climate change on the one hand and exploitation,
global disappearance of wild-life habitats, the rapid extinction of species on the other. As long as
the sacred is not extended so as to collapse into its opposite, the profane, these structures will
define and restrict the active recognition of the biophysiological and emotional contingencies of
living on earth. Yeats thought it necessary that we become able to cry again, with Blake, that
‘everything is holy.’ In order to do so, the illusion of shelteredness has to be given up. The
apparent immunity of technological and virtual environments, their removal from nature has to
be shown as illusory. Poetry is engaged in this endeavour.

In the poetry of Rilke and Yeats the figure of humanity is always already contaminated
and not to be saved. Contaminated with the world and with presences of other species, with the
oxygen the trees exhale, with the nutrients in the soil, with the atoms of the dead, the lingering
presence of the deceased of our own and other species. In Rilke’s and Yeats’s works, as will be
discussed in the following, the elements, especially wind and air already blow through the body,
infecting the living with the dead and other atmospheric presences. They both developed ideas of
inverted agency, in which the realm of the dead is depicted as interrupting, overlapping and
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coinciding with the human realm to the degree of non-difference, where the anxiety of influence already comes too late.

Leland De la Durantaye in ‘Homo profanus: Giorgio Agamben’s Profane Philosophy (2008) mentions the similarity between Adorno’s and Agamben’s projects, which link the sacred and the concentration camp. Durantaye recounts that Adorno had already in 1939 and 1940, when reports of the German camps reached him in exile, proclaimed that his was the “age of the concentration camp” [Zeitalter der Konzentrationslager]. Agamben, fifty years later, radicalises this statement saying that our age has the concentration camp as its “concealed paradigm” (37). Agamben further takes up the observation that theology will and must face profanation not secularisation. Durantaye outlines his stance as follows:

‘Profanation is something completely different [etwas völlig anderes] from secularization,’ Agamben remarked in a recent interview. Secularization takes something from the sacred sphere and seems to return it to the worldly. But in this case power’s mechanisms are not neutralized. When theological power is transformed into secular power, this provides a foundation for secular power. But secularization never truly does away with the sacred. And it is for this reason not a good solution to our problem—on the contrary. We must neutralize this relation to the sacred and that is what profanation first makes possible (Ibid.).

Secularisation is only a transposition which keeps the mechanisms of power, inscribed in the sacred, intact and transposes them merely into secular structures and power relations. It “change[s] the location of that closed-off area” (38). The nature reserve, for example, represents such a transposition. The protection of sacred nature inside goes hand in hand with the rampant pillage and abuse of profane, utilised nature outside. Not an abolition of the divine but a rendering inoperative244 of the differentiating mechanisms, which set the sacred apart from the profane, are offered as a counter measure by Agamben. In an appendix to “The Coming Community” he pictures a paradox: “The world – insofar as it is absolutely, irrepairably profane – is God” (90). Agamben does not suggest that one should “deny the existence of God or remove God from the world. One might just as well equate every atom and instant of the world with such a Divinity” (Durantaye 55). Profanation of the divine happens through an equation of world and God without the installation of privilege, hierarchy and sovereignty. Modern poetry performs such delimitation, as will be argued in the following.

244Durantaye observes that Agamen’s vision for a “coming community” is founded not on an inclusive logic of belonging (being communist, Italian, or the like), whose consequence has always been exclusion and violence, but as founded on a conception of our world as integrally and “irreparably” “profane” (55).
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4.2. “Mein Gott ist dunkel und wie ein Gewebe / von hundert Wurzeln” (My god is dark and as a texture / of a hundred roots) – Rilke and the Profanation of the Divine in Das Stunden-Buch (1899)

And this is exactly what Rilke’s collection Das Stunden-Buch [The Book of Hours] realises: identifying every atom and instant of the world as God. As Heinrich Imhoff’s study Rilke’s ‘Gott’ (1983) points out, the word God is used so inflationary in Das Stunden-Buch to become virtually exploded with significance: everything is god and God is everything: the forest, the neighbour, the dark street, the house, the speaker’s own son in the future “wie ein Gewebe von hundert Wurzeln” (as a texture of a hundred roots) (W 1 157).

I have many brothers in cassocks down South, where in cloisters laurel stands I know how humanly they plan Madonnas And often I dream of young Tizians Through whom the god walks in blazes

But however I incline into myself
My god is dark and like a texture
Of a hundred roots, quietly drinking.

Only that I lift myself out of his warmth,
More I know not, for all my branches Resting deep down, are only waving in the wind

245 (W I 435), “That from that which rises and returning falls / even within me being emerges: / O, lifting and receiving without hands / mental lingering: ball play without ball.”

246 A great number of scholars read Rilke in the context of aestheticism and atheism (Fülleborn, Steiner, Bassermann, Mason). In order to defend a Nietzschean secularised Modernism, they contextualise Rilke as secular. Manfred Engel describes Rilke’s notion of being as one of immanence to which there is no beyond, referring to a notion Rilke himself uses “vollzählige Wirklichkeit” (complete reality) (Engel “Rilke als Autor der literarischen Moderne” 510). Gísli Magnússon lucidly explores Rilke’s involvement in occultist practices and discourses and insists that there is a beyond in Rilke but the boundaries are unstable (178). This thesis will argue that it does not make any sense to contextualise Rilke as atheist per se without a closer look at how his negotiations of God and the divine take shape. In the following, the term profanation will be used to look at how the divine is transposed into immanence, Chapter four will then take a closer look at Rilke’s conception of death and the way in which here and beyond become permeable.

247 Martina King in Priester und Prophet (2009) compellingly argues that Rilke through his correspondences and personal relations was not interested in establishing a hierarchical discipleship as was present in Stefan George and his circle but that he saw himself as part of a network structure (222). King points out that metaphors of flowing and streaming abound in which the self is envisioned as given in “Dionysian self-liquification” to his correspondents (222 ff). A parallel to that can be found, according to King, in the figure of Saint Francis in Das Stunden-Buch who, as a prefiguration of the figure of Orpheus, is seen as running in the streams with his seeds.
The monk speaker talks of his brothers who plan depictions of the holy mother “humanly” along the lines of Eros, as the speaker himself admits to dreaming of “young Tizians” – artists, their bodies, in this context, pervaded by the blazing god. Conception of art, erotic desire of the human body and the pervasion of divinity are all interlaced in the first stanza. By “lowering himself into himself” (neigen denotes to incline, to lower as well as to deplete oneself) the speaker arrives at his personal god, “my god” as a dark and webbed root structure, a “warmth” and immediacy out of which the speaker’s being is lifted as a tree. The inverted rhyme scheme – abcbabc – of the second stanzas performs the same mirroring effect that is inherent in the rhyming words, themselves: neige, Gewebe and trinken (lower/deplete, texture and drinking) becomes hebe, Zweige, winken (lift, branches, wave). The stricture of the sonnet form and the iambic pentameter is counteracted by the “human” bodily desires described and the excess of the blaze of gods, of the unsurveyable rootwork, of the speaker’s admission that he does not know anything. Formal stricture and topical boundlessness coincide. There is no room for transcendental cult in the face of this immediacy: “the root God has born fruit, / go destroy the bells / be silent and look!” (“die Wurzel Gott hat Frucht getragen, geht hin die Glocken zu zerschlagen....seid ernst und seht!”) (W 1 157).

Rilke’s notion of God has been assessed within scholarship in terms of secularisation (King Pilger und Prophet 222), modernist mysticism (Wagner-Egelhaaf Mystik der Moderne), god-less mysticism (Spörl Gottlose Mystik in der deutschen Literatur um 1900), negotiation of turn-of-the-century discourses in the medium of mystical language (Fülleborn Rilke um 1900) or – on the other end of the spectrum - in terms of prophetic inspiration and speech (Wacker Poetik des Prophetischen). Eva Wernick in “Die Religiösität des Stundenbuches” (1926) mentions a connection to Jacob Boehme specifically. But it seems that this observation – that Rilke is a mystic – has often forestalled a closer look at the dynamics of how God and self are figured in the collection. In the following, the God-Self relationship will be assessed. While in Das Stunden-Buch the whole texture or “network” of being is identified as God there is also a motion of self-destitution and self emptying which makes both poles, God and self, lose themselves to re-solidify in the other. This motion is so all-embracing and so rapid, it causes the total collapse of difference between the divine and the profane.

For the speaker in Rilke’s Stunden-Buch poems, God is a scattered, distributed all-figure [“verteilt” “All-Gestalt”] (182). God is not intact but in permanent process and transformation “going through” embodiment. Self and God are as a primary and antithetical pole which form only in relation to each other, but in this originary direction they also expend themselves and lose themselves in each other. The metamorphoses of images and the succession of metaphors that “affirm” god is very rapid. Anthony Stevens observes that throughout the collection the “Ich-Gott relationship is expressed throughout all its transformations with a fluency and confidence […] No single confrontation is held or developed long enough for the situation to become in any

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248 In this sense I cannot agree with Kurt Klinger who sees Das Stunden-Buch as a failed communication between speaker and god, the “communication” is so profound as to be a virtual trans-version (Rilke und die Fremdheit der Welt 23).
4. Delimiting the Sacred

sense critical” (74f). Stevens observes that to Rilke the pole of subjectivity and the pole of being [“Ich-Pol” and [“Seins-Pol”] “are so unrestricted in their metaphorical transformations” that these dynamical fluctuations, this “kaleidoscopic interplay of opposites” itself, forms an “existential certainty” (Ibid.). The collection is a poetic elaboration on the oscillation of form and boundlessness (128). Spiralling around the pole of God, the self becomes manifest as gyrating motion and potential. In “Ich lebe mein Leben in wachsenden Ringen” (I live my life in expanding circles) the self performs a spiralling motion around God who is pictured as a tower and this motion embraces the uncertainty of the self of annunciation “Am I a falcon, a storm or a great song?”

The instability of the self, the uncertainty is reciprocal to the immobility of God as a fixed centre and again a strict rhyme and metric pattern makes this sonnet “hold out” the centrifugal forces that form its topos. The dynamics between God (stable centre) and Self (in flux, uncertain) is only ever a momentary condition in the collection, which reverses itself, as the speaker becomes the centre of experience around which God performs the fluctuating spiral of transformation and remains uncertain in/between countless forms and shapes. Stevens’ observation of the dynamic of uncertainty and shifting being the only certainty is correct:

> Du bist die Zukunft, großes Morgenrot über den Ebenen der Ewigkeit.
> Du bist der Hahnschrei nach der Nacht der Zeit, der Tau, die Morgenmette und die Maid.
> Der fremde Mann, die Mutter und der Tod.
> Du bist der Dinge tiefer Inbegriff, der seines Wesens letztes Wort verschweigt
> und sich den andern immer anders zeigt: dem Schiff als Küste und dem Land als Schiff.

> You are the future, great rose of dawn, over the plains of eternity.
> You are the cock crowing after the night of time, the dew, the mass at morning and the girl,
> The strange man, the mother and death.
> You are the deep essence of things, withholding silently the last word of its being, revealing itself differently to the other ones:
> To the ship as coast and to the land as ship.

249Gabriela Wacker in Poetik des Prophetischen (2013) claims that the search for god in the collection implies a search for the self. While self and god are not exactly sought for but negotiated in affirmative or dissolute terms, Wacker rightly observes the fundamental dynamics – that the two are inextricably linked (198).
Both zero and one at the same time, all shapes and no shape, described and undescribed, ship and coast – God is not fixed. And yet the compulsive repetitions of “you are” function as an invocation “to be” all these mundane things. The strain of the simultaneous ascription of so many divergent things, overly weighty as “death” and random as the strange man and the girl creates enormous metaphorical strain. And the speaker pushes even beyond the identification of God and all things. The enumeration of the lonely figure towering out of fate and the wild wood that is not yet described make God switch from one extreme to the other, instantly. That which towers distinctly and that which is diffuse and undescribed are flickering. Figuration becomes the point of the poem and God is that which enters into it as its condition.

In a letter to Ilse Jahr in 1923 Rilke retrospectively, three years before the end of his life, looks back at *Das Stunden-Buch* relating the experience of travelling through Russia, where he encountered a different spirituality, landscape, people and himself in a new way, he writes that God happened to him, befell him [“über mich herein gebrochen”] (*Briefe aus Muzot 1921-1926*, 195).

> I lived for a long time in the ante-chamber of his name, now you would hardly hear me name him at all. There is an indescribable discretion between us, and where there was once proximity and pervasion/interpenetration, new distances expand as in the atom, which the new sciences also conceive as a world in the minuscule. The graspable evades and transmutes. Instead of property / ownership one learns relation / relativity and namelessness emerges, which has to begin once again at God to be complete and without pretence. Sensory experience recedes behind an infinite desire for the potentially sensible …the attributes of God become God. No longer sayable, taken off, they fall back into creation, into love and death.

Rilke thus relates his poetry to the advent of sub-atomic physics and relativity. Relation is the new key, God does no longer insist in objects and metaphysical expectations, but becomes a principle of relation. The older Rilke reflects on *Das Stunden-Buch*’s approximation of the question of God as a quest for the potentially sensible and the process of coming-into-sensation, which in its consummation as sensory perception is itself no-longer-sayable as the senses are “forming” objects. And this phenomenological interest indeed is central to the poetics of the collection. We can only partly follow Martina King’s observation that in Rilke’s *Stunden-Buch* the transposition of god into immanence renders the term open for occupation by variable random mediator figures and objects of adoration [“variable besetzbar […] beliebige Mittlerfiguren und Anbetungsobjekte”] (222). Because through the rapid succession of images and apostrophes in the poems the objects and figures are ‘burnt up’ as soon as they emerge and in the rapid flux
from indeed one random item to the next what appears most poignantly is the insistence of God in motion through, in and beyond each object or figure, as the principle of figuration, change and manifestation. Rather than being mediators, the objects perform their own infinition. The poems all gravitate around the simultaneity of the emergence of the nameless and the emergence of worldly phenomena as the attributes of God. The divine empties itself of itself, the imperishable becomes restlessly given to the self and in doing so appears as world to the senses. God flows to the inside, to his substantiating gaze the self becomes the embodying outside: “and to your eyes which never blink, I am space” [“und deinen Augen, welche niemals blinzeln, / bin ich der Raum”] to God the dreamer, the self is the dream [“Wenn Du der Träumer bist / bin ich der Traum”], to God (the migrating roe deers) the speaker is the dark wood [“du gehst wie lauter lichte Rehe / und ich bin dunkel und bin Wald”]. (184) The dynamic is not a mere to-and-fro between a primary and an antithetical pole but becomes an expenditure of one into the other, an eversion in which one is momentarily contained and the other contains. In “Was wirst Du tun Gott wenn ich sterbe” the self is worried about what might happen to god after its own death:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Was wirst du tun, Gott, wenn ich sterbe?</th>
<th>What will you do, God, when I die?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ich bin dein Krug (wenn ich zerscherbe?)</td>
<td>I am your jug (when I break?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ich bin dein Trank (wenn ich verderbe?)</td>
<td>I am your drink (when I spoil?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bin dein Gewand und dein Gewerbe,</td>
<td>I am your robe and your business,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mit mir verlierst du deinen Sinn.</td>
<td>with me you lose your meaning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nach mir hast du kein Haus, darin</td>
<td>After me you have no house in which</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dich Worte, nah und warm, begrüßen.</td>
<td>near and warm, words welcome you.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Es fällt von deinen müden Füßen</td>
<td>From your tired feet falls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>die Samtsandale, die ich bin.</td>
<td>the velvet sandal that I am.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dein großer Mantel läßt dich los.</td>
<td>Your big coat lets go of you,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dein Blick, den ich mit meiner Wange</td>
<td>Your gaze, which with my cheek,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>warm, wie mit einem Pfühl, empfange,</td>
<td>Warm, as with a pool, I receive,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wird kommen, wird mich suchen, lange -</td>
<td>will come and look for me, a long time-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>und legt beim Sonnenuntergange</td>
<td>and will rest itself at sun down</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sich fremden Steinen in den Schoß.</td>
<td>into the lap of strange stones.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was wirst du tun, Gott? Ich bin bange</td>
<td>What will you do God? I’m afraid.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(W 1 176)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The accumulative rhyme pattern a-a-a-b b-c-c-b d-e-e-e-d-e conveys a sense of over-extension, as well as long-postponed satisfaction finally granted like the soothing repetitive rhythm of a nursery song. Finally the fact that the speaker imagines his own death as the moment in which God’s gaze will lay itself into the “lap of strange stones” is as soothing as it is disrupting. It is brought about gradually as the gaze is caught “as with a pool” and the speaker is already half-way landscape. The word bange has many potential connotations which all resonate here: anxious, apprehensive, with a sense of foreboding, but also ‘uncertainty,’ ‘undecidedness’ as in an uncertain matter “eine bange Sache.” As the very point of the poem is to elaborate the coincidence of God and self in the process of perceived world, “Ich bin bange” pictures the “I” itself as anxiously and temporally embodied, undecided, uncertain in an ontological sense.
4. Delimiting the Sacred

God insists in expenditure and metamorphoses, as a force gathered into his son who “exudes him, silently as the rose of all roses / he was the circumference around the homeless / he went in coats and metamorphoses through all the rising voices of time” [“er duftet leis / als Rose der Rosen / Er war ein Kreis um die Heimatlosen. / Er ging in Mänteln und Metamorphosen / durch alle steigenden Stimmen der Zeit”] (173).

As God “went through” Christ he also goes/ walks in and through the speakers. But also at other times, the speakers are embodied or sheltered by God as an organic structure, as the wood out of which we never left [“Du Wald aus dem wir niemals fort gegangen”] (W 1 169). We are the veins in the basalt in God’s hard glory [“Wir sind die Adern im Basalte in Gottes harter Herrlichkeit”] (W 1 180) or are playing in God’s beard which is holding us gently [“du hälst mich seltsam zart / und horchst wie meine Hände gehn / durch deinen alten Bart”] (W 1 181). God is addressed as a dark texture, a personified web which began itself as an infinite self-undertaking in undertaking us [“du dunkles Netz du hast dich so unendlich groß begonnen an jenem Tag an dem du uns begannst”] (W 1 170). And yet this God is falling and has fallen into human hands and is at the mercy of everything, adding gravity to their meaning / sense: “You are the begging one and the anxious / uncertain one, weighting the sense of all things” [“Du bist der Bittende und Bange, der aller Dinge Sinn beschwert”] (Ibid.).

Certainly, this poetic overabundance of figures of the divine, their poetic emergence, consummation and destruction which will be discussed in the following, is realised through poems which overcome the idea of object, ownership and property, even and especially the metaphysical object, and arrive at a description of their sensuous emergence as pure relation.

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251 While I agree with Judith Ryan that in this collection “the structure of prayer is identified with the figurative structures of the poem” in the light of the observations made I disagree that God becomes “a metaphor, not for the creative act, but for the art object” (1999, 28).
Are strange shapes which they blindly touch upon with extended hands. Surely, this is a certainty only for the grown ones, longing for eyes, because the others will not hear of it, that their poor wandering is related to no surrounding thing. That they, shunned from their property, unconfirmed by their possessions, own their wife as little as they own the flower which is of a strange life for all.

Do not fall, god, out of your equilibrium. Even he who loves you and who recognises Your face in darkness, when like a light he wavers in your breath, - does not own you. And when someone grasps you in the night so that you have to come into his prayer: You are the guest who moves on again.

Who can hold you, God? For you are yours disturbed by no owner’s hand, like the not-yet-ripened wine, getting sweeter, belongs to itself.

God is that which performs the self and its senses. God is that which in turn comes into the senses as world as the Other and which refuses to be owned. Rilke equates the human self with the motion of the wind, which brushes by objects. In the image of the things being “glowing hot” he describes them as ungraspable, so that subsequently every effort at claiming ownership is pointless. God is that which stays on the move. Rilke’s friendship with the biologist Jakob von Uexküll and his growing acquaintance with his theories of environment - Umwelt - are clearly reflected in this poem. Neither wife nor flower can be owned, being “of a strange life for all.” Geoffrey Winthrop Young in his afterword to Uexküll’s Foray into the World of Animals and Humans [1957] (2010) highlights the links between Uexküll’s “biophilosophy” and Rilke’s phenomenological poetics:

With his straight-forward claim, often dressed up as an appeal to Kant – that all reality is subjective in appearance, Uexküll is less a proponent of Kant than of a Kantian vulgate that breezily ignores fundamental distinctions between the transcendental and the empirical which were essential to Kant’s epistemological housecleaning exercise.[…] What truly linked the two was the question of seeing and significance. Uexküll’s basic objection against the philosophy of the day was that it rigorously denied any kind of animal subjectivity. It postied one objective environment for all life forms and, subsequently, proceeded to analyse animals from the outside in, that is, by torturing them with selected stimuli in order to illicit mechanic responses. The new (and true) biology required a reorientation on the part of the researcher. The blind reliance on an indifferent environment had to be replaced by the recognition of species-specific Umwelten[…] This enterprise had more than a passing resemblance to Rilke’s

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252 For a broader discussion of their life-long friendship and Rilke’s persistent enthusiasm for biology and biological theories see Fick Sinnenwelt und Weltseele, especially Rilke’s transformation of world into Umwelt (184-223).
Rilke describes a substance which gives itself into the formation of the sensual apparatus and the world created through and within it. God is the name of all-pervading processes of being. The self is trembling within God’s breath, an expression of it as well as an exception. God is recognisable only within darkness, as concealment. Throughout the collection God always remains the dark [“der Dunkle”], the unknowable, who is opposed to the “light” nature of those who kill and judge. First and foremost, for Rilke, God is “fallen” and “lost” in existence. This precondition is not visible to those who insist on objects and ownership, who Rilke scolds in the above poem, but only to the ‘grown ones,’ who are longing for eyes to see God within the profane.

4.2.1. The Wasting and Scattering of the Divine and the Self – Poetic *Kenosis*

Frederick Bridgham's study *Rainer Maria Rilke: Urbild und Verzicht. The theme of renunciation in Rilke’s poetry* (1976) is the only one that systematically addresses the phenomenon of poverty and self-relinquishment. He even goes so far as to observe that *Verzicht* becomes an “existential imperative” for Rilke (104). Rilke’s reception of the love letters of Kierkegaard, Bridgham suggests, became the foundation of his turning towards an aesthetic of renunciation. I would argue that renunciation is deeply linked into a project of re-thinking the divine in terms of *kenosis*, a rethinking in which human renunciation appears as meaningful. *Kenosis* is a Christological concept that was first formulated in the context of emergent Protestantism in the 16th-century. *Kenosis* is derived from the Greek word *kenoo* which means ‘to empty. It describes the destitution of Christ and its fundamental importance to Christian ethics:

> Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself [heauton ekenosen], taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.  

Over and against the Catholic church’s insistence on Christ’s worldly power, might and bestowing of privileges, the newly forming Protestant movement, in need of arguments for democratizing access to sacred texts, sacraments and salvation were informed by the implications of Christ’s kenosis. In the 19th century the idea gained momentum again with Gottfried

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253 The figure of Kain, and all those who misunderstand god and abuse power are associated with light.

254 Biblia.com – Bible Study Online, Phil. 2:5-8, <http://biblia.com/bible/nasb95/Phil.%202.5-8>
4. Delimiting the Sacred

Thomasius, but the final breakthrough into wider discourses happened only in the 20th century with the works of the Swiss Catholic theologian Hans-Urs von Balthasar. He suggested that Heidegger's works, especially his thinking of an ontological difference, should be embraced fully by Christian theology. Other French contemporary thinkers such as Jacques Derrida (especially in “Faith and Knowledge”), Jean-Luc Nancy and Jean-Luc Marion address the question of kenosis.

In the context of a discussion of kenosis, Nancy argues that the God of Christianity is not a God hidden in withdrawal, but instead is completely “emptied out” and is as such unspeakable. According to Hans-Urs von Balthasar “Plato reduced that which was original to the status of the derivative. In so doing he became the father of all who have put allegory (i.e. discourse about something else) in the place of symbol (i.e. a true [self-emanating] sign)” (22). To Balthasar, the Platonic infusion of Christianity, the idea of an agent God, who ‘resides elsewhere,’ is a misconception. He therefore favours a thinking of immanence. The divine Being is outpoured into beings and comes to consciousness through revelation, in the moment when man recognizes the inherent divinity of himself and all beings around him, when in the awareness of the difference between Being and beings man still is able to perceive their paradoxical identity: “God, as absolute Being as opposed to all finite existents, is indeed the ‘Wholly Other’. But precisely for this reason he is also the “Not-Other” (Non-Aliud) as Nicholas of Cusa says (459). Balthasar writes:

The truth of this kenosis of God is hidden from the rational mind, resides in mystery and concealment. The fact that the God of plenitude has poured himself out, not only into creation, but emptied himself into the modalities of an existence determined by sin, corrupted by death and alienated from god. This is the concealment that appears in his self-revelation; this is the ungraspability of God, which becomes graspable because it is grasped (The Glory of the Lord, Vol 1, 461).

Faith, on that note, is an event. Similarly Nancy claims that faith is “the act of the reason that relates, itself, to that which, in it, passes it infinitely” (Dis-Enclosure 25). This is how prayer and profane apostrophe are one and the same for Rilke. There is, I would suggest, a structural similarity between the theological mediation of kenosis and Levinas' philosophical approach to infinition discussed earlier. Only in understanding how structurally and substantially they are the same for Rilke, can we understand how the profane can be the divine:

The in- of the infinite designates the depth of the affection by which subjectivity is affected through this “placing” of the Infinite within it, withoutprehension or comprehension. A depth of undergoing [subir] that no capacity comprehends, and where no foundation supports it any longer, this is a depth in which every process of investment fails, and where the bolts of the interiority burst. A dazzling where the eye holds more than it can hold; an ignition of the skin that touches and does not touch that which, beyond the graspable, burns (Levinas Of God that Comes to Mind 66f).

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255 See also Robyn Horner Rethinking God as Gift: Marion, Derrida, and the Limits of Phenomenology (2001), and Jean-Luc Marion: A Theo-Logical Introduction (2005).
This “ignition of the skin” at the moment of touch, which desubstantialises the object, is in its deepest sense the *poetic* moment which *Das Stunden-Buch* is exploring. The point of ignition is happening between the infinity placing itself inside the finite form, thereby starting to burn it up, but the infinite does not stay immune, either; it is depleted and loses any sense of grandeur. God, in this way, is described as poor:

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| Du bist der Arme, du der Mittellose, | You are the poor one, you’re the destitute |
| du bist der Stein, der keine Stätte hat, | you are the stone that has no place, |
| du bist der fortgeworfene Leprose, | you are the thrown-away leper |
| der mit der Klapper umgeht vor der Stadt. | who walks outside the city with a clap-trap |
| [...] | [...] |
| Und du bist arm: so wie der Frühlingsregen, | And you are poor: like spring rain |
| der selig auf der Städte Dächer fällt, | falling blissfully on city roofs, |
| und wie ein Wunsch, wenn Sträflinge ihn hegen | and as a wish, when held by prisoners |
| in einer Zelle, ewig ohne Welt. | inside a cell, infinitely without world. |
| Und wie die Kranken, die sich anders legen | And as the sufferers, which shift themselves |
| und glücklich sind; wie Blumen in Geleisen | and are happy, as flowers in rail tracks, |
| so traurig arm im irren Wind der Reisen; | so sad-poor in the insane wind of travelling, |
| und wie die Hand, in die man weint, so arm... | and like the hand into which one cries, so poor… |

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| Und was sind Vögel gegen dich, die frieren, | And what are birds compared to you, who are cold, |
| was ist ein Hund, der tagelang nicht fraß, | what is a dog that did not feed for days |
| und was ist gegen dich das Sichverlieren, | And what against you is the loss of self, |
| das stille lange Traurigsein von Tieren, | the long and silent being-sad of animals, |
| die man als Eingefangene vergaß? | forgotten captives? |
| [...] | [...] |
| Du aber bist der tiefste Mittellose, | You are the deep destitute, |
| der Bettler mit verborgenem Gesicht; | the beggar with a hidden face; |
| du bist der Armut große Rose, | poverty’s great rose, |
| die ewige Metamorphose | the infinite metamorphosis |
| des Goldes in das Sonnenlicht. | of gold into sunlight. |

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| Du bist der leise Heimatlose, | You are the quiet exile/unsheltered one, |
| der nichtmehr einging in die Welt: | who did not re-enter the world: |
| zu groß und schwer zu jeglichem Bedarfe. | too great and heavy for and demand or need, |
| Du heulst im Sturm. Du bist wie eine Harfe, | You howl in the storm. You are the harp, |
| an welcher jeder Spielende zerschellt. (W 1 244) | at which each player shatters. |

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Again, the overabundant, luxurious sonnet composition, displaying a great density of image after image of God in iambic pentameters is strangely incongruent with the supposed shabbiness and poverty and helplessness of the divine. But this is part of Rilke’s concept of kenosis, in which self-emptying is seen as the highest form of accomplishment. The succession of apostrophes in the first stanza, personifying God, gives way to a succession of synecdoches. Rolling like beads off a rosary, they capture God’s poverty by comparison and approximation until finally the string breaks and the severity of the poverty of the animals is posited against God as a question. And I would argue that the question “what are they against you?” paradoxically reveals the apex of proximity in that even their suffering and exposure is negatively exceeded by the poverty and distress of God. Thus, the animals in their suffering are closest to the great destitution of God. But in the final stanzas’ personification God is again captured as the one who remains in motion.
4. Delimiting the Sacred

...and unembodied, that which simply does not hold on to any figuration and finally becomes a force of destruction, a lethal musical instrument, a harp which shatters the player.

This highlights the centrality of self-consummation for both the creative process and embodied existence for Rilke. This is expressed in the Sonette an Orpheus with the imperative “be a glass that shatters in resounding” [“seieinGlas das sichimKlangsconzerschlug”] (W 2 263). This becomes the imperative for artist and reader alike, the imperative to undergo kenosis. Echoing the Book of Job, the speaker in “Ich bete wieder, Du Erlauchter” is “scattered among his enemies / myself was in pieces and scattered / Oh god, all laughers laughed me / and all drinkers drank me.” The metaphors become ever more unlikely and baroque: the speaker becomes even a house after burning / in which only murderers sometimes sleep. [“Ich war zerstreut; an Widersacher / in Stücken war verteilt mein Ich. / O Gott, mich lachten alle Lacher, / und alle Trinker tranken mich.”] (W 1 202).

There are parallels between Rilke and the metaphysical tradition of the poet as “good physician” of which Stanley Fish writes in his study Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature (1972). He describes the metaphysical conceits of John Donne and George Herbert in terms of self-consummation. Through the far-fetchedness of metaphors in which the procession of imaginary contents goes up in smoke, calling attention to the perceptual process by the over-elaboration, poetry performs an offering. Metaphysical poetry becomes “the vehicle of its own abandonment,” demanding the reader to do the same: to become, in turn, the vehicle of self-abandonment (Fish 3). The reader “is consumed as he responds to the medicinal purging of the dialectition’s art, and the art, like other medicine is consumed in the working of its own best effects” (Ibid.).

This “best effect” for modernism is a destabilization of objects and of habitual perceptions and beliefs. Humankind, for Rilke, has to learn how to fall again with the falling things and the falling divine, to disengage from the compulsion to “save ourselves” and thereby become ignorant and callous towards the suffering and destitution of the world. In this sense, as self and God ‘go up in smoke’ through the poems which transpose them into motion and evaporation, this self-destitution becomes part of the reader’s experience. However, there is also a re-figuration, in which God and self take shape again.

4.2.2. Catching the Fall – Responsibility for God, the Neighbour

In Das Stunden-Buch the falling motion of destitution is omnipresent. God is described as the “law of gravity” [“Gesetz der Schwere”] and just as God is falling, humans, things and animals are falling too. The law of gravity “throws itself like a wind from the ocean onto each ball and each berry and carries them into the centre of the earth” (W 1 214). Within sensual perception and, consequently within art God can be reconstructed in the sense of reconstructing a house after demolition or fire [“wiederaufgebaut”] (W 1 203). God is imagined as a son or as a cathedral which is yet to be built, collectively and through centuries. As for Yeats “nothing is whole that...
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has not been rent” - the new, re-assembled self corresponds with a re-emergence of God within the “wholly other,” the neighbour and the fragile bird.

In “Du Nachbar Gott” the speaker addresses God as his neighbour concealed behind walls which are made of his names and images, hidden from view but within ear-shot.

The direct proximity of God as neighbour is hidden behind the wall which is erected of God’s images. This wall, however, may crumble if as little as a call should be uttered from either side. Where the visual sense creates distance, the auditory and vocal dimensions of embodiment create proximity. The even flow of iambic pentameters is interrupted by the four stressed syllables of “Ich bin ganz nah” – “ganz” being an annunciation that the speaker is entirely, very, wholly near. The same rhythm gives the impression of a repeated knocking sound, “knocking” the presence of the self into the neighbour’s perception. Yet these four stressed syllables re-occur in “und sie bricht ein,” figuratively demolishing the wall.

The self establishes itself as proximity in front of an Other. What Levinas calls the “non-indifference of this difference: the proximity of the other” in front of which the responsibility of the self is to renounce self-constitution into an “I think”, into an entity “as substantial as a stone” (Of God that comes to Mind 71). Rilke’s poetics of kenosis result in images of the “affection of presence by the infinite”(70). The “homelessness” of the speaker’s senses which have expended themselves into the splendorous reflection of light, kindled within his own depths and reflected on the “frames” of God, is again the onset of darkness in which the instantiation of God as the near-yet-Other neighbour can commence. The divine is not only the human for Rilke but also the animal. In “Wenn ich gewachsen wäre irgendwo” God is fragile as a little thirsty bird:
God is sitting on the speaker’s hands with yellow talons. It is a little fragile fledgling to which the speaker presents a drop of water. The inability to deliver a gesture of service, which the speaker laments in “Du Nachbar Gott,” is now overcome as the speaker is able to hold a drop of water to the bird. But the image arises from reflection and it is of a speculative nature. Suddenly, uncertainly, this image of proximity rises to the fore as a memory – “it may be, once.” This image of a unity between human and bird in the unbounded heart remains a potentiality, but as such it is a response or a continuation of the former situation in which the speaker “listens” whether the neighbour is still breathing, as he listens now to whether the drop of water is thirstily accepted. One might assume, since the speaker is a child running around with his friends, that it is broad daylight and his eyes could have confirmed the fact. Yet he still listens, implying a concealedness which the presence of daylight cannot lay open. Even on the palm of his hand, God remains veiled: the bird.

However, in the prayer/apostrophe to the bird, it is “your” heart which is beating, the heart of God on the palm of the human hand. But the difference is again collapsed, when the speaker says he can feel “your heart and mine” beating “and both out of fear.” The reader is left to wonder and explore does the speaker feel his own heart beating on the inside of his body in unison, in care and compassionate anxiety with the bird, or is he talking about a shared heart, beating through both, trembling anxiously in the fragile body of the one and with the anxiety of care and empathic identification in the other? This is the first indication of what the open (“Das Offene”) entails for Rilke, an undecidedness and unboundedness which makes the exposure of the one the exposure of the other.

Already in his poem “Der Herbst” [“The Autumn”] everything is falling: the leaves fall from the trees, God falls out of the stars and “we” humans fall (W 1 283). Then, God was still there to hold a hand under all this falling, “infinitely gently” [“Unendlich sanft”]. In Das Stunden-Buch God is no longer there as a security net. God is a destituting presence which generates, sustains and breaks all form, including the human body. God has restlessly fallen into the world and thereby fallen into pure presence and out of consciousness. In “Die Spanische Trilogie”
Rilke re-conceives falling as “das Tüchtigste” the most capable human achievement. Even art is only an achievement in as far as it entails the destitution of self either in the form of an expending of the self into the art work or a figurative breaking of the boundaries which delineate self from non-self. For Rilke creation [Schöpfung] is exhaustion [Erschöpfung], and not just in the metaphysical but also in the very biographical sense of the fatigue and depletion which would befall him at the end of each of his major creations (e.g. after the completion of his novel Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge (1910) (see Rattner & Danzer 201) and more significantly after the storm of inspiration in Muzot which ‘gives’ him the completion of the Duineser Elegien and the entirety of the Sonette an Orpheus in a matter of weeks in 1921).

Erschöpfung roots artistic creation in the expenditure of the poet’s faculties. The “temple” which Rilke creates in his Sonette an Orpheus is a temporal, performative memorial to the dissembled god Orpheus and the dead dancer Vera Oukama-Knoop and it is “founded on the expenditure of the body in song and dance and finally in its exhaustion. It is precisely this creative energy of the moving-perishing body which Rilke’s poetics of transformation aim to realise in language and perform as praise.” This transformation is not one of Dionysian flux into Appollonian stasis as Schuster claims. It is much more productive to think of his notion of being as perfectly embodied the co-insistence of motion and form within Orphic infinition – the perishing of the earthly-divine forces in motion which generate, perform, exceed and break form and embodiment. On a formal level it can be found in the strict sonnet structure, subverted by slanting lines, the over-extension and breaking of syntactical units and the enjambement and valuation of unlikely minor words. The Rilkean sonnet, already prior to the Muzot phase, is carried within/while walking - “Im Laufen getragen” (Schuster 373). At best, Apollo and Dionysius are fused beyond differentiation in Rilke’s poetics. The flux of transformation inherent in the Orpheus myth, however, suffices, as “once and for all, it is Orpheus when it sings” [Ein für alle Mal ists Orpheus wenn es singt”] (W 2 243).

The realisation of a principle of infinition by “capturing in its fall” the perishing movement of the body into an art work which performatively extends its excessive/exhaustive/exciting motion into the internity of each potential reader’s senses – is best captured in Rilke’s notion of a ball game. The image first emerges in “Wenn ich gewachsen wäre” in Das Stunden-Buch as a figure of the expenditure of God, a “giving away” of boundless presence as wastage [“verguden”].

256 Contrary to Ullrich Fülleborn’s claim that Rilke wanted to depict the “Erschütterung” of the human in the face of the divine and therefore is working strictly after Hölderlin [“Nach dem Vorbild Hölderlins”], Anthony Stevens points out that Rilke’s view of Hölderlin differs decisively from his own poetics (Stevens 30). While Rilke in An Hölderlin thinks Hölderlin capable of enchanting and “speaking” the divine into images, the motion in Rilke’s own poetry is reversed in Die Spanische Trilogie he writes: “aus den erfüllten/ Bildern stürzt der Geist zu plötzlich zu füllenden; Seen sind erst im Ewigen. Hier ist Fallen das Tüchtigste” (Ibid.).

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| Dort hätte ich gewagt, dich zu vergeuden,            | There I would have dared to waste you,        |
| du grenzenlose Gegenwart.                          | you boundless presence.                      |
| Wie einen Ball                                      | like a ball                                  |
| hättestich in alle wogenden Freuden                | I had tossed you into all surging delights    |
| hineingeschleudert, daß einer dich finge           | so that someone caught you                   |
| und deinem Fall                                    | in your fall                                 |
| mit hohen Händen entgegenspringe,                  | with high hands jumped towards you,          |
| du Ding der Dinge. (W1 167)                        | you thing of things.                         |

God is “lost” into a ball via a synecdoche, a “thing of things” which embraces the object yet explodes it within metaphorically excessive personification. It is a “you” which is expended as self into the “surging delights” of experience out of which again a “you” is falling to be caught by someone else’s hands.

4.2.2.1. Rilke’s Ball Game of Existence

We have seen that Rilke figures the divine as an ontic force, which substantiates the self as well as the perceptual phenomena as an Other within the extension of the senses, merging them into a duo-unity. The poetic prayers of Das Stunden-Buch thus become a profanation of prayer, since the address is extended to each and every thing. The divine Other is addressed as earthly presence before whom and by whom the self comes into existence. From prophet and priest the poet thus turns to being shaman and sage to the Western world for which nature has largely become determinate and mechanical, who:

acts as an intermediary between the human community and the larger ecological field, ensuring that there is an appropriate flow of nourishment, not just from the landscape to the human inhabitants but from the human community back to the local earth. By his constant rituals, trances, extasies, and ‘journeys,’ he ensures that the relation between human society and the larger society of beings is balanced and reciprocal, and the village never takes more from the living land than it returns to it – not just materially but with prayers, propitiations and praise” (Abram 1996, 7).

Max Oelschlaeger rightly praises David Abram’s eco-sophical work as providing us with the “risk of entering into an altered state of perceptual possibility” (Ibid., front jacket). This is the task that literature and criticism must face in an age of environmental crises: “to alleviate our current estrangement from the animate earth” (x). I would further suggest that to alleviate this estrangement it does not suffice to simply relocate the sacred into this grove or that tree or that nature reservoir. Care for the earth cannot become a new religion but must be as self-evidently necessary as care for our own skin. But to connect to an earthly divine without just once again shifting the sacred to a new territory (and in so doing retaining the structures of hierarchy and
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exclusion, forcing bare life into subservience to “good life”), profanation must occur. Agamben suggests “play” as a prime means of achieving profanation:

To profane means to open the possibility for a special form of negligence, which ignores separation or, rather, puts it to a particular use [...] namely, play. Most of the games with which we are familiar derive from ancient sacred ceremonies, from divinatory practices, and rituals that once belonged, broadly speaking, to the religious sphere. The *girotondo* was originally a marriage rite; the playing with a ball reproduces the struggle of the gods for the possession of the sun (Agamben *Profanations* 75).

Agamben, in referring to Benveniste, points out that the power of the sacred relies on the conjunction of the myth that tells the story and the rite that reproduces and stages it. Play, on the contrary, breaks this conjunction either by dropping the myth and preserving the rite in *ludus* or by preserving the myth but breaking the structural conditions of exchange that establish the rite in *iocus* – wordplay, for example (Ibid.). Rilke effects a profanation of the ball game by demolishing the representational subservience of the ball game to any extraneous myth. The ball to Rilke is no longer a means by which the gods’ struggle for the sun is expressed but it is pure *ludus*: an instance not a representation of a divine play of forces.

In this reading I follow Beda Allemann’s and Franka Köpp’s arguments. Allemann sees the ball in the poem as a “mysterious metaphor for the basic structure of being” (“geheimnisvolle Metapher für die Grundstruktur des Daseins”) presupposing all the central elements of Rilke’s later works (Allemann *Zeit und Figur beim späten Rilke* 60, 64). The poem embodies the simultaneity of rising and falling and so transfigures the object of the ball into an uncertain process in which both the human players and the ball are seen in a continuous motion without one being delineated against the other.\(^{258}\) What is more, the personification of the ball prolongs the gesture of the profane prayer turning the ball from metaphor into an “undecided” presence. Gravity itself and the human involvement in “rising and falling”\(^{259}\) are the divine principle; no extraneous myth is sought or needed.

\(^{258}\) Franka Köpp’s deliberation especially her refutation of Gerok-Reiter’s claim that Rilke fails at depicting the transitive step from a concrete, moved figure to a figure of motion (“von der konkreten bewegten Figur zur Figur der Bewegung”) must be followed (Köpp, *Axiomatierung in der poetischen Produktion: Rilkes und Brechts* 135). Köpp points out that there is no clear differentiation between the thing and the word and the concept “Ball” – to which I would like to add that there is no differentiation between the human beings and that which they are handling: the thing, word or concept “Ball.”

\(^{259}\) Wolfgang Janke describes three dimensions of falling within Rilke’s works: the Christian falling into the hands of God, the existential falling into the center of one’s own gravity and the Orphic falling back to the ancient in Rilke (*Archaischer Gesang* 198). Janke points out that in his explorations of Hölderlin, Rilke discovers Falling as a virtue (Ibid.). Through the notion of kenosis the existential, Christian and Orphic dimensions of falling cannot be clearly discerned but are all already implied. The same is true for the word “neigen” to incline, to lower to deplete – this is a word which Rilke uses consistently and it denotes both the undecidedness between the direction of falling and the immobility of resting, but it certainly implies the agency of each thing and being to participate in “neigen” – which later in *Die Sonette an Orpheus* becomes the term for the entire environment: “Im Reiche der Neige”(W 2 263).
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The poem itself describes the motion of a thrown ball (Allemann 58ff). Yet this motion is inextricably linked with the players. That which keeps the ball from gliding invisibly into the speakers is, in fact, the mode of address. Prosopopeia gives it the recognisable face, but as an interface in which the players are shown a new place. This motion of expenditure is a restless profanation of the divine into the modes and motions of being and re-solidification within the earthly phenomena (and human consciousness thereof). It corresponds with Rilke’s reminiscences on the creative emergence of Das Stunden-Buch which he outlined to Ilse Jahr:

Maybe it is always again only that which executed itself in certain places in the Stundenbuch this ascension of god out of the breathing heart of which the heaven covers itself and his downfall as rain, but even the confession of this would be too much, more and more the Christian experience is left out of consideration. The idea of being sinful and in need of being bought free withstands a heart that has understood the earth. Not sinfulness and error within the earthly, on the contrary its pure nature becomes essential consciousness, sin is certainly the most wondrous detour to God, but why should those who never left him take it? The strong internally trembling bridge of the mediator only makes sense where the abyss between us and God is admitted -; but this very abyss is full of the darkness of God and where someone experiences it he should climb down into it and howl inside it, that is more necessary than crossing/exceeding /overstepping it. First to him to whom the abyss was a place of habitation the provisional/(sent ahead before us) heavens return and everything deeply and intimately local/earthly, which
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the church has misappropriated into the afterlife, will return. All angels decide for earth, singing its praises.\footnote{260}

Thus, if we want to consider the artistic programme developed beyond the \textit{Stunden-Buch} in \textit{Neue Gedichte} and finally in \textit{Die Sonette an Orpheus}, this notion of an earthly presence of the divine within motions of dissolution and re-substantiation are essential. The artistic self “holds out” the abyss of privation – “darkness” and an abyss that needs not be redeemed or avoided but “inhabited.” The holding out within “darkness” is paradoxically the condition of the return of all that had been removed into transcendence into earthly presence.

It is not possible within the frame of this thesis to give a close account of all the innumerable gradations and figurations of “darkness” within Rilke’s poetry. It suffices here to note that darkness marks the essential inability to take shelter in the sense of sight which “removes” the things into the distance of a field of vision. Darkness prohibits the clear separation of self from world-as-Other and makes it impossible to make out objects.\footnote{Rilke cautions not to mistake art for a “selection taken from the world but its restless transformation into Glory.” Art must retain the darkness and turn it into an oxymoronic radiant darkness rather than into the ceritude of light. The understanding of earth becomes the founding moment of consciousness, its transformations of embodied selves between generation and destruction.

\footnote{260}Es ist vielleicht immer wieder nur das, was schon an gewissen Stellen im Stundenbuch sich vollzog, dieser Aufstieg Gottes aus dem atmenden Herzen, davon sich der Himmel bedeckt, und sein Niederfall als Regen. Aber jedes Bekenntnis dazu wäre schon zu viel. Mehr und mehr kommt das christliche Erlebnis außer Betracht; der uralte Gott überwiegt es unendlich. Die Anschauung, sündig zu sein und des Loskaufs zu bedürfen als Voraussetzung zu Gott, widersteht immer mehr einem Herzen, das die Erde begriffen hat. Nicht die Sündhaftigkeit und der Irrtum im Irdischen, im Gegenteil, seine reine Natur wird zum wesentlichen Bewusstsein, die Sünde ist gewiss der wunderbarste Umweg zu Gott – – –, aber warum sollten die auf Wanderschaft gehen, die ihn nie verlassen haben? Die starke innerlich behende Brücke des Mittlers hat nur Sinn, wo der Abgrund zugegeben wird zwischen Gott und uns – aber eben dieser Abgrund ist voll vom Dunkel Gottes, und wo ihn einer erfährt, so steige er hinab und heule drin [das ist nötiger, als ihn überschreiten]. Erst zu dem, dem auch der Abgrund ein Wohnort war, kehren die vorausgeschickten Himmel um, und alles tief und innig Hiesige, das die Kirche ans Jenseits veruntreut hat, kommt zurück; alle Engel entschließen sich, lobsingend zur Erde!” (\textit{Briefe aus Muzot 1921 – 1926}, 94ff)

\footnote{261}Forsaking the traditional register of light, Rilke equates God with darkness in \textit{Das Stunden-buch}. Light is the medium of judgement, of violence. In “Der blasse Abelknabe spricht” Rilke makes Abel posthumously narrate his own extinction, how his brother displaced “my face with his face” and now is alone, admitting that he believes his older brother to wake like a judgement: “All went my way / all come before his wrath / all go lost through him” [“Es gingen alle meine Bahn / kommenallevorscinen Zorn / gehenalle an ihm verlorn”] (\textit{W} 1 161). Cain is condemned to be in the light, an untouched “sacred” principle which kills. God, on the contrary is darkness personified [“Du Dunkelheitaus de rich stamme”] the speaker admits to loving darkness more than the flame which limits the world by radiating “but darkness summons everything to her shapes and flames, animals and me” Gestalten und Flammen, Tiere und mich “die die Welt begrenzt / indem sie glänzt” (Ibid.). “Dein Name ist uns wie ein Licht … God is transformed from light and the instance of judgement to darkness and gravity. Through hypallage he describes a transformative mystery of Being, describe this darkening gravity “dunkelndes Gewicht” (\textit{W} 1 180) in accordance with Boehmian cosmology, as we ourselves are still “darkening” of the sound of god speaking the word “mankind” [wird unkeln noch an seinem Klange]” (Ibid.).

\footnote{262}Glauben Sie nicht, lieber Freund, daß schon das Stunden-Buch ganz erfüllt war von der Entschlossenheit, in der ich (einseitig, wenn Sie wollen) zugenommen habe?: Die Kunst nicht für eine Auswahl aus der Welt zu halten, sondern für deren restlose Verwandlung ins Herrliche hinein. Die Bewunderung, mit der sie sich auf die Dinge (alle, ohne Ausnahme) stürzt, muß so ungestüm, so stark, so strahlend sein, daß dem Gegenstand die Zeit fehlt, sich auf seine Häßlichkeit oder Verworfenheit zu besinnen. Es kann im Schrecken nichts so Absagendes und Verneinendes geben, daß nicht die multiple Aktion künstlerischer Bewältigung es mit einem großen, positiven Überschuß zurückliefe, als ein Dasein-Aussagendes, Sein-Wollendes: als einen Engel” (Rilke \textit{Briefe aus den Jahren 1907 bis 1914} [1933], 72-75).}
Rilke desires to overcome the limited register of sin and redemption for the sake of bringing into consciousness existence as the participation within a greater self.

In his letter to Jakob von Uexküll from Paris 19th of August 1909, Rilke responds to his friend’s failure to understand and appreciate his more recent creations, insisting that they were born out of “the same privation” as the Stunden-Buch. Uexküll liked the collection very much. According to Rilke, the artist’s senses have to “plunge themselves” so violently and without reserve and regard onto the things-as-phenomena before they have the chance to become aware of their fallenness and decrepitude. The poetic “things” Rilke creates, be it the ball, the torso of Apollo or the numerous plants he describes – the Roses in “Roseninneres” and “Rosenschale” – are continuous with humanity. In the following, Yeats’ poetry in The Wind Among the Reeds (1899) and The Tower (1928) will be explored with regard to the ideas of the delimitation of the sacred and the out-pouring of the self.

4.3. Delimiting the Sacred in W. B. Yeats’ Poetry

4.3.1. The Wind among the Reeds (1899) – Entering a Zone of Contagion

By the time he published The Wind among the Reeds Yeats was already working in many diverse fields. He had worked as a critical reviewer, an editor of the works of the Romantic poet William Blake with Edwin Ellis, a collector and writer of folk stories, a playwright who had become formatively involved with the Irish dramatic movement and written three plays (The Land of Heart’s Desire, The Shadowy Waters and The Countess Cathleen). He had become politically active and found a patron in Lady Augusta Gregory who admired his work and furthered it as well as creating vital connections between Yeats and other formative artists of the Irish Revival. Yeats’ public life was in motion, and so was his love life of the 1890s. Both Maud Gonne and Olivia Shakespeare leave traces in his verse. J. Hillis Miller in Poets of Reality puts it very aptly: “The word ‘wandering’ expresses exactly the dominant motif of Yeats’s early work. Even in the country of the blessed Yeats’s characters find no escape from restless movement” (78). Miller notes that there is an outer and inner instability which makes Yeats resort “to nature as the abiding place of an immanent spiritual force,” yet peace and stability, safety and immunity are nowhere to be found (77). This immanently divine world, according to Miller, is not “a Platonic place of permanence and peace” but one of “instability and turbulence […] all outside it, though it belongs to God, is in motion. It is ‘the wind among the Reeds,’ a lonely wandering of spirit, now here, now there, without direction or purpose” (Ibid.). The supernatural is blowing through earth’s atoms “a tumultuous force not a unitary stillness,” perpetually renewing all quests (Ibid.).

Miller’s reading seems most adequate in that he views the wandering and the turbulence as perpetual – not as directed towards a destructive end, not attached to a telos, as most critics do. Many critics read The Wind Among the Reeds along the lines of “[a]pocalypsism” which they see in tune with the wider artistic world of the European fin de siècle (Brown [1999] 112, Murphy 65-86,
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Adams 72, Putzel 202). The world is perpetually consumed by destructive forces, but these forces have already been established as divine in *The Rose*, especially in “To Ireland in the coming Time.” God is equated with “truth’s consuming extasy” (*VP* 139). The voices in the wind, in *The Wind Among the Reeds* are giving ambivalent messages, they make bleak and desolating predictions: “your breast shall not lie on the breast / of your beloved in sleep” (*VP* 165). Yet at the same time, these voices can also be ‘sweet’. The apocalypse disappears from the horizon as destruction and desolation become accepted as part of living presence, it is in the here and now of *The Wind Among the Reeds*, that “The Horses of Disaster plunge in the heavy clay” (“He bids his Beloved be at Peace” *VP* 154).

Some critics portray this collection as a merely intellectual exercise. Paul de Man for example reduces the collection to a stylistic problem: “what looks like romantic agony is primarily a symptom of a stylistic problem common to all post-romantic poetry,” namely “the unresolved conflict between image and emblem” (*Rhetoric of Romanticism* 177). De Man tries to locate the collection between eschatology and apocalypse. “[T]he voice of god has again been heard” is attested by the fact that the images in the Great Memory store his presence (*Ibid.*). Yet, he wonders why the collection does not decide for the eschatological side of things, but drops into apocalyptic “nihilism” and becomes a “poetry of terror and annihilation” (*Ibid.*). Arguably, though, it does not do this. *The Wind Among the Reeds* is a sensuous celebration of rich imaginative poetics. Intense emotion, haunting presences and exquisite lyrical poetry whirl around the reader making sure that the apocalypse is only one impression among many, and is counterbalanced with images of perpetual harmony: “Your mother Eire is always young, / dew ever shining and twilight grey; / though hope fall from you and love decay, / burning in fires of a slanderous tongue” (*VP* 148). This stanza of “Into the Twilight” is juxtaposing *individual* perishing with the eternal youth of a super-personal, mythic land.

Murphy observes, that in this volume, Yeats is concerned with the “conflict of opposites [...] the interplay of many kinds of opposite pairs” (66f). These are the instances Murphy selects:

```
And never was piping so sad,
And never was piping so gay.
The silver apples of the moon
The golden apples of the sun.
I am no more with life and death
The banners of East and West,
Until he found with laughter and with tears,
Lilies of death-pale hope, roses of passionate dream.
Come clear of the nets of wrong and right (67).
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I would suggest that these polarities are in a way annihilated in the enumeration. The imperative of “Into the Twilight,” “Come clear of the nets of wrong and right;” signals a liberation from binary oppositions. Already here, it seems, there is the imperative voice urging the reader to be indifferent to them. Life ‘runs through many changes’ and opposites are rubbing each other up and consume each other. Piping is sad and gay at the same time, laughter and tears, sun and moon, life and death are within each other, hence, keeping them apart creates conflict, and gives humanity, fuelled by the desire to avoid one and attain the other, trouble. The twilight – in this
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regard – is a zone of non-differentiation, a refuge where the binaries are free to coincide. Letting be, not deciding, unanimity towards change – these are the attitudes which Yeats offers against the forces which knead the protagonists of *The Wind Among the Reeds*:

Come, heart, where hill is heaped upon hill:  
For there the mystical brotherhood  
Of sun and moon and hollow and wood  
And river and stream work out their will (VP 149);

Here, the speaker invites the heart to enter a zone, in which not the human but the collective, environmental will is enacted in the unity of a “mystical brotherhood.” The heavenly bodies and earth’s ecosystems are working together their will. This vision, however does not offer an Arcadian escape, as still love is “less kind than the grey twilight.” (Ibid.)

De Man cannot be followed when he states that “the ‘flaming word of God’ is still throughout his poetry, nothing more than “the fear of death”, and “death’s paralysis” is tangible in “the stilted stiffness of the allegorical language” (Ibid.).

In the preceding chapters, numerous instances were cited in which Yeats speaks out against allegory, as indeed he is averted to notions of representation. *The Wind Among the Reeds* consequently, works with symbols which are continuous, in addressing the wind and its voices as presence it leaves the realm of allegory and enters the realm of ritual and community. The wind is more than an allegory. David Abram in *Becoming Animal* (2010) describes the wind in a way which seems to come very close to the character of the wind in *The Wind Among the Reeds*

Our bodies witness this gradual release of leaves, this stripping away of colour from the gray, skeletal limbs, and cannot help but feel that the animating life of things is slipping off into the air – that the wind moaning in our ears is composed of innumerable spirits leaving their visible bodies behind. We feel enveloped by a rushing crowd of unseen essences – sighing whooshing lives that reveal themselves to us only as fleeting smells, or by a momentary turbulence of dust and spinning leaves. The wind is haunted, alive. […] For wind is moodiness, personified, altering on a whim, recklessly transgressing the boundaries between places, between beings, between inner and outer worlds. The unruly poltergeist of our collective mental climate, wind, after all, is the ancient and ever-present source of the word “spirit” and “psyche.” It is the sacred ‘ruach’ of the ancient Hebrews, the invisible rushing-spirit that lends its life to the visible world; it is the Latin ‘anima,’ the soulful wind that animates all breathing beings (all animals) (148f).

There is no need to ‘set aside’ sacred places in the face of this contagious wind, which communicates’ beings and voices, carrying leaves, pollen, scents, inducing moods. The wind in Yeats is cosmic, older than earth in being “older than changing of nights and day” (VP 162) personified in “The Lover asks Forgiveness for his many moods” and addressed “O Winds,” these winds full of murmuring and longing are coming both “from marble cities loud with tabors of old” and from “dove-grey faery lands,” making no difference between a historical and a mythic past (Ibid.). The heart, itself, and the wind are continuous, as in the same poem the odal apostrophe personifies the hearts as either attributes or properties of the elements (“O Hearts of wind-blown flame!”), creating a communal, environmental circulation (Ibid.).
4. Delimiting the Sacred

The elements and landscapes are already desolate, no apocalypse other than the desolation past and present is to be expected. “I wander by the edge / Of this desolate lake” the speaker confesses in “He hears the Crying of the Sedge” (VP 165). Destruction passes with the wind, yet it is not feared but there is a strange sense of revelry in being exposed and depleted by these winds:

Desolate winds that cry over the wandering sea
Desolate winds that beat the doors of Heaven and beat
The doors of Hell and blow there many a whimpering ghost;
O heart the winds have shaken, the unappeasable host
Is comelier than candles at Mother Mary’s feet (VP 147).

In “The Unappeasable Host” the wind, past any form of destruction is an all-fusing energy. And again, Yeats employs self-contradicting ambiguity in the use of the verb “beat” – are the powers banging on the doors of Heaven and Hell or are they overcoming them? The latter seems implied in the fact that a superlative ends the poem, although ‘comely’ is an oddly quaint adjective to bestow on such terrible forces. The wind is a terrible beauty. Terrible in exposing the world to desolation, and beautiful in transforming, connecting and keeping it in the whirling dance of existence.

Allen R. Grossmann in his book length study Poetic Knowledge in the Early Yeats, a study of The Wind Among the Reeds (1969) claims that this collection “represents a poetic moment in which the determining conditions both of Yeats’ later writing and of the modern movement in poetry can be seen with singular clarity” (v). Not only “the adaptation to the uses of poetry of the Wisdom tradition,” however, but also the paradoxical unity of an environmental self via the destruction of the discreet boundaries of the individual human self are central to Yeats’ modernism. J. Hillis Miller, however, cannot be followed when he believes that there is a compulsion to “escape the fluttering of the beach leaves and the turbulent spiritual energy they reveal” (79). Yeats in his notes on The Wind among the Reeds insists that the poems were born out of “images from Irish folk-lore” which had become “true symbols” born out of “moments of vision” and that they “took upon themselves what seemed a life of their own” (VP 800). The paradox of the inviolate Rose, blown hither and thither embodies the aspectual unity of eternity and temporal perishing. The same paradox can be found in the wind itself, which is depicted as the profane, elemental presence as well as the all connecting all-pervading divine breath of earth brimming with ghosts, yet there is also the storm of poetic inspiration. In his notes on “The Host of the Air” Yeats mentions two Gaelic names, the *Sluagh Sidhe* and the *Sluagh Gnaith*, both sound very much alike, one is the host of the otherworldly Sidhe and one the host of the air, *gnaith* being the word in modern Irish for wind (VP 803). It is the profane wind which plucks the petals of the inviolate rose and which comes between a man and his hope and deed. Most iconic, in this regard is “Maid Quiet” a poem which Yeats describes as a symbolic embodiment of the sun “pursuing clouds, or cold, or darkness,” as the solar hero desires “the day, when they, fragments of ancestral darkness, will overthrow the world. The desire of the woman, the flying darkness, it is all one!” (Jeffares A Commentary on the Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats 81)
4. Delimiting the Sacred

Where has Maid Quiet gone to,
Nodding her russet hood?
The winds that awakened the stars
Are blowing through my blood.
O how could I be so calm
When she rose up to depart?
Now words that called up the lightning
Are hurtling through my heart (VP 171).

The wind connects everything by piercing it and destroying its discreetness. The cosmogonic force that spun the stars into wakefulness does not politely stop at the boundary of the body, it does not merely blow through the speaker’s lungs but through his blood. The bodily circulation and the cosmos are fused into one. The human self, however, experiences this as violation, as the same powers that generate lightning are not only the life-giving pulsing of energy in the sinus node but the violent forceful attack “hurtling through” the heart. Yeats violates the homely image of the heart as that which one owns privately, sheltered inside. As the heart was cast out into rhymes and is seen passing away with the rhymes in “To Ireland in the Coming times” The heart, here, is exposed and laid open to the passage of violent forces. Throughout Yeats’ poetry, the heart is often characterised as ‘wild’ or ‘growing wild.’ The heart is throughout an extended, environmental circulation. The wind goes right through it and with it the host of the air.

In the iconic opening poem, “The Hosting of the Sidhe” the otherworldly host is passing between two prominent sites in the ancestral landscape: mountains which are traditionally thought to have doors to the otherworld. They do, however, also ride straight through and “between” the observer. The otherworldly riders are on a campaign, they are making a direct address: “Empty your heart of its mortal dream,” singing an otherworldly song of themselves, calling themselves into sensuous presence from out of the wakeful winds and the whirling leaves:

The host is rushing ’twixt night and day,
And where is there hope or deed as fair?
Caolte tossing his burning hair,
And Niamh calling Away, come away (VP 141)

It is not easily apparent, how one could experience Yeats’s early poetry, and come to the conclusion, as OonaFrawley does, that “in his early poetry” Yeats attempted “the futile reconstruction of the perfect world of his Sligo childhood” (80).

Yeats’ early poetry uproots certainties and comfortable projections. It abounds with danger and exposes to presences that are not necessarily benign. The land’s supernatural forces announce themselves with the forcefulness of a threat:

And if any gaze on our rushing band,
We come between him and the deed of his hand
We come between him and the hope in his heart (VP 141)

It is not easy to understand how readers find in it represented the “eternal trouble-free dreamland of the fairies” (Garatt Modern Irish Poetry 29). Steven Putzel claims that “Niamh’s call attempts to
break down the objective world, to transmute the diachronic time that both protects and imprisons the speaker and the reader” (168). But remembering that this poem was written to conclude *The Celtic Twilight* we may ask – what objective world? The world in early Yeats’s poetry is a wavering texture of subjective experience and super/natural presences, there is no objectivity to be broken. Mythical Niamh and Caoilte dare riding straight through the landscape without explanation or apology to the rational mind. They are riding as a matter of fact. Their occurrence is no violent rupture of the chronological order of time by a revelatory moment. Their riding is part of the inhabited landscape. The host is on a habitual ride between two humanly signified places, Knocknaree and Clooth na Bare. Their riding adheres to chronological progression, yet they disturb the understanding of the human self and –body that “imprisons the speaker and the reader” (Ibid.). The spatial cohesion of the Cartesian self, the cohesion of the deed and the hand that executes it, the hope and the heart that fosters it are torn apart. The threat of the host, passing destructively through body and self is extended to the reader. In keeping with the motto Yeats adopted from Blake’s *Four Zoas* for *Crossways*, the souls, here, are threshed from their bodily husks by the wind and its supernatural host. The wind goes straight through the egotic cohesions, leaving “him” rendered from his human attributes and actions. The poem does not present one speaker but a community. The description of events reported by a narrating voice and the italicised speaking of the Sidhe each are given 8 lines. The passionate song of the Sidhe is lodged in the middle, so that even structurally they “come between.” The Host is given the last word, overpowering the reporting voice, indicated by the italicised “Away, come Away.” The aural impression of the passage of the Sidhe is of rhythmic gusts of wind the alliterative – h –  and – m – give the impression of a sonorous droning and gusting that resembles the sound of galloping horses.

Allen Grossmann observes the “genetic heterogeneity” in the first section of *The Wind Among the Reeds* “there is a very wide spectrum of stylistic variation, reflecting that struggle for a unity of speech which is the problem of a poet in a complex culture” (14). A “threat of uncontrollable energy is indicated by a rhythm based on strong distinction between stressed and unstressed syllables and the division of utterance into breathless ejaculation and caesurae” meanwhile opposed to this style there is an Ossianic “trance style” characterised by “many learned techniques of reverie” (14f). This style, according to Grossmann, can be seen in “The Everlasting Voices” in which each word bears “the same indefinite weight of emotion” and is influenced by French symbolism and French syllabic metres (15). The wind is the prime phenomenon of the environmental self, it crosses through a human’s innermost being as a paradox of inviolate eternal being and its temporal desolation encountering as well as embracing the destruction of earthly beings: In keeping with Boehmian doctrine, the inviolate, a-temporal unity is poured into the temporal and devastating force of the wind, yet it is not formulated as doctrine but as apostrophe and question: “Surely, thine hour has come, thy great wind blows, / Far-off, most secret, and inviolate Rose?” – leaving space for consideration, the listening out of the reader for an individual answer (*VP* 170).

However, in “The Everlasting Voices” this paradoxical presence of eternity within perishable creatures and in the wind is affirmed beyond doubt: “Have you not heard that our
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hearts are old, / That you call in birds, in wind on the hill, / in shaken boughs, in tide on the
shore?” (VP 141) The speaker’s question sounds mildly upset, troubled by the voices’ lack of
regard for the “old” human heart, which addresses these powers and asks them to leave humanity
alone. “Go to the guards of the heavenly fold / And bid them wander, obeying your will,”
implies that humanity is worn out in wandering and service to these “sweet everlasting voices.”
(Ibid.) Their presence appears as abundantly clear and even oppressive in that the speaker asks
them to be silent. In a way, this continues the chorus of “The Madness of King Goll” in which
the beech-leaves refuse to hush. The wind is bothersome, disturbing and full of voices. Whereas
most poetic apostrophes to the everlasting, the muse or the angels, in Romantic or Classic poetry
beg for inspiration, beg for presence, vision, voice or guidance, here, their presence is so certain
and so intense as to be asked to be quiet.

In its earlier editions, the single poems The Wind Among the Reeds were spoken by different
fictional characters that are laced through the entirety of Yeats’ oeuvre. In the original version of
The Wind among the Reeds, as published by Elkin Mathews (London 1899), it is Aedh who hears the
cry of the Sedge, and Michael Robartes who asks his lover’s forgiveness for his many moods.
Yeats characterises them “more as principles of mind than as actual personages” (VP 803). And
claims that

It is probable that only students of the magical tradition will understand me
when I say that ‘Michael Robartes’ is fire reflected on water, and that Hanrahan
is fire blown by wind, and that Aedh, whose name is not merely the Irish form
of Hugh, but the Irish for fire, is fire burning by itself. To put it in a different
way, Hanrahan is the simplicity of an imagination too changeable to gather
permanent possessions, or the adoration of the shepherds; and Michael
Robartes is the pride of the imagination brooding upon the greatness of its
possessions, or the adoration of the Magi; while Aedh is the myrrh and
frankincense that the imagination offers continually before all that it loves”
(Ibid.).

Yeats’ syncretism is forming a unity of Irish myth, embracing central moments of the birth of
Christ, alchemical symbols and natural elements. A heterogeneous and heterodox image of a
continuity between personages, hovering on the edge between myth, history and imagination is
formed which is, then, equated with different functioning principles of the imagination. It is
interesting to note that in his later revisions the personages disappeared and gave way to titles
which are at once more abstract and more emotionally evocative than the names of the
personages. “The Lover” and “he” is open to the reader’s imagination, more available to his
store-hold of sensuous associations, giving the poems a greater immediacy. Yeats claims that “An
object is sensuous if I relate it to myself, ‘my fire’ ‘my chair’, etc., but it is concrete if I say, ‘a chair’
‘a fire’, and abstract if I but speak of it as the representative of a class – ‘the chair, the fire’ etc”
(AVA 14). In this sense the titles of The Wind Among the Reeds are abstract, yet bear more
potential to become sensuous objects for the reader, ready to be charged with emotional
associations, than in their original ascription to mythic/imaginary/occult personae.
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4.3.1.1. Comparing Yeats’ and Rilke’s Wind

“Sturm,” a poem Rilke wrote in the autumn of 1904 on a stay in Sweden, conceives of the wind in a similar way to Yeats’ conception in *The Wind Among the Reeds*, as an ancestral wind, which connects the presence to the historical and mythic past, as a contagious force which exposes and desolates the speaker, and finally turns the individual self into an environmental self.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sturm</th>
<th>Storm</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wenn die Wolken, von Stürmen geschlagen, jagen:</td>
<td>When the clouds, beaten by storms, chase:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Himmel von hundert Tagen</td>
<td>Heavens/skies of a hundred days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dann fühl ich dich, Hetman, von fern (der du deine Kosaken gern zu dem größten Herrn führen wolltest).</td>
<td>Then I feel you from afar, Hetman (you would have liked to lead your Cossacks to the greatest of lords).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deinen waagrechten Nacken fühl ich, Mazeppa.</td>
<td>Your vertical neck I feel, Mazeppa.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dann bin auch ich an das rasende Rennen eines rauchenden Rückens gebunden; alle Dinge sind mir verschwunden, nur die Himmel kann ich erkennen:</td>
<td>Then I, too, am tethered to the racing chase of a smoldering/steaming back; all things have disappeared to me, Only the heavens/skies I recognise:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Überdunkelt und überschienen lieg ich flach unter ihnen, wie Ebenen liegen; meine Augen sind offen wie Teiche, und in ihnen flüchtet das gleiche Fliegen. (ll’ 1 285)</td>
<td>Darkened and shone upon /exceeded by radiance, I lie flat beneath them, as plains lie; my eyes are open like ponds and in them the exact same flight is fleeing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Rilke in Pan-Slavic mood takes up the history of Mazeppa, which had by his time become “a commonplace of the European imagination” (Brodsky *Rainer Maria Rilke* 75). Byron had written a story about him and Brecht in 1927 wrote a ballad dedicated to the Ukranian rebel chief. Rilke “envisions the rebellious Cossack chief Mazeppa, who joined forces with Charles XII to fight the Russians in 1709” (Ibid.). Dissatisfied with the tsar’s politics towards the farmers and the Cossacks, Mazeppa tries to muster an army to support the Swedish king to storm Petersburg but the plan fails. Rilke, however, begins with an episode from before Mazeppa’s time as Hetman (the Slavonic title of chieftain). As a young man he served as page at the Polish king’s court and was caught being intimate with the wife of a magnate. He was then tied to the back of his own horse and the horse was set free. Rilke fuses the temporal layers of history. We meet the successful chieftain first and then are introduced to him on steaming horseback. It thus appears as if the relentless chase of a human tied to the back of a horse describes the hero’s entire life as a violent, harrowing race. Yet in the direct address, the “stiff neck” of the dead hero becomes tangible in the wind, a supernatural presence, no less violent than Yeats’s Sidhe.

The speaker envisions the storm as something which speeds the slow progression of time, to bring the past into the present and tether the self helplessly to an animal. The self in the last
stanza becomes passive like a pond, and the chase of clouds and storms does not merely happen outside, but is happening within the speaker, who is instantiated by the same eternal powers.

In 1901, Rilke writes a cycle of eight poems titled “Out of a Stormy Night” [“Aus einer Sturmnacht”], which bear remarkable resemblance to Yeats’ conception of the wind in *The Wind Among the Reeds*. In Yeats the co-presence of different temporal dimensions, the voices of the living the dead, the animals and the supernatural are present in the wind. Likewise, in Rilke:

| Die Nacht, vom wachsenden Sturme bewegt,       | The night, moved by the growing storm,                                      |
| wie wird sie auf einmal weit - ,               | suddenly becomes wide - ,                                                   |
| als bleibe sie sonst zusammengelegt            | as if otherwise it remained enfolded in the petty folds of time.           |
| in die kleinklichen Falten der Zeit.           | Where the stars withstand her, she doesn’t end                            |
| Wo die Sterne ihr wehren, dort endet sie nicht | and doesn’t begin in the middle of the wood                               |
| und beginnt nicht mitten im Wald              | and not in my face and not in your figure                                 |
| und nicht an meinem Angesicht                 |                                                                      |
| und nicht mit deiner Gestalt. (W 1 333)       |                                                                      |

The night is imagined as a cloth which otherwise remains furled but through the wind is spread out. The vastness of darkness is expressed in negatives, which affirm nights’ endlessness by refusing to name a limit. Similar to the primordial darkness in Yeats’s collection, embodied by Maid Quiet and the boar without bristles, in Rilke night is “the only reality for millennia” [“die Nacht die einzige Wirklichkeit / seit Jahrtausenden”] (Ibid.).

In Rilkes “Aus einer Sturmnacht” it is possible to encounter the supernatural presence of the future, coming ones [“In solchen Nächten kannst Du in den Gassen / Zukünftigen begegnen”]. They do not recognise “you” and pass by. Conversation is not possible as to them the speaker believes he would be as one long gone, decomposed a long time ago [“langverwest”] (W 1 334). Rilke envisions the prisons opening up and the prisoners fleeing into a personified wood on such stormy nights. Disrupting the solidity of the human individual self like in “The Hosting of the Sidhe,” the storm-born prisoners march with soft laughter through the nightmares of their wards despising their violence [Und durch die bösen Träume der Wächter / gehn mit leisem Gelächter / die Verächter ihrer Gewalt”] (Ibid.). The rhyme fuses antithetical poles, via the acoustic force of laughter. Those who despise violence are disturbing those who commit violence from the inside, such is the power of the storm.

Violence is made explicit in the third piece of the cycle in which the storm consumes a burning opera house as in the violent stampede the fleeing audience is dying, ravished in both a literal and a metaphorical sense, by music and by fire [“und es reißt sie mit”] (W 1 335). But in this stormy night also the hearts of the dead begin to beat again in their sarcophagi. A dome’s walls are beginning to tremble as if there were giant, blind turtles at its foundations which are beginning to move. [“als trügen seinen gründenden Granit / blinde Schildkröten, die sich rühren”] (Ibid.). Thus, life and death, Christian and Eastern foundations are fused and shaken.
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4.3.1.2. Comparing Yeats’ and Rilke’s ‘Hair’

Finally, one of the most remarkable similarities between Rilke’s and Yeats’ interpretation of the wind is the role of hair. Paul Elmer More, in his essay “Two poets of the Irish Movement” (1940), of which an excerpt is printed in A. Norman Jeffares W. B. Yeats (1987), bearing the amusing title “Paul Elmer Moore finds Yeats troubling and unwholesome” (1922). Elmer More titles the Gaelic Revival “a movement of defeat,” because after perusing the entirety of his oeuvre he finds “a sense of failure and decay rather than mastery and growth” (1922). It “saddened [him] a little” to find no emotional edification, as Yeats’s art did not provide the expected soothing Celtic lamentation but the same decadence that swept France (Ibid.). These misgivings did not deter Elmer More from counting the instances of “hair” in The Wind Among the Reeds. He finds 23 examples of dim, heavy, shaken out hair, bound or unbound, hair which the speaker repeatedly requests to be loosened (1923). We may add hair that is shaken out and serves as a protection against the raging storm.

Loosened hair signals continuity between individual self and environment. The “eminently physical” ‘wandering tress’ of hair mingles with the physical world (Unterecker A Reader’s Guide to William Butler Yeats 92). It can even provide shelter: “Such a ‘hair-tent’ (Professor Tindall’s phrase) also protects the lover […] from the Shadowy Horses of disaster” (Ibid.). Unterecker enumerates instances in which the loosened hair indicates an uncertain boundedness between the human body and the environment:

The jester of ‘The Cap and Bells’ has a heart made eloquent by the thought ‘of a flutter of flower-like hair,’ and when his lady lays cap and bells on her bosom ‘Under a cloud of her hair,’ his heart and soul stand singing before her. ‘And the hair was a folded flower.’ When in ‘The Lover asks Forgivness because of his Many Moods’ he pleads that his mistress ‘crumple the rose’ in her hair and cover ‘the pale blossoms’ of her breast with her ‘dim heavy hair’ (93).

Loosened, long hair physically extends into the environment, visibly so in strong winds. Identified with cloud and flower, the hair in The Wind Among the Reeds is not only human, since also the Sidhe’s hair is loosened. The loosened hair in Yeats spans the distance between eroticism and aesthetic beauty, self and other, body and cosmos.

The hair and the reeds waving in the wind become indistinguishable. Death is no disruption no reason to be fearful. In “He wishes his Beloved were dead”

Were you but lying cold and dead,
And lights were paling out of the West,
You would come hither, and bend your head,
And I would lay my head on your breast;
And you would murmur tender words,
Forgiving me, because you were dead:
Nor would you rise and hasten away,
Though you have the will of wild birds,
But know your hair was bound and wound
About the stars and moon and sun:
O would, beloved, that you lay
Under the dock-leaves in the ground, while lights were paling one by one (VP 175).

Not only is the beloved, who is here imagined dead, still physically present and finally available for the lover, merged symbolically, as in so many of Yeats’ images of the dead-live threshold, with the “wild birds,” but her hair is now cosmic and unlimited. It is “bound and wound” around the stars, one with the mystical environmental brotherhood. There is factually no difference in vitality between the living and the dead. The beloved is imagined moving close, inclining her head, executing those longed for motions and emotions of consent to amorous union. She is pictured as giving herself and resting because there is no loss to be encountered: The beloved is paradoxically freed in death and yet fixed, and thus present to the lover. Beyond the confines of the human body, her hair becomes universally bound up with the fate of the heavenly bodies. It does not escape their gravitational pull.

However, it does not seem as if Yeats in The Wind Among the Reeds “deliberately cultivates the unattainability of the sexual object, preferring to imagine her dead and infinite than to imagine her achieved in her mortal and therefore finite body” (Grossmann 34). Grossmann overlooks the fact that there is union and that this union is imagined as a physical union in sensual images, placing the lover’s head on his beloved’s breast, which remains impossible in so many other poems. Though the lover has disappeared as limited finite body and object of affection, she or it has not disappeared as responsive partner within union. She is now one with the landscape and the planet. Although Allan Grossmann delivers a precise and valuable study of the alchemical symbols and personages in the early versions of The Wind among the Reeds, his bias towards the volume’s intellectual and occult pursuits makes him focus less on the dense sensuous immediacy of the lyrical demands, the vivacious rhythms and imperatives. The observation that Yeats shifted from an emotional to an intellectual understanding of the symbol, which in turn describes the shift between the early and middle period, cannot be followed. An “objectification of the relation to the symbol” does not take place (26). “The problem of emotion for which he could find no effective mode of transcendence” is tackled not abandoned (Ibid.).

Yeats and Rilke are the two prime modernists of the address, the odal O, the figuration of the jaw dropped in awe the figure zero of the onset of breath, in which all song originates. This odal apostrophe, the address of a personified other, is a mouth pushed open by emotion. Echoing Boehmian continuity of word, sound and existence, Yeats insists:

All sounds, all colours, all forms, either because of their pre-ordained energies or because of long association evoke indefinable and yet precise emotions, or, as I prefer to think, call down upon us certain disembodied powers, whose footsteps over our hearts are called emotions, and when sound and colour and form are in a musical relation, a beautiful relation to one another, they become as it were, one sound, one colour, one form and evoke an emotion that is made out of their distinct evocation and yet it is an emotion (E&I 156f).

Self, all through the collection, as has been argued, is environmental. The moods as well as the sudden gusts of wind, inspiration and emotion are circulating in the vast body of nature, at one with the supernatural and the realm of the dead, continuous with the store-hold of memories and images. This wind is not necessarily apocalyptic, though the experience of breaking out of an
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individuated, closed off self may be cataclysmic. It is not the end of the world per se but the end of a world as we know it. What ends in “He hears the cry of the sedge” is a world of fixtures and dichotomies. First of all, a human perceives the everlasting voices in the reeds. Telling him of an axle, keeping the stars in their round and banners of East and West “frustrating by their conflict the transformation of mortal into immortal” (Grossmann 134). The world which is ended by the harrowing wind is the world of distances and oppositions. It is overcome in the death of the lover, whose hair ties earth to the stars into meandering continuity. Likewise the hair of the dying, in Rilke’s “Aus einer Sturmnacht” exceeds the human frame:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>In solchen Nächten werden die Sterbenden klar, greifen sich leise ins wachsende Haar, dessen Halme aus ihres Schädels Schwäche in diesen langen Tagen treiben, als wollten sie über der Oberfläche des Todes bleiben. Ihre Gebärde geht durch das Haus als wenn überall Spiegel hingen; und sie geben - mit diesem Graben in ihren Haaren - Kräfte aus, die sie in Jahren gesammelt haben, welche vergingen. (W 1 336)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In such nights the dying ones become clear, silently they grasp their growing hair, whose stalks are sprouting out of the weakness of their skull in these long days as if they wanted to stay above the surface of death. Their gesture walks through the house as if there were mirrors everywhere; and they expend – with this digging in their hair – energies they accumulated in these years Which passed.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The hair is alive and growing from the confines of the dying body metaphorically identified with stalks of grass or grain. Raking their hair with their hands becomes equal to farming the land, thus Rilke indicates environmental unity through death. This, I would argue, is the paradoxical notion of unity in both Rilke and Yeats, which goes through destruction to arrive at an earthly unity. The cosmogonic forces instantiate and break the body, setting it free into endless traces, not annihilating it. Voice and agency are kept and are shared within a wider environmental selfhood, in which the dead, the animals and the supernatural beings partake.

In the following, the discussion of Yeats’s notion of Unity of Being started in chapter two will be taken up again to show how both contingency and destitution are part of the concept. It is never a raw, Dionysian delight in destruction, helping the will to overcome its boundaries but it is a voluntary submission of the individual to the forces that make, alter and break the world.

4.3.3. The Community of A Vision

This chapter will explore Yeats’s occult system of A Vision with regard to its underlying notion of self – even if, due to the limiting frame of this thesis, the discussion can only be brief. Although the work is called A Vision, the occult system, both as a finished book and as a process of becoming, has never forsaken the ‘twilight’ of the epistemological, authorial and ontological uncertainties that shape Yeats’s early works. Presences and voices, dehiscence within the
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interrogating and mediumistically receiving self, messages and disturbances are central to the emergence of the book.

In October 1917, a few days after the Yeatses were married, George Yeats attempted automatic writing, a practice in which the writing hand is released from the conscious mind and allowed to glide over a sheet of paper. Yeats later reported that his wife ‘surprised’ him with the gift of the automatic script, but beyond making a delightful discovery George Yeats may have “salvaged a near disaster,” according to the editors’ introduction to A Vision (1925) (xxvi). Yeats felt severely insecure and half-way remorseful over the marriage. He had only shortly before proposed (yet again) to Maud Gonne and shortly thereafter to her daughter Isol R. But was both times rejected. The presence of the beautiful, erudite and devoted Georgie Hyde Lees, although she was to fundamentally “renew him as a man and artist,” could not initially convince Yeats that he had made the right decision (Brown 1999, 249). The marriage succeeded, though, and A Vision is not at least a monument to their shared interests and backgrounds: “WBY and GY were seasoned occultists, with considerable knowledge of such areas of inquiry as astrology, Western esotericism, folk beliefs, and spiritualism (AVA xxvi). The mediumistic reception of ‘communications’ by a relaxed mind, unoccupied by intellect, could not have resulted in the book and its occult system without this background, and not without “organized method” (AVA xxvi). Through George’s mediumistic reception of messages and W. B. Yeats’s questions, the system evolved just as much as through meticulous cleaning up – clarifying questions to answer an issue half-understood, organizing and structuring material, as well as scheduling their sessions. The system might have been “external to either of its principal investigators,” it is nevertheless “intrinsically associated” with their “wills and subconscious desires” (AVA xxvii). Everything was at issue in their “conversing with their spirit ‘communicators’ from cosmically abstract topics to […] deeply intimate matters” (AVA xxviii). The work was prolific: the Yeatses created about 3,600 pages of script, and notebooks full of messages “received in trance or ‘sleep’” (AVA 219).

Like Rilke, Yeats was interested and engaged in spiritualism and occult practices, though both were disinclined towards the shallow, popular sensationalism that accompanied the awakening public interest in Europe. Both Yeats and his wife were

263 Margaret Mills Harper views the automatic script as “perform[ing] various uncertainties about the willed self, the male and female dynamics of co-authorship, the creations (conscious or not) of the human brain in a reality external to them. A Vision enacts “various ontological as well as epistemological difficulties of their time with great precision” (2006 180). The automatic script, according to Harper, hovers “uncertainly in a blurred zone among the possibilities that it is a mechanization of human activity or fakery” (169).

264 The Yeatses worked together on the philosophy almost daily for more than two years, in a number of different locations, through events including the Great War and the Irish war of independence, as well as the births of their two children. […] The intense sessions continued until the spring of 1920, when, on an American lecture tour, the Yeatses were informed by Dionertes that he preferred “other methods -sleeps” (YVP 2:539, AVA xxviii). More than a decade after these intense years in the young married life of the Yeatses, the revisions were still ongoing and in 1937 the revised edition was published, which “is so different from I le earlier text that it may effectively be regarded as a separate work” (AVA xxiii).
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active astrologers; they also read tarot cards, practiced divination, and studied numerology. WBY in particular had attended a number of séances and studied psychic currencies from ghost stories to religious miracles. Automatic writing itself was far from new to them. A number of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century spiritualists used the technique, notable among them William Stainton Moses, one of the founders of the Society for Psychical Research, to which organization WBY belonged from 1913 to 1928 (xxix).

A Vision was thus derived dynamically and dialogically. Its author was “not a unified entity: there is both explanation and instruction, argument and agreement, a sense of monologue or even diatribe, as well as a sense of conversation or even just several voices speaking all at once” (xxii). The Yeatses called the supernatural presences which found expression through George’s script or speech ‘instructors’ and ‘communicators” though often enough the process was less than straight-forward, as these instructors could be ill-informed, motivated by their own agenda and not answering questions directly or might be right out misleading. Such agencies were called “frustrators.” The book that emerges out of this communal process is complex and marked by paradoxes, it is “comedy and tragedy: a grave and playful, poetic and geometric, concrete and abstract, earnest and slippery work, aiming to be all at once a work of theoretical history, an esoteric philosophy, an aesthetic symbology, a psychological schema, and a sacred book” (AV/A xxiv). Yeats’s works in the twenties and beyond are consequently “enmeshed in the net cast by A Vision” (Ibid.).

The book is not presented as a piece of scholarship. It comes with a fictional frame, not entirely void of humour. In fact, the introduction of the 1925 edition of A Vision is set up as a humorous hoax. Yeats pens for his own fictional character Owen Aherne a diatribe against the unjust Mr. Yeats for giving “the name of Owen Aherne and Michael Robartes to fictitious characters, and made those characters live through events that were a travesty of real events” (AV/A lviii.). The fictional Aherne then sets out to tell the story of the book’s emergence. In a bibliophile manner and with the air of authority of the Initiate Aherne accounts how Michael Robartes in his lodgings in Cracow found a book called Speculum Angelorum et Hominorum by a certain Giraldus, printed “in Cracow in 1594, a good many years before the celebrated Cracow publications and was of very much earlier style” (AV/A lxi). The volume had been left by “an unfrocked priest who had left with a troupe of gypsies” and been deprived of its middle part by the chamber maid who lighted a fire with the pages. What remains is laboriously pieced together from the Latin by Robartes. Then, Robartes is reported to have travelled “towards Damascus” and in an undefined location he finds an imaginary Arab tribe, the Judwalis, whose orally transmitted doctrine, especially certain diagrams were “drawn by old religious men upon the sands, […] these diagrams were in many cases identical with those in the Speculum […]” (lxii). When Robartes meets Aherne to tell him of the book he brings

diagrams and notes, and began explaining their general drift. The sheets of paper which were often soiled and torn were rolled up in a bit of old camel skin and tied in bundles with bits of cord and bits of an old shoe-lace. This bundle, he explained, described the mathematical law of history, that bundle the adventure of the soul after death, that other the interaction between the living

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and the dead and so on. He saw that I was interested and asked if I would
arrange them for publication (AV 4 lixi).

Aherne then describes how he is entrusted with the material and how after writing 80 odd pages
of an exploration, Robartes rebukes him for having interpreted the system as “as a form of
Christianity.” (AV A lixii) At which Aherne counters that there is nothing incompatible between
the idea of disincarnate states of the soul and reincarnation in Christianity, quoting, e.g., Clements
of Alexandria. Yet Robartes has decided to take the material to Yeats, despite all disagreements,
because he is a lyric poet, primarily interested in expression. Since he is aligned with “intellectual
belief” rather than “moral faith,” the “desert geometry will take care of the truth” (AV A lixii).
Yeats presents us with a fictional account of the emergence of an occult Sacred Book, which sees
the anthropologists’ as well as the scholar’s position as part of a virtual phantasmagoria. He
employs the rhetorics of establishing credibility, yet presents his readers with mock-accuracies,
heterodoxies, obliteration, bibliophilia and hear-say. The very structure of the amalgamation of
the field researcher’s notes, of living, oral Eastern traditions, smudged and bound in camel-skin
and the half-torn book of learned Western medieval occult texts frames the system of A Vision
already as a heterodox, imaginatively and learnedly assembled hybrid ‘corpus.’ Surely, this body
questions the (purely) academic approach. As Charles Armstrong (establishing a questioning
frame for his article “Classical Philosophy in Yeats’s A Vision” (2012) notes:

poetry is less than simply affirmative of the Platonic tradition. Arguably,
though, such a neat division presupposes that one reads A Vision as a
straightforward positing of doctrine, devoid of any of the irony and
ambivalence found in Yeats’s literary work. Even the central chapters would
seem to be informed with a gentle sense of irony, as Yeats—more than once
misspelling John Burnet’s name, misquoting various sources, and even mixing
up Heraclitus and Empedocles on one occasion—engages in an obtuse parody
of scholarly prose (97).

Yet beyond the humorous narrative, there is also a story of serious commitment and
sustained effort on the part of the Yeatses, who took both the automatic writing sessions and the
received material very serious. Mediumism was for George Yeats an experience that came with
strain and exhaustion, as through the release of her conscious control ‘other’ presences gained
expression. Margaret Mills Harper understands the automatic Script and the process of its
emergence in terms of performance, a conjunction of death and technology: “mediumistic
automatism is an activity that is figured as expression divorced from its usual human cause, ‘a
kind of machine’” (154). However, since the main operator of this ‘automatism’ was attempting
to release conscious control, the question is who ‘manned’ it. With reference to Juan A. Suárez,
Margaret Mills Harper points out that the great upsurge of interest in the occult at the turn of the
century was due to the arrival of new technological media:

Profound shifts in perception including perceptions of time and space, memory
and motion, of the human body as well as human abilities, co-occurred with
these developments. Images that dissembled reality seemed to create doubles
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with disquieting relationships to the original subjects of photographs: People
who were absent, changed by time, or even dead, could look at the living. In
the case of an X–ray, people could look at their own skeletons. The world of
sound, language, was amputated from the human boddies (and its meanings,
berief of integrity by analogy with human form, correspondingly dis-organ-
ized) Disembodied voices could be heard over untold distances; voices of the
dead could speak again (162f).

Harper notes that these changed medial landscapes, these doublings find expression in the
concepts of the human self that A Vision develops (see 2006, 164). Humankind participates in a
wheel of existence, made of the instantiating and extinguishing dance of gyres.\textsuperscript{265} The wheel is
going through 28 phases of the moon, which are different stages of incarnated or disembodied
existence, respectively. Participating in a force-field of the tinctures, the “solar and lunar” primary\textsuperscript{266}
and antithetical\textsuperscript{267} energies, “pulling in either direction—towards the One and towards the Many:
the unifying and the dispersing, the centripetal and the centrifugal, the homogenizing and the
differentiating, the objectifying and the subjectifying.” (Mann “Foundations of A Vision” 5)The
human self is constituted by four Faculties: a) Will, b) Creative Mind, c) Body of Fate and d) Mask.
(AV’A 112) These are: a) a form giving energy, or prior choice, b) reflective mind and
imagination, c) “the physical and mental environment, the changing human body, the stream of
phenomena as this affects a particular individual, all that is forced upon us from without” (Croft
“Stylistic arrangements” 59), d) that which we wish to become, the desire that taunts us and that
which the self seeks for self-completion.

The Mask, very similar to the notion in Rilke, is part of the human self, inalienable yet
also porous and “uncanny,” linking “self and non-self in a pre-Cartesian, perhaps even pre-
Platonic whole. ”\textsuperscript{268} Like the mask, the act of writing is always a gesture in the direction of
possession […] ‘how else could the god have come to us in the forest?’” (Ibid.; “Anima
Hominis” Myth 335). Thus, also in terms of authorship, the “Mask” allows for a living continuity

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\textsuperscript{265} The human soul must undergo the emergence and destitution of body and self through 12 cycles of 28 phases before it will be re-united with its daimon, which resides in the Thirteenth Cone. The individual cycles move along
an overarching planetary cycle of the “Great Year” of about 26,000 year which progresses in phases of 2
millennia duration, in which one age is followed by its polar “mocking” opposite, which tares down its values and
achievements. The same is true for the individual soul at the moment of death, when it encounters the truth of
that which is opposite.

\textsuperscript{266} the impulse to the collective and objectivity, corresponding to the solar, which operates on a larger and more
general scale, and predominating during the darker phases of the moon, between Phases 22 and 8 (Mann Glossary
352).

\textsuperscript{267} “the impulse to individuation and subjectivity, corresponding to the lunar (which operates on a larger and more
general scale)” (Mann Glossary 244).

\textsuperscript{268} Neil Mann sees A Vision as based on the same beliefs that were essential to Yeats, all along: “divine manifestation
in stages of emanation; of sparks from the divine fire descending as spirits into material existence, evolving with a
goal of experience and wisdom, and seeking to return to and reunite with godhead; as corollaries of this
evolution, the immortality of the spirit and the concept of reincarnation; a multilayered constitution of the
human being that goes beyond the simple dualisms of mind-body or spirit-body; a similar multilayered
constitution to the universe and a framework of correspondence between the human microcosm and the
universal macrocosm” (“Everywhere that Antinomy of the One and the Many” 2). Problematic in this definition
is the notion of correspondence between microcosm and macrocosm, as if they were, in essence, apart. Yeats’s aim
was to abolish the dichotomy by perceiving the microcosm as in a continuity with macrocosm. They are
therefore not to be juxtaposed.

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between an author and his creations: “So too when you write a play, the characters seem to move & live of themselves. Is your own mind broken, & your will doubled.” (Ibid.)

This extension of the divine self into creation is an expression of the main paradox which underlies A Vision, as Yeats explicates in his 1937 revised edition: “The whole system is founded upon the belief that the ultimate reality, symbolised as the Sphere, falls in human consciousness [...] into a series of antinomies” (AV/B 187). This is not Platonic or Neoplatonist but essentially Boehmian cosmology as the center itself is ‘everywhere’ and in tumult. J. Hillis Miller observes: “He remains true to his early image of the divine as wavering instability when he rejects, in A Vision, the Platonic or Cabalistic Theory of emanations from a still center in favor of his own intuition of life as “no orderly descent from level to level, no waterfall but a whirlpool, a gyre”” (85). Miller’s elaborations are very helpful for understanding this oxymoronic notion of a still yet violently moving center, and must be quoted at length, here:

The center is discord, as the middle of the maelstrom is the most violent place of all, the very womb of war. In another sense, the center of the whirlpool is the stillness of that which is moving so fast that its speed is infinite and therefore beyond motion, and the oneness of that which has absorbed multiplicity into an all-inclusive point: as all the radii of a circle meet in its center. Heraclitus’ fire is at once many and one, storm and calm. It is the lightning-like energy which gathers the greatest multiplicity, for ‘thunderbold steers all things.’ [...] Yeats has a similar notion of the contradictions of the divine. It brings multitudinous motion into motionless unity, and destroying neither motion nor multiplicity, holds them together in the transport of extreme tension (85).

Miller is right in all points but one: the divine does not merely uphold existence, it upholds all things while and by destroying them. Every “Bird, beast, man or flower” is self-begotten and at the same time lodged in the eternal bosom of divinity, desolating keeping as well as desolating them (Miller 86). A ‘congeries of beings’ God is also ‘a single being’ as well as nothing (87). A significant passage from Yeats’s short story “Where there is nothing” in The Secret Rose reveals this all-consuming power of God: “‘The ruby is a symbol of the love of God.’ / ‘Why is the ruby a symbol of the love of God?’ / ‘Because it is red, like fire, and fire burns up everything, and where there is nothing, there is God’” (Myth 185). The lightning rod, in fact, is a central motif in A Vision. “[T]ruth’s consuming ecstasy” (VP 139) is a force which creates, through self-outpouring kenosis, upholds and destroys the world within antinomies that consume each other, as gods and

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men, men and women, the Thirteenth Cone\textsuperscript{260} which is central to understanding the “perfect sphere” of the divine in \textit{A Vision} and the earthly, mortal plain of existence must “live each other’s death and die each other’s life” (\textit{VP}931).

Paul De Man is confounded by \textit{A Vision} and claims that Yeats combines cyclicality ("resulting from tensions between irreconcilable opposites") and dialectical progressions ("of antinomies toward their ultimate reconciliation") thereby creating “true incoherence” (146).

4.3.4. Out of \textit{The Tower} (1928) – Destruction and Kenosis as Part of Unity of Being

The image of the lightning rod striking a Tower was of central importance to \textit{A Vision}. Neil Mann in a comment on the title page of \textit{W. B. Yeats’s \textit{A Vision: Explications \& Contexts}} observes: “At its simplest, it represents the Daimon or the soul. The lightning-struck tower is also rich in meaning from Cabala and Tarot, as well as Yeats’s own usage, representing divine influence and the shattering of the ‘lone tower of absolute self’” (v). Paul & Harper also identify the unicorn as daimon or soul, adding, that in the play which Yeats co-authored with Lady Gregory \textit{The Unicorn from the stars} (1908) the unicorn signals the “end of the Christian Era” and also the emergence of a mediumistic group-mind, called a coven. (\textit{AVA} 224f; \textit{YVP} 3, 57)

\textsuperscript{260} The ultimate reality, because neither one nor many, concord nor discord, is symbolised as a phaseless sphere. But as all things fall into a series of antinomies in human experience it becomes, the moment it is thought of, what I shall presently describe as the thirteenth Cone. All things are present as an eternal instant to our Daimon (or Ghostly Self as it is called, when it inhabits the sphere). But that instant is of necessity unintelligible to all bound to the antinomies (\textit{AVB} 193). The Thirteenth Cone “is that cycle which may deliver us from the twelve cycles of time and space. The cone which intersects ours is a cone in so far as we think of it as the antithesis to our thesis, but if the time has come for our deliverance it is the phaseless sphere. Sometimes called the Thirteenth Sphere. […] our expanding cone seems to cut through its gyre; spiritual influx is from its circumference, animate life from its centre” (210f). Drawing on Hermes in the Aeslepius dialogue, Yeats claims that eternity “though motionless itself, appears to be in motion” (Ibid.). Matthew M. De Forrest’s recent study “Yeats and the New Physics” (2013) suggests that Yeats not only knew about Einstein’s theory of relativity, which just started gaining cultural currency around the time Yeats finished \textit{A Vision} (De Forrest names Lyndon Bolton’s \textit{An Introduction to the Theory of Relativity}, published in 1921 as the most likely source, among others). De Forrest’s reference to physics and especially his exploration of Yeats’s interest in multi-dimensionality is very useful for understanding how the rotation of the gyres can be understood as co-existing with the “Phaseless Sphere” of the Thirteenth cone: “The four-dimensional movement of the gyres is the basis for Yeats’s explanation of the image of an egg turning inside out without breaking its shell”, quoted in \textit{A Vision} (1925) […] and in the beginning of ‘Stories of Michael Robartes and His Friends’ (304). De Forrest links the Thirteenth Cone to the tesseract which is “a cube within a cube with the inner points of the larger cube connected by diagonals to the outer corners of the interior cube.” He observes that “this structure bears an uncanny resemblance to both the verbal description of Yeats’s system as a series of gyres within gyres, but also to the physical structure of the image formed by the superimposition of the gyres” (306).
The image of a unicorn in combination with destructive forces comes up in a Vision of one of the characters of the play *The Unicorn from the Stars* (1908) which Yeats co-authored with Lady Gregory. Here the coachmaker’s apprentice Martin Hearne describes a strange vision of white horses, changing into unicorns, in a vineyard in what he takes to be “one of the town-lands of heaven” (*VPl* 659). Another character, Father John stands by to interpret the vision. He calls the unicorn *monoceris de astra* (Ibid.). The unicorns appear as violent cosmic forces to Martin Hearne, trampling grapes and breaking them: “I tried to stop them, but I could not, they tore down the wheat and trampled it on stones, then they tore down what was left of the grapes and crushed and bruised and trampled them [...] I smelt the wine it was flowing on every side [...] it all changed. [...] It was terrible, wonderful. I saw the Unicorns trampling, trampling [...] but not in the whine troughs” (*VPl* 659f). Father John contributes Biblical learning so as to interpret the vision: “It puts me in mind of the psalm, *Et calix meus inebrians quam praedator est*. It was a strange vision, a very strange vision” (*VPl* 661).

The dialogic setting of this vision makes sure that there is no single authoritative line of interpretation available. The traditional mystical image of Christ in the wine press, becoming the grapes to be crushed is evoked, implying *kenosis*. Yet through the invocation of Psalm 22, the overflowing ‘inebriating’ cup extended in the pastoral image of hospitality and safety, suddenly becomes infused with violence. Maybe not only the cup the lamb drinks overfloweth, but also the vessel of the body will be crushed and in this way be overflowing. The trampling unicorns in the play invoke both terror, beauty, fascination and destruction. (They are not presented in a straight forward, celebratory way, since the peronae in the play fall into a state of mass delusion). It is important to understand *The Tower* as a symbol, in connection with the symbol of the unicorn to understand the tension between the fortitude and solidity of the tower and its antithesis of flowing and crushing.

Theodore Ziolkowski compares Yeats and Rilke in his essay *The View from the Tower. Origins of an antimodernist Image* (1998) as anti-modernists being outside, and often opposed to, the groups conventionally regarded as ‘modernists.’ Yet he finds the fact that Rilke lived in a Tower in Muzot, Yeats in Thoor Ballylee, C. G Jung in Bollingen at the same point in time indicative of their refusal to participate in the “technological world of modernism to which they saw themselves in opposition” meanwhile the “classical modernists often adduced the tower as a negative icon, as a symbol of the past that they hoped to overturn” (xiii). While the fruitful observation that three major writers and thinkers of the turn of the century inhabited towers,
simultaneously bears many important implications, this act of inhabiting must not be equated with an affirmative stance in their works. Inhabiting a tower and writing of one are two different things and neither Yeats nor Rilke fled from the bitter world of the modernist task of “making new” into a cozy retrospective adherence to late Romanticist ideas and 19th century metaphysics, looking down at the world from a safe dwelling place. On the contrary, the tower is, continuous with the implications of the tarot card, the site of demolition of narrow world views or frames of self and mind that were confining. It is true, towers “play a constitutive role, both literal and symbolic, in their writing,” but not only as sites of sequestration, religious introspection or the ascent to consciousness, as Ziolkowski claims. Contrary to the claim that “upward striving” towers exemplify the “human desire to transcend temporal existence,” in the poetry and thought of Yeats and Rilke their walls become porous, housing starlings, bats and bees, or crumble altogether. The tower, struck by the divine lightning, is a site of violent transformation, it is posited within the gyre, maybe in that eye of the maelstrom, where it is most violent – ‘I circle around god the primordial tower’ Rilke writes, and his speaker suddenly is suspended between being a falcon, a storm or a song [“ich kreise um Gott den uralten Turm”] (W 1 157). With the tower, anthropocentrism and the fetish of greatness and mastery begin to crumble. For Rilke, in the end, the tower will be a co-presence, an animal, which he strokes lovingly for having been the site of the violent inspirational storm that gave him the chance to finalise the Duineser Elegien and Die Sonnette an Orpheus.

For Yeats, the Tower becomes the ‘exposed fortification’ which is struck by the transformative, destructive force – giving him the chance to reflect on a world expended between mutually consuming antitheses. Yeats’ self-experience also finds expression in the tower: the glowing intellect and artistic power of the Nobel laureate inhabiting an ageing body, as he wonders: “What shall I do with this absurdity – / O heart, O troubled heart – this caricature, / Decrepit age that has been tied to me As to a dog’s tail” (VP 409)? But then, the antinomies grow stronger by their juxtaposition as “Blake declared that the imagination grew stronger as the body decayed” (Albright The Myth against Myth 11). Daniel Albright observes that there is some anxiety, though, as Yeats no longer feels certain of the energies of youth and in Per Amica Silentia Lunae imagines the comforts of a poet’s retirement:

Surely, he may think, now that I have found vision and mask I need not suffer any longer. He will buy perhaps some small old house, where, like Ariosto, he can dig his garden and think that in the return of birds and leaves, or moon and sun, and in the evening flight of the rooks he may discover rhythm and pattern like those in sleep and so never awake out of vision. Then he will remember Wordsworth withering into 80 years, honoured and empty-witted and climb to some waste room and find, forgotten here by youth, some bitter crust” (Myth 342).

The room that literally lay bare at the top of Thoor Ballylee becomes a symbolic entrance into the attic ‘wasteland’ where inspiration will be renewed. Yeats is not “forging his soul” as an act of “objectifying old age” but in a process of the consummation of its antinomies lays bare and dissembles his self, releasing its stature and scattering it among humans and non-humans. Again, this giving away and executing of the self as a legacy is similar to the baroque imagination of John
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Donne who imagines himself as “mine own executor and legacy” (The Poems of John Donne 1896, 18).

In The Tower Yeats imagines dissembling and giving away his self in a poetic kenosis which has environmental implications (49). Albright claims that Yeats thought “his ghostly shape would still inhere in his works” and that in The Tower he is “trying to express something of what his life and works will mean to the human race” (47). It is also an exploration of what becomes of the human self after death and in how far the animals are part of that. Let us disentangle the threads of Daniel Albright’s very useful suggestion that there are “dead singing birds that warble everywhere in his work: The transmuted Souls in The Shadowy Waters, the ‘golden bird’ in Sailing to Byzantium, the kindred cowards in ‘Cuchulain Comforted.’ Humans are somehow freed from the wreck of their body if they can learn to “transform it all into song” (36). Firstly, throughout Yeats’s works there are dead humans transforming into living singing birds (except the one in ‘Sailing to Byzantium’ which is a tiny, golden automaton) and as Albright suggests, they are in close relation to the transmuted human souls. It would merit a book-length study to analyse these human-animal transaction at the gates of death in Yeats’ poems and especially his plays. They are the true inheritors of the human soul. Man is freed from the body, if he can learn to transform it all into a living, palpitating, singing bird – but this of course is beyond human mastery and comes naturally. Yeats artistically anticipates these inter-species passages. Bird-kind is seen as part of the environmental self and there is truth to Daniel Albright’s claim that “Yeats is hatching his posterity in his own nest” (46). In the third part of the opening poem “The Tower” he compares his learnedness and the accumulation of the “proud stones of Greece” in the poet’s imagination, his memories of women and “All those things whereof / Man makes a superhuman / Mirror-resembling dream.” to a daw building a nest of twigs (VP 415). The slanting lines invoke the superhuman before displaying it as a fanciful dream. This transformation is structurally similar to “The heart of the Spring” in The Secret Rose, in which the aged Aengus first invokes immortality as a colourful dream, which is transformed into the vibrant earthly morning and the song of a thrush. Here, the scenery is early spring, and “the mother bird” prepares a nest of old twigs, as the poet “spend[s] his energies on the narrow segment of reality still under his control” – his memories and symbols (44).

The opening poem, “The Tower,” shows us a weary poet reminiscing on his life in the Sligo outdoors as a child, walking with a fishing rod up Ben Bulben, having a paradoxical “livelong summer day to spend.” (VP 409) The present looks more bleak, he feels himself slipping into abstract thought, beset by the “battered kettle” of thought, Plato and Plotinus drive the muse away (Ibid.). Against this Vision, Yeats affirms the present moment, which is no less consumed in antinomies: Standing on the battlements of his tower, he looks down to the foundations “where / Tree, like a sooty finger, starts from the earth” (VP 410). This echoes the quivering trees “like sooty fingers” from The Wanderings of Oisin (VP 13) but now, the tree is infused with the power of the lightning bolt, present in the image of the tarot (Maison de Dieu in the tarot is often also depicted as a tree struck by lightning). This charred tree, however, is far from lifeless, in removing the definite article the tree moves from abstract concept to totemic, sensuous presence “Tree” (much like “Black Elk”) is a personified human-natural identity, a
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“finger”, which points at nowhere and everywhere, releasing the imagination. “Ruin and ancient trees” are dissolved in each other (VP 410). The transformation of a living girl into a song sung by farmers and thought up by Raftery, the blind Irish poet is described. In a stream of consciousness the images shift and change, Hanrahan’s pack of cards turns into a pack of dogs and he into a hare and both into a gap in the text. The force that cleaves the stones, and burns the tree, here rents the stream of mental images and breaks the text.

Lacan in “The insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious” (1966) not only supports this idea of continuity between imagination, world and text, he also claims that the tree is crucial to understanding signification. He understands “our word ‘tree’” not as an isolated noun, but located at a point of intersections and “punctuations” of the virtual and the real, signification, environment and embodiment. Very much contrary to the post-structuralists in his wake, lets go of the idea of an endless chain of signifiers that shift without any contingency to the real. At the heart of communication, Lacan insists, there is poeticity. To the horizontal shifting of signifiers there is the vertical lightning rod or metaphor. The word tree itself, he insists, “crosses the line of the Saussurian formula” (Ibid.):

For even broken down into the double spectre of its vowels and consonants, it can still call up with the robur and the plane tree the meanings it takes on, in the context of our flora, of strength and majesty. Drawing on all the symbolic contexts suggested in the Hebrew of the Bible, it erects on a barren hill the shadow of the cross. Then reduces to the capital Y, the sign of dichotomy which, except for the illustration used by heraldry, would owe nothing to the tree however genealogical we may think it. Circulatory tree, tree of life of the cerebellum, tree of Saturn, tree of Diana, crystals formed in a tree struck by lightning, is it your figure which traces our destiny for us in the tortoise-shell cracked by the fire, or your lightning which causes that slow shift in the axis of being to surge up from an unnamable night into the "Εν Πάντα of language:

No! says the Tree, it says No! in the shower of sparks
Of its superb head

In this superbly poetic passage Lacan outlines the capacity of the tree as a signifier to stand in front of the reader as well as in the reader. The tree cannot be reduced to a signifier, it already has crossed the boundary into the unconscious preconditions of our signifying practices. It is already there in the letters derived from runic codification (twigs of beek still resonate in the German word for letter, Buchstaben) and divination. Finally, it is the presence of this destructive lightning strike of the poetic verticality that enables Lacan to address the tree in a question: “is it your figure which traces our destiny for us in the tortoise-shell cracked by the fire”? He speaks poetically, seeing the violent crack of the tortoise shell, used by indigenous people for divination, as the presence of absence, humanity’s will to know and interpret cracks the shell, but the trees prior and outlasting presence within and appeal to us, cracks the solidity of the Cartesian Self. The image of the tree struck by lightning, “desolated” into signification, offers a resistance to interpretation, the traces of the violence of the desolation of language is visible in the sootiness

\footnote{Thomas R. Whitaker in \textit{Swan and Shadow} (1964) points out Paul Claudel and Honoré de Balzac as inspiration for The Tower, Yeats admired Claudel’s \textit{L’Otage}, in which the besieged aristocrat Coufantaine declares that, as the earth has given his family its name, so he gives to the earth his humanity (166).}
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of Yeats’s tree. The tree in language is ignited by the consuming lightning rod, cast from sensuous presence into a trace. But in poetry it re-emerges into consciousness from its silent medial subservience. There it is, making its demand, not staying dead and silent but uttering its refusal to be burnt: “No! Says the tree” in the midst of its symbolic consummation: “it is between the signifier in the form of the proper name of a man, and the signifier which metaphorically abolishes him that the poetic spark is produced” (126).

Likewise, the monuments founded by humanity in Yeats's *The Tower*, more specifically, in the seven poems that make up the cycle of *Meditations in Time of Civil War*, refuse to comply. The “Ancestral Houses” in the poem of the same title are indifferent to human ambitions, the heir of a great man may be “but a mouse” and those things “the greatest of mankind / [...] but take our greatness with our bitterness” (VP 418). Yeats, in erecting monuments in the mind already destroys them. The homely tower is doubly founded: “in this tumultuous spot” by himself through renovating it and by a “man at arms” in the past not closer defined (VP 420). The speaker imagines his own descendants as “torn petals,” worrying that they may lose “the flower” of his own superiority, residing in a proud inheritance of “vigorous mind” (VP 422f). But instead of trying to prevent disaster, the poet invokes it:

> May this laborious stair and this stark tower  
> Become a roofless ruin that the owl  
> May build in the cracked masonry and cry  
> Her desolation to the desolate sky (VP 423).

The peaceful iambic pentameter and abab rhyme contrasts harshly with the invoked destruction. Nothing is desolate about this structure, as there is an underlying trust in unity: “The Primum Mobile that fashioned us / Has made the very owls in circles move; / And I […]” (VP 423). Unity and perfection are here widened beyond the human, so even if his descendants lose the priced attributions, it is no great loss at all. Through the slanting lines, very much as in Rilke, the owls, emphasized as “very owls,” are connected to the I, the line break configuring their united disjunction. Thus the poem, in not further specifying ‘them’ formally and ritually institutes the owls, along with his friends, his wife, his children, as formal heirs to the tower, declaring his will: “whatever flourish and decline / These stones remain their monument and mine” (Ibid.).

However, Yeats’s is not a Dionysian celebration of destruction, mocking the great, wise and good for their achievements in the fifth piece of Meditations, one must finally also “Mock mockers after that / that would not lift a hand maybe / to help good wise or great” (VP 432). One of these mockers, the fat “Falstaffian man” in “The Road at my Door,” who comes to his doorsteps during the civil war, cracking jokes, “as though to die by gunshot were / the finest play under the sun” (VP 424). Anthony Bradley claims that “Yeats vacillates between his admiration for the soldiers and his life-affirming awareness that it is the opposite of their trade that deserves his allegiance as man and poet” (Imagining Ireland in the Poems and Plays of W. B. Yeats 119). The “pear-tree broken by the storm” is destroyed, just like Ireland, torn by war. It may be the heroic dead whom the poet envies. But “To silence the envy in my thought,” which is the opposite of seeking comfort in the face of death, he counts little moorfowls who are guided by a mother hen over the stream at the tower. These “feathered balls of soot” as sooty as the charred tree, are still
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evident of destruction, maybe of a human form that preceded their birth? It is not easy to think in such cycles and transformations, and even less easy to put them into words. As in Dylan Thomas’ “The force that through the green fuse drives the flower” the speaker is ‘dumb to tell’ the continuities and contingencies between the human self and the environment.

In W. B. Yeats’ “Human dignity” this is exactly the speaker’s predicament:

So like a bit of stone I lie
Under a broken tree.
I could recover if I shrieked
My heart’s agony
To a passing bird, but I am dumb
From human dignity (VP 452).

This is very close to the speechlessness of Rilke, who after WWI is longing for a bird’s voice for one single scream, to voice the outrage and dissent, yet finds none. Agamben describes dignity as an illusion. It masks the violent dead-lock of the exclusive inclusion of bare life on the site of the human. Dignity functions as a form of cover-up for this abjection since at the bottom of “the humanist discovery of man lies the discovery that he lacks himself, the discovery of his irremediable lack of *dignitas*” (The Open 30). The speaker here notes the stupefying force of dignity. He proclaims himself “dumb / from human dignity” again, prolonging the thought through a line break, thereby strengthening the humility of the inversion of the bird elevated in the air and a dumb human extended below. The ambiguity “from” implies either that the poet is made dumb by the presence of or that he is voicelessly excluded, far from human dignity, as he imagines himself “like a bit of stone.” In this ambivalence Yeats configures the gist of modern human-non-human interactions, shaped by hierarchy and alienation. The animals are excluded from humanity’s privilege to selfhood. Human *dignitas* which bestows a face and a right to legal representation and protection only to the human species (though not evenly), creates a dumb and stale ‘cistern’ of privilege, ignorant of the bio-physiological and -morphological, emotional interdependencies. The short poem “Human dignity” with two stanzas, six lines each in iambic tri- and tetrametres begins by exploring the personification of nature:

Like the moon her kindness is,
If kindness I may call
What has no comprehension in’t,
But is the same for all
As though my sorrow were a scene
Upon a painted wall (VP 452).

In the first line, the moon’s kindness is stated. In the second line the prohibition against personification is acknowledged, but by the first line’s disregard already mocks it. The speaker mocks objectification, and by merit of the sentence structure, leaves the question, whether the moon has comprehension or not, open. Yet, personification is necessary exactly because “his sorrow” is not as obviously manifest as a scene on a painted wall. The speaker is in a paradoxical life-in-death situation, lying “as a bit of stone” voiceless under a tree. “Recovery” is imagined in the extension of the “heart’s agony” in a shriek, which is a capacity neither purely human nor
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purely animal. Since human dignity forestalls this vital apostrophe, Yeats poetry is ready, anytime, to forsake dignity rather than the contact with the non-human world. Yeats demolishes the tower of anthropocentrism, or, as David Albright humorously and aptly writes: he wants to have the power to “un-Locke” the world (18).

4.3.5. Unity of Being in “Among School Children”

Embracing the destitution of the passing and transforming world, the passing and transforming self, Unity of Being is never exclusively human for Yeats; it is always also communal as he outlines in his “Introduction to ‘Mandukya’ Upanishad”:

In pure personality, seedless Samhadi, there is nothing but that bare ‘I am’ which is Brahma. [...] [T]he Universal Self is a fountain, not a cistern, the Supreme Good must perpetually give itself. The world is necessary to the Self, must receive ‘the excess of its delights,’ and in this self all delivered Selves are present, ordering all things, from the Pole Star to the passing wind (LE 162).

Rory Ryan in his article on the Four Faculties in Yeats points out that it does not suffice to understand Yeats’ Unity of Being merely as an embodied quality, attainable to humans in the antithetical phases 16, 17 and 18, nor something solely bound to the technicalities of the system. It may refer “to an ideal or higher unity, “a form created by passion to unite us to ourselves, the self so sought is that Unity of Being…” (Ryan 30, AVB 82). It is not restricted to the living but, especially in what Yeats calls Beatific Vision also to the dead, and it embraces destruction: Even the perfect, divine sphere is implied in this concept, since Unity of Being is also “that which only contradiction can express not ‘the lone tower of the absolute self’ but its shattering, ‘the absolute self’ set free.”

Most often, the final stanza of “Among School children” is identified within scholarship as an instance of Yeats’ notion of Unity of Being:

O chestnut-tree, great-rooted blossomer,
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance (VP 443)?

Unity of Being in this instance embraces the bio-physiological contingencies between the breathing tree’s leaf as well as the instrumentalised bole and by implication also the silent page of the book on which these eloquent lines are printed in letters that, themselves are faint memories of runic twigs. Unity of Being is conceived, here, as an open question. By the invoking demand

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271 Neil Mann relates that this definition from “a cancelled paragraph from “Notes on the Life after Death,” NLI 36,272/12, p. 29, corrected typescript; [...] probably deals with the Beatitude, reconciling the paradox of the “Thirteenth Cone [a]s a messenger or substitute for the Sphere” (“The Thirteenth Cone” 192).

272 Helen Vendler in Our Secret Discipline (2007) remarks the “unity of being of the chestnut tree.” (284) “The symbol of the tree stresses the unity of a work of art” Eileen McKinlay claims (The Shared Experience 137) NelaBureu-Ramos sees this poem as an instant of “Romantic organicism” and “Anti-Cartesianism” (Flaming Embers 166).
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of the address the poem holds the tree able to hear and to respond. The “great-rooted blossomer” describes the fixed above-below dynamics of the tree as well as its cyclical, physical unity with the ecosphere via the ingestion of earth’s nutrients and dispersal of fragrant, generative pollen, which makes it impossible to tell the tree from its environment with any definitive certainty. What is most interesting though, is that the two questions are themselves forming a continuum via the odal pathos of the thrice repeated O of the final two couplets and the continuation of the invocative apostrophe: “O chestnut-tree […] O body swayed to music […] O brightening glance” leave uncertain whether or not Yeats has changed addressee, or whether these names invoke different attributes of the same entity. The vibration of being, Boehme’s “Hall” that instantiates all forms, vibrates the tree into being, exceeds the tree in atoms of breathable oxygen that become the medial precondition of the song that invokes the tree as well as the boles that constitute the bodies of musical instruments. Looked at it this way, whose body is swayed to music? What is furthermore interesting is the ambiguity of “swayed” –to vacillate, to vibrate, to convert – if this verb was allowed to remain in the uncertainty of its possibilities, the body would appear not only dancing along to the music, but persuaded, even converted to music.273 The question after the connection between the dancing body and the brightening glance evokes an image of impact and transformation, a circle of inspiration and motion in which the tree partakes.274 In this regard, unity of being in Yeats is expressed as non-differentiation275 of life forms and their modes of self-expression and –generation, which are embraced into self-hood. This makes Yeats’ poetry reflect closely on physiological principles, as it challenges Enlightenment convictions. I therefore disagree with Helen Vendler’s position in Our Secret Discipline on the point of the “deficiency of the tree” as an image for achieved human enterprise, due to the fact that the tree cannot move its location nor “changes its self-hood over time” because “its immobile species-nature is not ours” (284). Yeats has shown three ways in which a tree changes location: as leaf, bole and blossom are taken from their place by elemental or human intervention without there being a cessation of “chestnut-tree” or a diminution of its worthiness to be addressed. The hyphenation of “chestnut-tree” already emphasises the duo-unity of seed and tree, highlighting becoming and the cyclicality of the tree. We could add the process of photosynthesis, adoption of nutrients and exchange of carbon dioxide and oxygen which urgently imply the human in the quest of identifying or locating the tree.

In the same sense, the human is implied in the “Presences” in the preceding stanza, of images of time-past within time-present as “self-born,” mocking human achievement:

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273 In the same sense, as will be demonstrated in chapter four, Rilke in his Sonnet XV of Die Sonette an Orpheus depicts the orange which a dancer eats and which subsequently fuels and “affords” the energy of the dance as having converted to the dancer (W 2 248).

274 Kenneth Burke writes: “the chestnut tree(as personified agent) is the ground of unityor continuity for all its scenic manifestations and with the agent (dancer) is merged the act (dance) (Symbolic action in a Poem by Keats [1945], in: Sutton & Foster Modern Criticism 579).

275 Michael O’Neill confirms this: “Yeats says that labour can be identified with 'blossoming or dancing' when it cancels our sense of being creatures who are self-divided, caught between the demands of body and soul. The feeling of unity occurs 'where' self-division is absent” (A Routledge Literary Sourcebook on the Poems of W.B. Yeats 164).
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Both nuns and mothers worship images,
But those the candles light are not as those
That animate a mother's reveries,
But keep a marble or a bronze repose.
And yet they too break hearts — O presences
That passion, piety or affection knows,
And that all heavenly glory symbolise —
O self-born mockers of man's enterprise. (V/P 445)

The unity that emerges here is that between onlooker and icon within embodiment and perceived presence. The “animated reverie” of the mother on her children and the devotional or contemplative meditation of the nun vis à vis the static and intangible repose of the image are a kind of exposure out of which animated presences emerge that can “break hearts.” Yeats maintains both the odal apostrophe of Keats’ “Ode on a Grecian Urn”: the artistic object that by the animating view of the onlooker emerges into temporal existence is an Other that has the power to ‘tease us out of thought’ or, as Yeats puts it, “symbolise all heavenly glory” — whether it be that of a joyful union in the past or in the future. These images within their uncertain location between the “repose” of their medial embodiment, and the animation of the onlookers’ actualisation of temporality therein attain the status of “presence” and as such are personified.

The notion of ‘imagination’ that Yeats gains from Blake is later enriched by his readings of Henri Bergson’s reconciliatory notion of perception and matter. Yeats’ main interest, as evident in his markings, underlinings and comments on the margins of the English translation of *Matiére et Memoire*, is first and foremost in Bergson’s notion of unified consciousness. Little wonder that he annotates the following passage with “The One”:

> Our perception, we said, is originally in things rather than in the mind, without us rather than within. […] If on the dualistic hypothesis, we naturally shrink from accepting the partial coincidence of the perceived object and the perceiving subject, it is because we are conscious of the undivided unity of our perception, whereas the object appears to us to be, in essence, infinitely divisible. […] But if the divisibility of matter is entirely relative to our action thereon, that is to say to our faculty of modifying its aspect, if it belongs not to matter itself but to the space which we throw beneath this matter in order to bring it within our grasp, then the difficulty disappears. Extended matter, regarded as a whole, is like a consciousness where everything balances and neutralises everything else; it possesses in very truth the indivisibility of our perception; so that, inversely, we may without scruple attribute to perception something of the extensity of matter […] sensation recovers extensity, the concrete extended recovers its natural continuity and indivisibility”276 (291-293).

No doubt, also the material universe, defined as the totality of images, is a kind of consciousness, a consciousness in which everything compensates and neutralises everything else[…] (313)

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276This quotation consists of the passages Yeats marked in pencil on the margin. The underlined passages show Yeats’ original underlining, he wrote “The One” next to the first paragraph. See Yeats’ heavily marked and annotated copy of *Matter and Memory* by Henri Bergson, transl. Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer. London: Allen and Unwin, 1919 [YL 157] [NLI 40,568/14; 118 sheets; envelope 1170].
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In developing this notion of a co-extensive consciousness, Bergson wants to reconcile Berkeley’s idealism, Descartes’ abstract geometry and Kant’s metaphysical self-limitation. It is interesting to note that the Bergsonian universe is not one of achieved or static unity, but one in which the constituents of consciousness are compensating and neutralising each other. This stance informs also Yeats’ notion of the unity of onlooker and artwork, reader and text and delivers the latter from the restrictive notion of “object” into the openness and sharing in being of consummated presence. In that our consciousness and temporal experience is extended into and through them, they are not merely objects or projections: in them, we are.

“Among School Children” dissolves the image of young children in a classroom of the speaker’s present into a reverie about the temporal manifestations of Maud Gonne in his mind: The memory of a shared instant in their youth, the not-so-distant memory of her aged face, the iconic hollow cheeks of her aged face, and the imaginative reverie of what she would have looked like as a young girl which ends in a dissolution and identification of this potentiality with the actuality in the classroom “She stands before me as a living child.” (VP 444) There is a cycle of Yeats’ and Gonne’s life traced in the poems’ reminiscences which identifies the lovers as birds (a dream fostered already in “The White Birds”). Beginning with the “yolk and white of the one shell,” (443) the beautiful “Ledean body” of his beloved and his own “pretty plumage” in youth, the antithetical summersault turns the speaker into “old clothes upon old sticks to scare a bird.” All these are one, co-present in the reverie. Throughout the poem, the organic process of becoming is deprived of the telos of perfection, the idea that it can only arrive at some stage of mastery or one point of culmination in one’s life time. Human existence is circular as the tree or the bird, it performs a circle which is open to a paradigmatic manifold of signifiers and a biophysiological manifold of presences that traverse it. The “hollow cheek” of the aged Maud Gonne is elevated to artistic perfection by the question “did quattrocento finger fashion it?” Yeats breaches the iconic difference between woman, mental image and painting, fusing them into an uncertain relation of temporality and duration. “Labour” itself, poetic toil “is blossoming or dancing.”

In “Adam’s Curse” from In the Seven Woods (1903), “Labour” – the conscious scrubbing and toiling to achieve perfect lines of poetry or, as his conversant replies, beauty, stands vis à

Bergson explicates: “Philosophy made a great step forward on the day when Berkeley proved, as against the ‘mechanical philosophers,’ that the secondary qualities of matter have at least as much reality as the primary qualities. His mistake lay in believing that, for this, it was necessary to place matter within the mind, and make it into a pure idea. Descartes, no doubt, had put matter too far from us when he made it one with geometrical extensity. But, in order to bring it nearer to us, there was no need to go to the point of making it one with our own mind. Because he did go as far as this, Berkeley was unable to account for the success of physics, and, whereas Descartes had set up the mathematical relations between phenomena as their very essence, he was obliged to regard the mathematical order of the universe as a mere accident. So the Kantian criticism became necessary, to show the reason of this mathematical order and to give back to our physics a solid foundation – a task in which, however, it succeeded only by limiting the range and value of our senses and of our understanding. The criticism of Kant, on this point at least, would have been unnecessary; the human mind, in this direction at least, would not have been led to limit its own range; metaphysics would not have been sacrificed to physics, if philosophy had been content to leave matter half way between the place to which Descartes had driven it and that to which Berkeley drew it back – to leave it, in fact, where it is seen by common sense” (Matter and Memory [1911]xiii-xiv).
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*via* the “already” present beauty of his companion in the indefinite past and the weary-hearted, personified moon:

We saw the last embers of daylight die,
And in the trembling blue-green of the sky
A moon, worn as if it had been a shell
Washed by time’s waters as they rose and fell
About the stars and broke in days and years.

I had a thought for no one’s but your ears:
That you were beautiful, and that I strove
To love you in the old high way of love;
That it had all seemed happy, and yet we’d grown
As weary-hearted as that hollow moon. (*V/P* 206-207)

Yeats imagines time as physically extended, like the sea is extended, connecting yet at the same time wasting away the heavenly bodies, washing out and eroding the moon like a shell. From the clamorous self-appraisal of his own labour for perfection the speaker returns to a moment of contemplation where ‘presence’ intervenes: the presence of natural and human beauty. The conversants are “grow quiet” and thus outgrow and turn away from noisily comparing the merits and pangs of labour and as the natural environment enters their consciousness so, too, does the presence of beauty as an *a priori*, unconditionally given and refuting the preceding argument for toil and enterprise: “that you were beautiful” is an affirmation of the presence of beauty in an indefinite, unconditional past that extends until before the onset of conscious effort at self-beautification. *Were* implies the possibility of beauty ‘otherwise than now.’ From the curse of a division between labour and love, subjective and objective nature, Yeats returns to the personification of their union, paradoxically, within relinquishment. To be tossed and turned by time, exposed to and washed out by its currents appears as the final and arguably decisive notion of the poem. Nicholas Meihuizen remarks that the poem “enact[s] relinquishment of love” in a formal manner and accepts the “disunity between the poet and the real woman” (*Yeats and the Drama of Sacred Space* 48). He observes an “honest type of weariness,” which occurs because “love […] cannot survive the deep severalty implicit in the imagery of the penultimate stanza” (Ibid.). Paradoxically, however, the momentary silence between the conversants, the enduring separation between the lover and his unattainable beloved, as well as the distance between them and the moon is contradicted by the presence of “time’s ocean” which “rose and fell /about the stars” a unitary, all-connecting all-consuming medium, broken into days and months, the separation of temporal units by human habit. Furthermore, Yeats delimits emotion from its exclusive anthropocentric locus. The moon is weary hearted, hollowed out by time, and the speaker relates in first person plural via comparative equation to it, actively overcoming the “deep severalty” of their disunity. Beauty and art as achievement are merely one end of a spectrum of which the

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Stan Smith identifies “an abiding preoccupation of Yeats’s: that all beauty whether in art or women, is won by ‘hard laboring’, not acquired casually or idly” (*W.B. Yeats: A Critical Introduction* 82). Yeats’ laborious process of working and re-working poetry is a well-documented and critically evaluated fact. But all too often Yeats is
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other end is formed by the presence of beauty already given in both life and art as processes of self-outpouring. The human speaker, however, affirms the present company as “grown” weary-hearted as if expanded and unfolded in self-expenditure. This paradoxical self-realisation through self-destitution is in fact a central aspect in Yeats’ oeuvre that has received but little scholarly attention and yet it is essential not only in an aesthetical dimension but also in an ethical one. To spend and to extend oneself to the other for Levinas establishes human goodness: Emmanuel Levinas, in *Of God that Comes to Mind* outlines an ethics of kenosis as an emptying of self before the Other:

There is no rest here for the self in the shelter of its form, in the shelter of its concept of ego! There is no “condition,” were it only one of servitude [...] In this way proximity is never close enough; as a responsible I, I never finish emptying myself of myself. An infinite increase in one’s exhaustion, wherein the subject does not simply become aware of this expenditure, but is its site and its event, and, if we may say this, its goodness.” (1998 73ff.)

In Yeats’s oeuvre self-consummation and destitution is achieved by pulverising all desires for stature or greatness. The formal and lyrical beauty of the poems is achieved within the depiction and performance of self-consummation, that between a reader’s embodied and celebrated lifetime and that of the metaphoric interplay of antinomies, rubbing each other up and expounding. Perfection is a way not a goal. The work of art is the site of human self-expenditure, and this self-giving is aesthetically and ethically necessary.

In the light of kenosis, mediality has to be rethought. The medium in the process of the automatic script empties her mind and consciousness of the personal self and its interests that govern her existence. So as to ‘receive’ the Other – be it from the Unconscious or the world of spirits or the dead – an act of relinquishing control, giving up of agency is central. McLuhan said that the medium is the message but it is so by being consummated, poured out, burned up, or ground between the stones of our interest in its messages. Poetry makes the self-giving gift of the medium tangible and shows us its also-human shape. Prosopopeia can make the medium’s disappearance and the author’s self-destitution audible. Peter Ackroyd in *Albion: Origins of the English Imagination* (2007) notices a predominance of trees as a centrally important leitmotiv that weaves through all ages of English literature. He cites *The Dream of the Rood*, in which the tree of the crucifixion speaks out and tells its own story:

Ic waes aheawen holtes on ende [...]  
Rod waes ic areared [...]  
Eall ic waes mid blode bestemed. (5f)

This passage of the poem has been carved 13 centuries ago into the monumental Ruthwell Stone cross. The fate of man and tree are inseparable – and what they both suffer. The tree is bearing the nail marks and suffering, innocently and silently, yet still the stone speaks and the tree sighs” (Ackroyd 6). It is this silent presence of medial contingencies that prosopopeia lifts into
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consciousness. Literary studies in an age of environmental crises has in front of itself the anamnetic task of tracing the letter back to the tree, the parchment to the calf. Thus, it is necessary to note that human historiography, the evolution of mind and letters would not have been possible without the sacrifice of the silent media involved. The Irish Lebor na hUidre, the Book of the Dun Cow contains, amongst other texts, the Irish Táin Bó Cuailnge, which was written down by St. Ciaran of Cluain on the hide of his pet cow. The title of the collection thus marks the proximity and indebtedness of the scribe to his medium, and an acknowledgement that wards of forgetfulness of dependencies and continuities. The first recorded copyright judgement which is mentioned in the Book of the Dun Cow passed by the High King Diarmaid runs as follows: “To every cow her calf, to every book its copy” (Carson xiiii). Ciaran Carson in his introduction to The Táin mentions the matter in the attempt to contextualise the Táin itself and extrapolates on the proximity of the topic (the stolen bull), the history of its medial transmission and the very material mediality: “For books then were quite literally made from calves, as borne out by the English word ‘vellum’, from old French vel, a calf” (ibid.). It is time for a green literary studies to go further and to show that it is important to listen to the ways in which the medium is forced into silence when the letter speaks, to trace the ambiguous presence-as-absence of the calf or the tree.

Yeats’ play The Resurrection features two lyrical poems in iambic tetrameters strict abba rhyme, which are adopted into The Tower. The first of these “songs” describes a rather Orphic vision of “a staring virgin” tearing the hart out of Dionysus and bearing “the beating heart away” – this strange survival of the heart into its destruction and the transformation of physical dying into ritual is indicative of Yeats’ understanding of the performativity of art, of the procedural “passing” of heart into text, in which the author is obliterated, yet fused into a continuity with reader and exegesis. The second song, thus reads

Everything that man esteems
Endures a moment or a day.
Love’s pleasure drives his love away,
The painter’s brush consumes his dreams;
The herald’s cry, the soldier’s tread
Exhaust his glory and his might:
Whatever flames upon the night
Man’s own resinous heart has fed. (VP 438)

Reuben Arthur Brower sees these metaphors “expressive of the central paradox: all achievement is self-destructive” (The Fields of Light 87). He sees this final image as a reconciliation of the individual and historical cycles, form and formlessness. We are coming back full circle to the burning tree, “Resinous takes us back via ‘flame’ to the pine torch, the taeda of the ancients which was brandished by the worshipping maenads” (Ibid., more on the Orphic undertones in Yeats in chapter five). The heart is an environmental circulation, destruction and creation being its systole and diastole. Whatever is humanly achieved is only achieved through the temporal consummation of humans and the world around them, this principle also works in art, which is sharing in the kenotic self-destitution. Art, as Stanley Fish outlines in Self-Consuming Artifacts:
becomes the vehicle of its own abandonment[.] […]which is intended in two senses: the reader’s self (or at least his inferior self) is consumed as he responds to the medicinal purging of the dialectician’s art, and that art, like other medicines, is consumed in the workings of its own best effects. The good-physician aesthetic, then, is finally an anti-aesthetic, for it disallows to its productions the claims usually made for verbal art—that they reflect, or contain or express Truth—and transfers the pressure and attention from the work to its effects, from what is happening on the page to what is happening in the reader (3).

5. CONCEIVING dLeIAFTxEH – THE OPEN IN R. M. RILKE AND W. B. YEATS

The preceding chapter has discussed the paradoxical notion of Unity of Being as an infinity of interconnections. It embraces disunity and destruction and is not fully knowable or controllable. The occult collaboration and manuscript of A Vision was shown to have a profound influence on Yeats’s understanding of a unity of self and environment, in a sense that allows the latter to be charged with divine presence and human personality, embracing the living, the dead, the disembodied and the animals, self and environment as well as their passing. The concept of kenosis was seen as a central element in poetry as a way in which the individual self is released into a greater, environmental self.

The following chapter will explore the notion of a simultaneity and mutual instantiation of life and death in Rilke and Yeats, according to the principles of unity and infinity consummated through self-destitution developed in the previous chapters. The notion of ‘The Open’ is a term Rilke develops in his later poetry and it is subsequently adopted by 20th century philosophy into its ontological project of rethinking the relation of man and animal. Especially in the early 21st century it is becoming central to environmental philosophy, to which Giorgio Agamben’s book The Open made a fundamental contribution. The notion of the open will be traced in Rilke and Agamben and discussed with regard to Yeats’s mediation of the human-animal threshold.

The question of a unity of life-in-death and death-in-life has a longer tradition in Yeats studies and is more firmly established, also through the prominent role it plays in his occult system of A Vision, than in Rilke studies. Addressing the life-death unity in Rilke in some length and contextualising it with a shorter reading of the question in Yeats’s (against the background of existing studies) will lay open a new spectrum of convergences of their thought. The discussion will concentrate mainly on their later works and will, in the case of Yeats, focus strongly on the traces that reading Rilke had on the latest works of Yeats. Yeats’s interest in Rilke, especially in the last year of his life, was profound and led to his reading translations of Rilke’s poems as well as reading repeatedly a collection of essays on Rilke sent to him by William A. Rose. This chapter will consider his thoughts on Rilke, expressed in a letter to Ethel Mannin and attempt to reconstruct Yeats’ understanding of Rilke, outlined therein. Especially the question of the relation of death and life interested Yeats, although to some degree it was William A. Rose’s rather than Rilke’s position that he outlines to Ethel Mannin.
This thesis has so far traced convergences between the works of W. B. Yeats and R. M. Rilke on the basis of similarities of their poetic and poetological, ontological, ecological, occultist and spiritual mediations, which are evident, regardless of mutual reception. Yeats’ enthusiastic late discovery of Rilke left traces in his latest works. Especially the fact that he claims to have composed his famous epitaph on the margin of an essay on Rilke suggests that “Under Ben Bulben” be read with Rilke’s notion of death in mind.

5.1. Rilke’s Poetics of dLeIaFtEh

If we stop at the thought that Rilke’s poetics of transformation from *Neue Gedichte* and beyond realise “a classical synthesis between subject and object” (Jayne 208), we miss the actual mystery of the mediation and dissolution of the notion of subjectivity and objectivity. Rilke transforms the formerly static poles into a dynamic flux which does not solidify into either. He enters on a phenomenological quest for the conditions of the appearance of the object and the self-experience of the subject he calls both into question as modes of understanding existence. There is a constant loss of form in which humans and non-human nature participate. The divine-environment substantiates all beings, performs and exceeds them – and humans partake both in the falling and dissembling of self but they are also witness to these processes in others. As the existence of tangible things, animate and inanimate bodies of humans, flowers and items is transposed from spatial bodily presence into temporal sensuous flux, the inability to differentiate interior and exterior, self and world, perceiver and perceived becomes ever more apparent.

In *Die Sonette an Orpheus* Rilke will use the figure of the dancer to visualise this “giving away” and expending of energy through embodied performance into the world. The phenomena of the world, in turn, are extending hospitality to the perceiver who pours his senses and attention into them. As the human perishes, the things and beings are becoming animate and are retaining humanity as a living kenotaph. Otto Friedrich Bollnow in his chapter on Rilke and death in *Lebensphilosophie und Existenzphilosophie* sketches two paradoxical dimensions of death as a) that which is already within life and b) that which comes from the outside and needs to be transformed into an internal experience (206ff). However, he sees a shift occurring from *Das Stunden-Buch* to Rilke’s novel *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge* in that “the feeling of an intoxicating/ecstatic proximity [and] increasingly gives way to death appearing as something horrific and strange in the face of which life shrinks away” (206). I would argue that this shift is wholly dependent on the perspective from which death is presented. The latter dimension of alienation and mechanisation of death as a process which should be unique to every living thing is part of Rilke’s criticism of modernity, characterised especially through technology, and the automatisation and atomisation of urban life, replacing the unique process of living-as-dying with a one-death-suits-all scenario. This criticism is exemplified in the opening passages in *Malte*, describing the way in which people die in hospitals and asylums a serially produced, random,

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279 “Der gemeinsame Grundzug dieser Werke liegt darin, daß das Gefühl einer rauschhaften Nähe immer mehr verschwindet und immer stärker der Tod als etwas grauenhaftes und Fremdes hervortritt, vor dem das Leben zurückbebt” (206).
ready-made, disposable conveyer-belt death. Rilke at that stage could not foresee the horror of mechanised mass-death that the First- and Second World War would unleash from within Germany but he clearly saw the roots and causes for it in the depersonalised death that comes with a mechanical “production” and consumption of existence within the technological confines of urban life. In a letter to L. H. from 8th November 1915, he outlines the collective misapprehension of death he perceives to afflict human understanding:

God and death now were outside, were the Other, and the One was our life, which seemed to become human at the cost of this ejection, intimate/homely, possible, do-able, in a closed sense: ours. But in this beginner’s course in life, in this remedial life course, there were still uncountable things left to comprehend and put in order and one could not strictly differentiate between tasks that were solved or just abandoned for the moment [...] From all results finally the basic error had to re-emerge, this precise precondition on which this entire experiment of being had been conducted. By deducting from every utilised meaning god and death (as a non-immanent, posterior, elsewhere and different) the small circuit of the no-more-than-worldly was accelerated more and more. So called progress became the event of a world increasingly caught up in itself, which had forgotten that whatever it might do, it had been exceeded/outweighed by god and death, already. Now, this could have resulted in some kind of consciousness, had we been able to hold god and death at a distance in the merely-mental/spiritual - : but nature knew nothing of this curiously achieved repression – when a tree blossoms, death blossoms in it just as well as life, the agrarian field is full of death, sprouting from its recumbent face a rich expression of life. And the animals walk patiently from one into the other – and all around us death is still at home, and from the cracks of things he watches us and a rusty nail, protruding somewhere from a plank does nothing but rejoice over us, day and night.281

In re-introducing god and death to the inside, Rilkean poetics make the familiar strange and place the numinous in the centre of our experience of existence rescuing it from estrangement and disappearance into banality. When Rilke tackles death he never does so without, at the same time, animating the inanimate. The prosopopeia of the rusty nail, rejoicing over us not only gives value to a decaying signifier, no longer in use, as a witness, but through the extension of “rejoicing” the ephemeral, random nail becomes the host to and memory of human life. The co-extension of our

280 Rainer Maria Rilke, Über Gott. Zwei Briefe 13-21)
281 "Gott und Tod waren nun draußen, waren das Andere, und das Eine war unser Leben, das nun um den Preis dieser Ausscheidung menschlich zu werden schien, vertraulich, möglich, leistbar, in einem geschlossenen Sinn das unstreitige. Da aber in diesem gewissermaßen für Anfänger eingerichteten Lebenskurs, in dieser Lebensvorklasse, der zu ordnenden und begreifenden Dinge immer noch unzählige waren und zwischen gelösten Aufgaben und nur eben vorläufig übersprungenen nie ganz strengere Unterschiede gemacht werden konnten. [...] [A]us allem Ergebnis mußte endlich wiederum als Grundfehler eben diejenige Bedingung hervortreten, auf deren Voraussetzung dieser ganze Daseinsversuch aufgerichtet war; indem nämlich aus jeder in Gebrauch genommenen Bedeutung Gott und Tod abgezogen schienen (als ein nicht Hiesiges, sondern Späteres, Anderwäriges und Anderes), beschleunigte sich der kleinere Kreislauf des nur Hiesigen immer mehr; der sogenannte Fortschritt wurde zum Ereignis einer in sich befangenen Welt, die vergaß, daß sie, wie sie sich auch anstelle, durch den Tod und durch Gott von vornherein übertroffen war. Nun hätte das noch eine Art Besinnung ergeben, wäre man imstande gewesen, Gott und Tod als bloße Ideen sich im Geistigen fernzuhalten -: aber die Natur wüßte nichts von dieser uns irgendwie gelungenen Verdrängung - 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 ins andere - 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” (Rilke, Über Gott, 13ff, e. a.).
objects through time, their simultaneous wasting-away provides a human frame of reference. What is remarkable about this letter as well, is the description of the repression of death and god as a miscalculation. Counting and calculating is closely related to temporal procession. Rilke transposes death and God from a posterior into presence and infinite exceeding. One can understand this shift in terms of sets. The first model envisions life and death as two different sets, one apart from the other, the second sees one within the other.

The boundaries are permeable, as Rilke describes the animals walking from one realm to the other indifferently. And the direction is reversible as well: the passage from death to life to death to life is possible. And it is exactly this permeability and mutual pervadedness which lies at the heart of Rilke’s notion of the open, which he further develops in the *Duineser Elegien* and finally consummates in the *Die Sonette an Orpheus*, as a being that is thought as permeated by death and in which one can only fully consciously participate by going indifferently from one realm to the other. Already in this letter in 1915 Rilke sees an advantage in the animals, who do not shield themselves from the presence of death but “walk patiently” from one to the other. This, I suggest, is the foundation for understanding *Das Offene* – the open – of the 8th elegy, which the animals can see while habitual human perception is turned away from it.

This indifference towards living and dying persists from Rilke’s earliest works unto his last, in one of his early plays “Die weiße Fürstin” he has the countess say:

| Look, thus death is in life. Both pervade each other, like in a carpet the threads are running; and out of this emerges for one who passes by, an image. When someone dies, not only that is death. Death is when someone lives and doesn’t know it. Death is when someone cannot die. Many things are death, you can’t bury it. In us is daily dying and birth, and we are regardless/callous as nature, which endures over both, without mourning indifferent. Suffering and Joy are only colours for the stranger, who sees us. Therefore it means so much for us to find the viewer, him who sees, who subsumes/gathers us in viewing and simply says: I see this and that, where others only guess or lie. |

The truth of one’s own living and dying is not knowable and visible to the self but is beheld by the “one,” an external viewer who in a peripheral glance, not unlike the anamorphic viewer in Lacan’s elaboration on Hans Holbein’s *Ambassadors* beholding the skull sees the coherent image of our lives. This viewer constructively sees where other “strangers” merely observe shifting colours without participation and in voicing his observation gathers imaginative coherence from the indifferent material life-death shifting of the texture.
5.1.2. Rilke’s Occult Modernism

Although Rilke participates in spiritist practices such as séances and has a keen interest in esoteric writings at the turn of the century, he is deeply sceptical about superficial practices, such as table-turning (See Magnússon 359f). To Rilke, occult explorations are a way of deepening awareness for the entirety of being, of which the dead are part. We find in Rilke a keen interest in but an entirely experimental and speculative approach to new ideas that dominate the imagination at the turn of the century. Rilke reads Rudolf Kassner’s, Walther Rathenau’s and Oswald Spengler’s works criticizing conventional ideas of civilisation, as well as esoteric writings by authors such as Carl du Prel, Herrmann Keyserling, Alfred Schuler and Carl Vogl. Rilke amalgamates the impulses that these texts provide him with into a genuine creative cosmos and if there is a latent proto-fascism in, for example Schuler’s works, it does not transmigrate into Rilke’s works. This interest is most acutely visible in Rilke’s later works (See Pott 343ff). Rilke’s works have never been explicitly excused of fascist tendency. His stance of self-relinquishment and and resistance to any cult of greatness or mystification of power are incompatible with fascist aesthetics.

From his earliest poetry onwards, especially from Mir zur Feier (1899) Rilke collapses any boundary that could shelter the human body and its perceptual inside from the communication of the things amongst themselves: “every door in me gives in” [“Jede Türe / in mir gibt nach” W 1 109]. The interior and the exterior collapse: “when the clocks are ticking so close as in one’s own heart, [“Wenn die Uhren so nah / wie im eigenen Herzen schlagen”]. (W 2 109) The openness which emerges in the internity of the heart through these eradicated doors pervades all of Rilke’s oeuvre: inside and outside, self and other, the living and the dead, past and present are participating in each other and in this participation instantiate, consummate but also sustain each other into the pure duration of eternal co-presence. No gesture or prayer of the past vanishes “because the things are too heavy for that” – [“dazu sind die Dinge zu schwer”], the dead are involved in weaving the speakers’ self [“webten an meinem Sein”] and are still participating, as the speaker speculates

| Und setzte ich mich zu dir her  | and if I sat down close to you       |
| Und sagte dir leise: Ich litt – | and told you quietly: I suffered –   |
| Hörst Du?                     | Do you hear me?                      |
| Wer weiß wer                  | who knows who                        |
| Murmelt es mit                | is murmuring it with me              |

(Ibid.)

The speaker’s voice is estranged from himself, the agency is uncertain: Is the voice that murmurs simultaneously the voice of the things or of those who lived a long time ago – the “who knows” creates an open space, a tension in the face of which caution is apt, and questioning is possible but will not yield answers. The uncanny emerges via thinking a foreign authoring of the self – the self as an open question.

282 Tina Simon compiled a most valuable, concise overview of whom, what and when Rilke read: Rilke als Leser, 2001
5. Conceiving diLaFtEh – The Open in R. M. Rilke and W. B. Yeats

To understand Rilke’s notion of Other-authoring is explicable only through a closer look at Rilke’s occult readings and practices. Although, as Gísli Magnússon aptly points out, the study of the relevance of occultism to Rilke’s works was an exception rather than a rule in Rilke scholarship up to the nineties, after the turn of the century more attention has been paid to the topic although much remains to be done. The earliest exegeses however, often seem less inhibited by an anti-occultist bias, which in parts, of course emerged after the Second World War and the centrality of certain occult teachings and practices to the very outlook of NS-ideology. Again, careful differentiation is necessary. Where fascism was interested in gaining power and legitimacy to its claims to superiority through studying occultism, “ecological modernism” has no such agenda, on the contrary, it seeks an overcoming of egotic prejudices of human self-understanding, it seeks an understanding of community and unity which does not exclude the other, the non-human, the supernatural and the repressed but which includes it on the site of the unknowable and uncontrollable, that which pre-exists, exceeds and escapes. I would agree with Gísli Magnússon and Priska Pytlik that occultism is not peripheral but central to high modernism. However, the investigation of questions of Otherness and epistemological uncertainty is necessary to understand the project of an ecological modernism as partly overlapping with occult high Modernism as an “other Modernism” [“eine andere Moderne” 12]. In that it tries to find lucid forms of understanding the relation of self and other as well as counter the de-mystification of the world, modernism doesn’t so much try to re-enchant the world but in pointing towards the as-yet-unsolved mystery of being, in pointing to the limits of vision and understanding show that the world is still and always was – chanting and enchanting. Where the modernists seek wisdom through occult reading, their poetry performs the impossibility to know, grasp and manage the world. It is not ego-aggrandisement but self-relinquishment which becomes central to ecological modernist aesthetics, to which the foregrounding of an unknowable self is important. The loss of centre, subjectivity certainty, which is usually associated with Post-modernism as well as the preference for hybridity, paradox, baroque tricks is already present here. Occultism to both Yeats and Rilke plays an important part to the conception of the unity of that which is mutually exclusive. Eberhard Kretschmar already in 1936 observed that

One of the most central wisdoms of Rilke is his conviction that there is no true contradiction between this world and the beyond, between the realm of the living and the dead, but that there is synthesis in the entirety, which he calls the Whole [“das Ganze”]. But he does not only see life and death flow into each other without delineation, but he sees the entire realm of the supernatural, in which death is all but one district among many, flow together [“zusammenströmen”] in the natural and perceivable. Natural and supernatural, that which can be commonly experienced and the super-sensual are not clearly demarcated but are in constant connection [“stehen in dauernder Verbindung”], even if the supernatural only becomes rarely visible to some, it is

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283 Gísli Magnússon gives a comprehensive overview of the scholarly assessments of Rilke’s Occultism (56-67), as well as Rilke’s reception of the occultist writers of the 19th century, my study cannot add to this but will reinterpret some of these connections in the light of Rilke’s conception of environmental and all-unity.

284 Magnússon claims that what we find in occultist modernism are discourses of remystification, but I think modernist art and thought go beyond that, attempting to understand the paradox of being – as a revelation which occurs to the threshold realm of the imagination rather to the rational mind (“Wiederbezauberungsdiskurse” 12).
What interests us here, is the idea of continuity, which is at the foundation of all of Rilke’s perceptions, paradoxically connects that which radically excludes each other. Magnússon thus talks of a duo-unity which is both sensual and super-sensual [“sinnlich-übersinnliche” 223, “Duo-Einheit” 284]. Georg H. Blokesch, whom Magnússon mentions as the first scholar to state the centrality of the supernatural to the understanding of Rilke’s life and works, in 1933 in his essay *Rilke und das Übersinnliche: Aus unbekannten Papieren der Fürstin von Thurn und Taxis*, mentions the séances held at the castle of Duino in fall 1912, which left a deep impression on Rilke. Priska Pytlik in *Okkultismus und Moderne* (2005) notes that the Countess Thurn und Taxis ascribes the results of the automatic script that is gained from these sessions as manifestations of the poets’ unconscious but Rilke himself is convinced that they are messages from the dead (See Pytlik 169). ‘The unknown one’ [“Die Unbekannte”] Rilke calls a female entity which communicates through the automatic writing of the son of Marie von Thurn und Taxis (Prince Alexander called ‘Pascha’). And even in his absence, Rilke from time to time asks anxiously in letters whether there has been a message for him. Least ‘she’ had forgotten him (Ibid.).

Pytlik ascribes Rilke’s interest in the automatic script to the fact that some of the messages urge the poet to do his work, confirming thereby his vocation (Ibid.) “Why does he not sing?” Question: Who shall sing? Answer: The poet, write to him: he must, he shall! His duty. His calling. – He shall! He was once brushed by – No – write to him that I want. He shall not forget, because this is the reason why he… Otherwise he loses the part he gained.”

Pytlik observes that Rilke reads these lines as an imperative to finish his *Duineser Elegien*, and admits to being ‘pierced by shock’ rather than merely affected by a bad conscience (170). How seriously Rilke takes these communicators can be apprehended by considering the fact that he even travels to Toledo for a meeting with this “unknown one” at her request (Ibid.). Magnússon observes that Blokesch is quick to find a psychological explanation so as “not to be called naïve” (57), but nevertheless points out that for Rilke these phenomena were real and were explainable through the notion of a “fourth dimension.” (Blokesch, quoted in Magnússon 57).

Priska Pytlik underlines the importance of the fourth dimension to Rilke’s poetry since he claims that especially his *Sonnette an Orpheus* (1922) were almost entirely received as dictations. In his 1920 collection *Aus dem Nachlaß des Grafen C. W.* (From the Legacy of Count C. W.) the question of a shared authorship is maybe even more radically raised: Rilke refuses to publish them under his name, explaining to his publisher that he took down the poems as dictation from

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286 Pytlik’s far-reaching study locates Rilke’s first encounter with Du Prel in 1896 as the beginning of a deeper and pronounced interest in spiritism. Rilke reads Du Prel’s essay “Der Spiritismus” (1892) and *Das Rätsel des Menschen* (1893) and tells Du Prel in a letter of his fundamental agreement with his ideas and his profound interest in deeper study (see Pytlik 169).
an unknown gentleman dressed in 18th century array (See Pytlik 170). Rilke allegedly felt himself
to be in the company of the dead for much of his life, and certainly his most influential works,
such as *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge, Die Duinser Elegien* and *Die Sonette an Orpheus,*
cannot be read fruitfully without bearing this exposure in mind. Therefore, it is necessary to
rethink Sandra Kluwe’s observations on modernist authorship put forward in *Krisis und Kairos:*
“The paradox of a ‘theonomous autonomy’ – this demigod which the Greek employed under the
sign of a metaphysics of art and allegory, experienced a peculiar renaissance in the crises of
modernity in the early 20th century” (14).

Kluwe sees Rilke’s work in a tension between the maxims of autonomous aesthetic
authorship, the desire to aesthetically induce and produce the moment of inspiration, and the
passive dependence on inspiration, Kairos and dictation [“kairotisches Diktat”] (15). Many
scholars, as for example Gabriela Wacker (2013) and Sandra Kluwe (1999) are satisfied to
categorise this tension in terms of a prophetic authorship, Martina King (2009) furthermore
investigates the strategies of Rilke’s self-fashioning as a prophetic author. But this is a
problematic step, since the source of the inspiration is already assumed rather than
problematised. The “ambivalent force” [“ambivalente Macht”] of the inspired author, however is
directly related by Rilke himself to the dead. “Are they the masters that sleep by the roots” [“Sind
sie die Herren die bei den Wurzeln schlafen?”] (*W* 2 247)? Magnússon observes that in Rilke’s
works there is a continuity between the realms of the living and the dead, one towering or
protruding into the other – an idea Rilke himself uses “Hineinragen” (178). He reads Rilke’s
occultism against the background of the *philosophia perennis* tradition (179-183). Most importantly,
however, he reads Rilke’s *Weltinnenraum* – (internity) in the context of the esoteric concept of a
*mundus imaginalis* a third realm which Henry Corbin describes as world-in-between or *mesocosm*
[“Zwischenwelt…Mesokosmos”] which in Rilke figures as a “sensual-supersensual monism”
[“sinnlich-übersinnlicher Monismus”] (183).

Going back to Paracelsus’ ‘vast inner firmament,’ for Rilke *Weltinnenraum* is extended
through both the measurable and immeasurable environment, the interior of the human being as
well as the traces of the dead: In his famous letter to Nora Purtscher-Wydenbruck on the 11th of
August 1924 he describes the “depth dimension of our interior, which does not even need the
expanses of the universe to be in itself almost unsurveyable. If then the dead or the coming need
a place to stay, which shelter should be more comfortable and more willingly offered than this
imaginary space?” While this correspondence emphasises pure interiority, in the majority of his
artistic elaborations on death and perception Rilke carefully elaborates pervadedness. In his prose
pieces *Erlebnis I and II,* in the “Improvisationen aus dem Capreser Winter”, and in the poem
“Todes-Erfahrung” – it is through perceiving one’s own interior as being “pierced” by the cries
of birds, the atoms of a tree one rests against, that the *Weltinnenraum* - emerges into consciousness
as a vast and shared *internity.* Magnússon’s otherwise brilliant study makes too little of this

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287 See also Rehm, *Orpheus, der Dichter und die Toten* 1972.
288 “ […] Tiefendimension unseres Innern, das nicht einmal die Geräumigkeit des Weltalls nötig hat, um in sich fast
unabhäglich zu sein. Wenn also Tote, wenn also Künftige einen Aufenthalt nötig haben, welche Zuflucht sollte
Ihnen angenehmer und angebotener sein, als dieser imaginäre Raum?” (*Rilke: Briefe.* Bd. II, 452)
“commuting” of both the dead and the living as an environmental exchange - from the outside to the inside and back. It is not possible to talk about a mundus imaginalis in Rilke that isn’t at the same time the natural environment.

Rilke’s friendship with the biologist Jakob von Uexküll has been mentioned in the third chapter. Uexküll was the first to turn from the supposition of an objective shared environment to a subjective, individual experience of environments, which all animate beings experience. Their environments can overlap but seldom concur. Magnússon, with reference to Monika Fick’s treatment of this matter in *Sinnenwelt und Weltseele* (esp. 21) points out that both Rilke’s and Uexküll’s notion of the environment is strongly influenced by an experience connected with the death and funeral of the Countess Louise Schwerin, which both he and Rilke attended and on account of which Rilke wrote his famous elegiac sonnet “Todes-Erfahrung.”

In *Von nie geschauten Welten* 1936, Uexküll describes a peculiar /noteworthy environment-experience [“merkwürdiges Umwelterlebnis”] (Uexküll, 267, quoted in Magnússon 318f). Describing how on the day of her funeral he walks through the familiar landscape, alone, when suddenly the character of the landscape changes dramatically for the quarter of an hour and everything, trees, leaves, sky and clouds assume a more intense colour and an “unanticipated radiance” [“strahlten in ungeahnter Pracht”] (Ibid.). Uexküll speculates that Rilke’s lines in “Todes-Erfahrung” are evidence of the fact that the poet, too, experienced this radiance: “But when you left, into this stage broke / a rim of reality through this gap / through which you went away: Green of real greens, / real sunshine, real wood” (W 1 480). Uexküll surmises that perhaps they both were granted a view into her “true environment” and Magnússon is quick to point out that this would mean that Rilke and Uexküll both assumed that they were momentarily staying in and sharing the environment of their dead friend. For Rilke in “Todes-Erfahrung” the intrusion of a heightened radiance of the environment interrupts the theatricality of self-performance, described in terms of mask and stage-play that dominate the rest of the poem [“Noch ist die Welt voll Rollen, die wir spielen”] (W 1 480). The experience of the radiant landscape is, in contrast to that, a sharing in the dissolved presence of the dead friend. Magnússon calls this presence of the dead “Ausgebreitetsein im Ganzen” [being spread throughout the whole] (320). It becomes accessible to the living as will be discussed in the following. He points to Rilke’s description of Bettine von Arnim in *Malte* as someone who is already dead and “stretched far out into being, belonging to it. And what happened to her was infinitely within nature, there she recognised herself and almost painfully extracted herself; guessed herself back, labouriously, as if out of old oral tales, summoned herself as a ghost and endured herself.”

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290 “überall hat sie sich ganz weit ins Sein hineingelegt, zugehörig dazu, und was ihr geschah, das war ewig in der Natur, dort erkannte sie sich und löste sich beinah schmerzhaft heraus; erriet sich mühsam zurück wie aus Überlieferungen, beschwor sie wie einen Geist und hielt sich aus” (W 3 598).
5. Conceiving dLeIaFtEh – The Open in R. M. Rilke and W. B. Yeats

5.1.3. The Perspective of the Revenant – Post-mortem Environmental Self-experience

Experience for Rilke entails All-Unity which through embodied perception figures as an encounter of embodied Self and Other, located on the site of the environment, experienced as external. Rilke does not simply eradicate the difference but shows how it is bound up with perception. Difference can fluctuate and remain unfixable within a dynamic, procedural unity. Hermann Kunisch describes experience in Rilke in terms of a mysticism of being, a notion I would like to maintain and radicalise (Von der Reichsunmittelbarkeit der Poesie 395ff). The god of experience as “pure being”, actus purus, instantiates all that is. Within experience being emerges into consciousness, thus, experience itself becomes a divine self-experience of a wholly Other being Self, it acquires an “inner-worldly holy quality of being.” Kunisch observes that there are direct experiences, which Rilke first notes in his diaries and then transforms into prose pieces Erlebnis I and II and which are essential to providing a context for understanding the Duineser Elegien and Die Sonette an Orpheus: They originate in 1906/07 and 1912 in direct experiences of environments in Italy and Spain (Capri, Toledo and Ronda) but are marked February 1913 in his notebook in Ronda (292).

What Kunisch describes as a mysticism of an experience that is at once in-most and strange [“innig”…“seltsam”] (398). I would describe as an environmentally uncanny encounter with being in which the self is discovered as unsheltered and pervaded – as the homeliness of a prior and exceeding Other’s Self-experience and the strangeness of one’s habitual sense of certitude of bodily limits. Manfred Engel in his commentary points out that this proximity with nature, which pervades both pieces, Rilke loses during the years of the First World War (W 4 1027). To Alexandrine Dietrichstein he writes on the 6th of August 1919 that it was no longer possible to relate himself to a tree, a field the grace of an evening “because what did the tree know, the field the landscape in the evening of this ill-fated, disastrous, killing human?” Rilke narrates the event-experience “Erlebnis” from a third person singular, indicating distance: The speaker describes a male person pacing outside in the evening with a book. He chances upon and leans against a shrub-like tree, rather leans or rests into the space between two branches [“eingeruht”] (W 4 666). He feels vibrations from the inside of the tree enter his body without effort, which he first ascribes to a slight wind brushing by. He is surprised and encompassed by the impact caused by this ceaseless pressing-in (“überrascht, ja ergriffen von der Wirkung”

291 “Das Geschehen einer sich als Innerweltliches bekundenden  ‘heiligen’ Qualität des Seins” (Kunisch 395). I would like to use holy as a notion that does not denote the sacred but in its ethymological derivedness from Proto-Germanic *hailaga- (cf. Old Norse heilagr, Old Frisian helich “holy,” Old Saxon helag, Middle Dutch helich, Old High German heilag, German heilig, cf. “holy” (Online Ethymoplogical Dictionary <http://etymonline.com/?term=holy>) denotes „whole, entire, intact“ - paradoxically because the self is experienced as pervaded by or given by the Other.

292 For more on the fundamental importance of Spain for Rilke’s poetic negotiations of night see Jean Gebser Rilke und Spanien (Zürich 1946).

293 “Denn was wußte der Baum, das Feld, die Abendlandschaft von diesem unseeligen, verheerenden, tödenden Menschen?” (R. M. Rilke Briefe zur Politik 271)

294 “als ob aus dem Innern des Baumes fast unmerkliche Schwingungen in ihn übergingen”… “daß ein leichter nicht sichtlicher, vielleicht den Hang flach herabreichender Wind im Holz zur Geltung kam” (W 4 666).
“unaufhörlich Herrüberdringende”] (Ibid.). He believes never to have felt more subtle motions, treating his body like a soul, which was enabled to receive a degree of influence which he thought impossible to experience in bodily terms. He receives a subtle and dissolved message [“feine und ausgebreitete Mitteilung”] (W 4 667). And asking himself what is happening he recites to himself that he has gotten to the other side of nature [“vor sich hinsagend: er sei auf die andere Seite der Natur geraten”] (Ibid.). In this innermost pressing-in [“Andrang”] his body becomes incredibly moving/affecting [“unbeschreiblich rührend”] and useful only to stand in it purely and carefully [“rein und vorsichtig”] like a Revenant. Here Rilke’s thinking of being takes an interesting turn as the perceiver describes himself as returned from the dead, which is what the term denotes. This also explains why Rilke uses the third person singular for an experience that in multiple documents and letters he describes as of paramount importance to him, most intimately his own. He returns to the world:

Just like a revenant, already residing elsewhere, returning melancholy and absentmindedly/scattered to that which has already been put away to belong to the world he once took to be indispensable. Slowly looking around, without otherwise altering his posture, he recognised everything, smiled at it with distant inclination/fondness, allowed it to be, as something from earlier on, which once, under different circumstances took part in him […]. Where otherwise his dwelling place had been he would have been unable to think. But he knew that he had only returned to all this and was standing in his own body as if in the depth of an abandoned window […]. He realised how all objects were giving themselves to him more distantly and truthfully. This might have been due to his gaze which was not directed forward anymore but dissolved itself in the open. Suddenly, his position became burdensome. He felt the tree trunk, the tiredness of the book in his hand and he stepped out. A recognisable wind was browsing through the tree, it came from the ocean. The bushes on the hillside were rummaging through each other.

Rilke thus transposes death into the very centre and foundation of self-experience as the already posterior actor of existence, one who knows all things as already completed. This experience comes upon him by stepping “into” the tree, by being pervaded by an already abandoned self-experience, a scattered subjectivity coming from an unknowable place. When the “he” of the Erlebnis finally returns out of the experiential dimension of the unity of being to the habitual perception of the discreet solidity of book, body and tree, the wind nevertheless remains there as personified third-person subjectivity, flipping through the leaves of the tree [“blättern”] – organically prolonging the act of reading yet animating the leaves Blätter into their significance – after all, each tree, as part of the “green lung” of earth gives its oxygen molecules, pollen and

295 Revenant [Wiedergänger]: someone returned from the dead, a ghost or apparition (See: “Revenant” Der Duden online).
296 “Langsam um sich sehend, ohne sich sonst in der Haltung zu verschieben, erkannte er alles, erinnerte es, lächelte es gleichsam mit entfernter Zuneigung an, ließ es gewähren, wie ein viel Früheres, das einmal, in abgetanen Umständen, an ihm beteiligt war. […] Wo sonst sein Aufenthalt war, hätte er nicht zu denken vermocht, aber daß er zu diesem allen hier nur zurückkehrte, in diesem Körper stand, wie in der Tiefe eines verlassenen Fensters, hinübersehend […]] Überhaupt konnte er merken, wie sich alle Gegenstände ihm entfernter und zugleich irgendwie wahrer gaben, es mochte dies an seinem Blick liegen, der nicht mehr vorwärts gerichtet war und sich dort, im Offenen […] Auf einmal fing seine Stellung an, ihm beschwerlich zu sein, er fühlte den Stamm, die Müdigkeit des Buches in seiner Hand, und trat heraus. Ein deutlicher Wind blätterte jetzt in dem Baum, er kam vom Meer, die Büsche den Hang herauf wühlten in einander” (W 4 667f; e.a.).
countless other organic bits and genetic bytes of information to the wind to “read” from them in a literal fashion, to grasp, remove, retain and dissemble atoms and energies to other places. The act of reading returns quite literally to its medial cycle the tree and the wind and the (already dead) human can step in and out of experiential unity into the illusion of discreetness, in this prose piece. The speaker understands himself as at the same time dead and alive. This perception is of course not accessible from a habitual vantage point.

The idea of the revenant is in many ways a result of Rilke’s interest in Egypt, where he travelled in 1911 and which captured his interest so much that he planned to study Egyptology on his return. (See Grimm 10ff) He read translations of old Egyptian poems and other texts at the time, for example Gespräche eines Lebensmüden mit seiner Seele in which a man converses with his Ba.297 The death-consciousness that emerges in the Duineser Elegien must be read in this light.

5.1.3.2. Rilke’s Relation to Turn-of-the-Century Thinking of Space and Time

Rilke’s understanding of a meta-temporal dimension [“metatemporale Dimension”] of human experience has been variously noted in scholarship in terms of a space-time continuum. (e.g. Eppelsheimer 54, Gellhaus 45, Buschmeier & Dembeck 359, Langner 65, Tang 196) Rilke explores questions of temporality and duration in his poetry as well as in his letters. I agree with Jana Schuster, that Rilke’s term Wendung denoting “turning point” and principle of turning is resonant with the climate of discovery at the time, first and foremost the discovery of space-time:

The history of the term space-time is closely connected to the special theory of relativity. The Hungarian philosopher Menyhért Palágyi in 1901 developed a theory of space-time which already envisioned time as a fourth dimension of space, but it does not yet create a connection to thermodynamics. In September 1905 Einsteins’ ‘On the electrodynamics of moving bodies’ lays the foundation to a special theory of relativity and in 1906 the mathematician, physicist and philosopher Henri Poincaré introduces the speed of light as the constant of the fourth coordinate. The German mathematician Hermann Minkowski further develops this notion and in 1907/08 in a sensational presentation proclaims the end of traditional conceptions of space and time and introduces space-time as a four-dimensional non-Euklidean manifold.298

297 In 1843, the egyptologist Lepsius purchased this papyrus manuscript from the XIIth Dynasty known as "Berlin Papyrus 3024." In 1859, he published the text without translation. Adolf Erman first translated it in 1896. Rilke discusses the text with the Professor for Egyptology Friedrich Wilhelm Freiherr von Bissing (Grimm 10ff).

Furthermore, she provides details of Rilke’s reception of the works of the French Henri Bergson. \(^{299}\) That Rilke’s thinking of death and self-world continuity in terms of a unity of being is influenced by the emerging images of this non-Euklidean “manifold” is apparent. Karl-Heinz Fingerhut discusses the influence of Henri Bergson on Rilke’s worldview in *Das Kreatürliche im Werke Rainer Maria Rilkes* 68ff. Ji-Ming Tang sees a special relation between Rilke’s concept of the spatial-temporal model of consciousness developed in his famous letter to Nora Pertuchwydenbruck from the 11th of August 1924 and Bergson’s model of subjectivity [“Ich-Modell”] developed in *Matière et mémoire* (1896) and *L’énergie spirituelle* (1919) which Rilke read between 1913 and 1920 (See Tang 196). Rilke views space-time as a continuity which is layered through different stages of consciousness:

> However extended is the “exterior” may be, all its sidereal distances do not so much as merit a comparison with the depth-dimension of our interior being […]. To me it always seems as if our habitual consciousness inhabits the tip of a pyramid, the base of which – in us and beneath us – extends so drastically that we, the more we see ourselves able to lower ourselves into it, appear all the more comprehensively encompassed into the circumstances/givenness of the earth, of what we may call, in the broadest sense, *earthly* being. From my earliest youth I have felt the suspicion - and have lived according to it wherever I sufficed to do so – that in a deeper stratum of the pyramid of consciousness simple being could become an event/happening for us, this inviolable being-given and being-simultaneously of all that we are allowed to experience as progression/sequence/flow/expiration at the tip of self-consciousness. \(^{300}\)

Here, consciousness is the difference to the co-present strata of experiencing being of the *earth*. Fingerhut points out that Rilke’s thought is indebted to Bergson exactly on the point of seeing the instincts as more suited to understand being than the intellect (l’intelligence), which is set to manage the world, compartmentalising and systematising “true space” thereby destroying its continuity. The instinct (l’instinct), on the other hand is at one with the entire stream of life ‘l’élan vital’ and has access to true space and time which is a continuous flow forming the d’urée profonde’. Rilke adopts the idea of a stream of life instantiating all beings and a ‘conscience en générale’ which extends, like space, through all bodies, objects and phenomena (Fingerhut 69).

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299 Schuster mentions that Rilke in 1913 borrowed two volumes of Bergson in the French original from Lou Andreas-Salomé *Matière et mémoire* (1896) in its 8th edition Auflage of 1912 and *L’évolution créatrice* (1907) in the 11th edition of 1912. Schuster further mentions a letter he writes on the 13th of June 1914 to Marie Taxis: „I am reading Bergson and am delighted to be able to follow for pages on end, there is something in this spirit which we all need and for which we are most acutely prepared” [“Ich lese Bergson und freue mich, daß ich seitenlang mitkomme, es ist schon etwas in diesem Geiste, was wir alle brauchen können und worauf wir eigentlich ganz dringend vorbereitet sind”] (Quoted in Schuster 197).

300 “So ausgedehnt das ‘Außen’ ist, es verträgt mit allen seinen siderischen Distanzen kaum einen Vergleich mit den Dimensionen, mit der Tiefendimension unseres Inneren, das nicht einmal die Geräumigkeit des Weltalls nötig hat, um in sich fast unabschätzig zu sein. […] Mir stellt es sich immer mehr so dar, als ob unser gebräuchliches Bewusstsein die Spitze einer Pyramide bewohne, deren Basis in uns [und gewissermaßen unter uns] so völlig in die Breite geht, dass wir, je weiter wir in sie niederzulasen uns befähigt sehen, desto allgemeiner einbezogen erscheinen in die von Zeit und Raum unabhängigen Gegebenheiten des irdischen, des, im weitesten Begriffe, weltischen Daseins. Ich habe seit meiner frühesten Jugend die Vermutung empfunden [und hab ihr auch, wo ich dafür ausreichte, nachgelebt], dass in einem tieferen Durchschnitt dieser Bewussteinspyramide uns das einfache Sein könnte zum Ereignis werden, jenes unverbrüchliche Vorhanden-Sein und Zugleich-Sein alles dessen, was an der oberen „normalen“ Spitze des Selbstbewussteins nur als „Ablauf“ zu erleben verstärkt ist” (Rilke Briefe 295).
Rilke’s poetics make tangible the deeper layers from which being can be experienced other
than from the incarceration of embodied temporal expiration. For this purpose he uses the
vantage point of the revenant – a perceiving consciousness that has returned from the deeper layer
of durée in which all time is already co-present. In this sense, Rilke’s attempts to think non-
Euklidean space-time are also an attempt of thinking being in an environmental sense, more-
than-human. It is clear that from this notion of the simultaneity and co-extensivity of radically
different modes of self-experience, Rilke’s notion of being is not strictly speaking post-humanist.
Just as Schrödinger’s cat from the view of the experiment in quantum mechanics is neither
certainly dead nor alive, so we might reserve for Rilke an undecided stance. From the deeper,
more expanded strata of consciousness, post-mortem humanity to Rilke, as we have seen, is
dissolved into the ecosphere and is therefore thought eco-centrically and yet, in that consciousness
has returned into human subjectivity, at the same time is still experienced anthropocentrically from
an embodied individual viewpoint. This uncertain relation is enabled by the figure of the revenant
– the one returned from the dead – which we find embodied in the paradoxical figure of the
dissembled human-divine agency of song, Orpheus, but which we also, curiously, find in the
figure of Malte, the protagonist of Rilke’s novel, Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge. This
character, Rilke presents from the very beginning as an uncanny presence of a
“drowned/wrecked/demised one” in a letter to Lou Andreas Salomé on 28th of December 1911
(Gesammelte Briefe 147). Describing the process of the literary emergence of the figure of Malte as
a kenotic process of self-depletion:

The wrecked/drowned/demised one has worn me out, somehow. Has fuelled
his immense ruin with the forces and objects of my life, there is nothing that
wasn’t in his hands, in his heart. He appropriated everything with the imploring
of his desperation. Whenever something appears new to me I discover the
crack in it, the brusk place where he tore himself off. Maybe this book had to
be written like igniting a mine, maybe I should have jumped into safety, the
moment it was ready. But I am still too attached to property, perhaps, and
cannot perform this boundless poverty, as much as it probably is my decisive
task.301

The author-text relation, which emerges here and which we will further follow on account to Die
Sonette an Orpheus is kenotic. The author is depleted and worn out by the spectral presence of the
virtual character, who himself is depicted as originating from a realm “beyond destitution.” The
writing of the text is likened to the triggering of an explosive, creating in-formation within the
physical universe, from which the author would have liked to save his self but being “attached”
to the creation found himself unable to. The detachment from the text in the “release” thus
appears as a poverty, which Rilke defines as his vocation. It is clear, that in the light of such an

301 “Der Untergegangene hat mich irgendwie abgenutzt, hat mit den Kräften und Gegenständen meines Lebens den
immense Aufwand seines Untergangs betrieben, da ist nichts was nicht in seinen Händen, in seinem Herzen war,
er hat sich mit der Inständigkeit seiner Verzweiflung alles angeeignet; kaum scheint mir ein Ding neu, so entdeck
ich auch schon den Bruch daran, die brüse Stelle wo er sich abgerissen hat. Vielleicht müßte dieses Buch
geschrieben sein, wie man eine Mine anzündet; vielleicht hät ich ganz weit wegspringen müßen im Moment, da
es fertig war. Aber dazu häng ich wohl noch zusehr am Eigentum und kann das maßlose Armsein nicht leisten,
so sehr es auch wahrscheinlich meine entscheidende Aufgabe ist” (Briefe 147f).
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authorial self-conception, the text has to be seen as within a continuity of life. It is another instance of an inter-face, a destroyed face into which the physical life of the author congealed but which is metabolically transfigured in the reading minds of those who receive it.

5.1.3.4 *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910 – Views of a Revenant

In a letter, reflecting on the process of writing the novel, Rilke in retrospect envisions the main character as a dead entity feasting off his vitality, which in turn is depleted. The fictional character assumes an uncanny presence, as each of the objects Rilke encounters appear as already touched by this unnamed ‘demised one.’ Death and life in Rilke’s novel cannot be told apart. The novel is full of haunting presences and uncanny or outright horrific phenomena which make an orientation impossible and expose the reader to this uncertainty – like Rilke’s angels in the elegies we are unable to differentiate whether we are walking among the living or the dead. When it comes to its main protagonist it is quite remarkable that Malte introduces himself as a pure witness – in the past “I have was out/ I was turned off out. I have seen” [“Ich bin ausgewesen. Ich habe gesehen.”] (W 3 455). The present, on the contrary, is marked by a permeability of self, a spread-out-ness and exposure that is again uncanny as the tram train rushes through Malte’s room and a host of other sound phenomena expose him to the city as an internal co-presence. Here what Magnússon calls the being-spread out through the whole [“Ausgebreitetsein im Ganzen”] of the dead, the perception of being stretched out of the dead is inherent to the first person narrator’s experience.302 Malte is dead in the sense of having died to habitual human perception but also in the sense of having gone away to think, as Rilke describes the dead in his tale *Von der Gerechtigkeit*, one of the *Geschichten vom lieben Gott*:

> How, then, does a dead person differ from someone becoming serious, renouncing time and locking himself in to think calmly about something, the solution of which has been bothering him for a long time […] and maybe the dead are those that have withdrawn themselves to think about life.303

Malte went away to learn anew how to see. This has traditionally been read in the context of modernist loss of subjectivity and re-orientation in the face of urban disintegration. What if we think the figure of Malte radically from beyond death? After all he considers himself a “nothing” [“ein Nichts”], his old possessions are rotting in a barn, he has no roof to shield him and rain falls into his eyes [“Ich habe kein Dach über mir und es regnet mir in die Augen”] (W 3 483). He would have loved to become a poet but things happened differently (Ibid.). This reading would

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302 I thank Tina-Karen Pusse for pointing out to me this idea that Malte might as well be dead; the following reading is based entirely on her first suggesting certain evidences to me.

303 “Wo durch aber unterscheidet sich denn ein Toter von einem Menschen, welcher ernst wird, auf die Zeit verzichtet und sich einschließt, um über etwas ruhig nachzudenken, dessen Lösung ihn lange schon quält?” (W 3 377)
also concur with Manfred Engel’s observation that the “new seeing” in Malte is neither one of recognition or apperception but, since the boundary between subject and object has already collapsed, has become accepting of all external phenomena and allows the mood of the object to transmigrate into the viewer: “everything enters deeper into me, and nothing remains at its former boundary. I have an interior of which I knew nothing, everything goes there, now. I don’t know what happens there.”

Malte describes himself as undergoing drastic and rapid changes, and considers the futility of trying to report these changes to anyone, as nobody will be able to relate to him since he isn’t anymore who he was, thus having no acquaintances, he doesn’t see any sense in writing to strangers (W 3 456). Even his former home is a forsaken place where nobody lives anymore “[wo nun niemand mehr ist]”. Malte finds it hard to think that the people he knew are no more there and he himself travels without destination and possessions, not even with memories – “if childhood was there but it is as if buried” (“wäre die Kindheit da, sie ist wie vergraben”) (Ibid.).

There is a constant stream of images configuring death-in-life. The personified death of Malte’s paternal grandfather Christoph Detlev Brigge is a haunting possessor, wielding his grandfather’s voice [“Nicht Christoph Detlev war es, welchem diese Stimme gehörte […]”] (W 3 462). This death demands and rules – it demands to see friends, women and dead people, demands that there be dance and silence and all at the same time (Ibid.). Death is the driving force of life in the house. This personified death is perceived by the villagers as oppressively close. The pregnant women perceive it as if happening within their own bodies [“als ob es in ihrem eigenen Leibe wäre”] (Ibid.). While this may indicate feudal memories of Leibeigenschaft, instantiating the ruler’s body in his subjects, there already is a deeper participation in death, as the women have “blurred/obliterated faces” [“mit ihren verwischten Gesichtern”] bearing in their womb a child and a death (W 3 462). The other grandfather of the protagonist the Count Brahe is a figure of meta-temporal consciousness, to whom past present and future are simultaneously given. Ji-Ming Tang sees a parallel between Rilke’s thought and Einstein’s relativity in this circumstance (196). Death is recounted as being a minor disruption to Malte’s grandfather [“ein kleiner Zwischenfall”] which he completely ignores [“vollkommen ignorierte”], regarding persons which he had admitted to his memory as present – a circumstance that could not be changed by their demise (W 3 475). He experiences the future with the same pernacity as the present (Ibid.). The protagonist has inherited this perception in so far as he is also able to perceive the presence of the deceased but unable to perceive a difference between the ghost Christine Brahe and the living [“Ich wußte nicht, daß sie eine Gestorbene war”] (W 3 478). The grandfather is characterised as of an indifferent mind. He acknowledges the ghost’s right to be there, he grants them to pursue their own ends in his house - a reason for controversy between him and Malte’s father, unable to physically see the ghosts.

The figure of Erik Brahe is remembered in the novel as a cousin who died as a child but who appears in a nightly encounter in which he reports that he and the ghost Christine were

304 “es geht alles tiefer in mich ein und bleibt nicht und der Stelle stehen, wo es früher zu Ende war. Ich habe ein inneres von dem ich früher nichts wußte, alles geht jetzt dorthin. Ich weiß nicht, was dort geschieht” (W 3 456, commentary, see W 3 912).
looking for Christine’s portrait. Malte is seamlessly part of the conversation, his lamp is blown out by the boy and when asked for his friendship the boy says “it is all the same to me” [“Mir ists gleich”], indicating that already at this point in Malte’s memory he was a ghost (W 3 537). It remains to be suspected that Malte also died as a child, being able to see other ghosts, and that he merely imagines individual existence, a dream which is threatened to be disturbed by realisation, at every moment.

However, the reader is not granted certainty as to who the sometime-presences are and who the “actual” living. Malte describes the ways in which he is not perceived by readers in the Bibliothèque Nationale- “you can go over to someone and silently touch him – he won’t feel it.” Of course, this can be attributed to their absorption in the books, but the passage that follows spirals into a rather uncanny reverie: Malte admits that he could go into a bakery and put his hand into a cake stand to take something [“könnte mit meiner Hand getrost in einen Kuchenteller greifen und etwas nehmen”] without having to fear anyone would notice or stop him (W 3 480). He attributes this circumstance to the fact that his hand is from a socially respectable background and clean, a bit too clean, perhaps) as there is “nothing under the nails” [“es ist nichts unter den Nägeln,” e.a. ] (Ibid.).

Although he is poor his collar is clean as his joints are clean. Though he is quick to add that there are “existences […] the thrown-away ones, hulls of humans spit out by fate” on the Boulevard Saint-Michel which cannot be deterred by his joints “they look at me and know it”) They know that he actually belongs to them that he only “acts a piece of comedy” [“daß ich nur ein bifschen Komödie spiele”] (Ibid.). These figures have so far only been read as signifiers of poverty and social abjection (See Bettina Müller 2010, 11), asocial urban characters, messengers of a horrific future (Egon Schwarz Zu Rainer Maria Rilke 92), in the face of which Malte experiences a shift from attachment to subjective personality to a will of entering transformation. Margret Eifler maybe comes closest to a suspicion that these thrown-away ones are the dead: “figures of renunciation of a static-aetherial being” [“entsagende Wesen von statisch-aetherischer Qualität”] they are indifferent to what becomes of them and to their misery. (Die subjektivistische Romanform seit ihren Anfängen in der Frühromantik 60). Caught in the idea that he is still alive, Malte is terrified to think that he is already irrevocably at one with this state of being which scares and

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305 “Du kannst hingehen zu einem und ihn leise anrühren: er fühlt nichts” (W 3 479).
306 The uncanny inherent in the alienation of his own hand is a recurring topos. Malte recounts how as a child a disembodied hand groped for his in the darkness under the couch as he was groping likewise for a lost object. See Parry, “Malte’s Hand” 1957 and Tubach “The Image of the Hand”1961, 240-246.
307 “Fortgeworfene…die sehen mich an und wissen es” (W 3 480). Rilke further differentiates between the poor and the thrown-away ones: “[…] man muß Unterschiede machen. Es sine Abfälle, Schalen von Menschen…” (W 3 481).
308 Joseph Metz calls them “fragmented, bodily reminders of modernity who are quite literally Kristeva’s abject, expelled objects [“Abfälle, Schalen von Menschen, die das Schicksal ausgespieen hat”] - no such final drawing of borders or exclusion of the abject is possible. For Malte also is a “homeless” body “[I]ch habe kein Dach über mir, und es regnet mir in die Augen” and his passage into the library is a journey to a land of death or ultimate Otherness “[D]ann bin ich zwischen diesen Büchern, bin euch weggenommen, als ob ich gestorben wäre.” (“Exhuming Rilke’s Orphic Body” (…) The synecdoche “as if I had died” is turned into an uncanny metonymy “Ich habe einen Dichter” “[I have/possess a poet]” which engages the uncertainty of figurative and literal speech (2636).
unsetses him. Perhaps the “learning to see” that he proclaimed in the beginning of the novel to be his main occupation is a “learning how to see differently” after death:

If my fear were not so great, I would console myself by thinking it not impossible to see everything different and yet live. But I am afraid, I am namelessly afraid of this change [...] In the midst of this fear I am like someone standing in front of something great and I remember I felt this way often before I began to write, only, that this time I will be written. I am the aspect/impression that will change, oh there isn’t much missing and I could almost grasp it, approve of it.309

The oscillation between the greatness of his fear and the “small” unnamed amount [“ein Kleines”] which is missing and thus keeps him from “accepting” is very revelatory. Once Malte has realised and “approved” of this change he knows that he will not be executing the writing but be written as text. The change is slight: from the first person present active progressive verb to the first person future passive progressive verb which preserves the continuity of writing and prolongs it into the future as the anticipation of the accomplishment of being gathered into the artifice of the text.

Malte, however, is as yet not able to “approve”, thus to him, walking among the dead and the living, the thrown-away ones are timeless, liminal figures which appear at twilight and in autumn and which are standing at bridges or walls or lamp post for eternity. He is haunted by the impression that they are giving him signs and that there is a “certain appointment” [gewisse Verabredung] (41). At first Malte only encounters them randomly but soon, no day passes without an encounter and they appear even at midday in the most populated streets (Ibid.). Their winking and peculiar habits however, their over-familiarity are uncanny: a woman following him around with a drawer in which small objects roll around, another woman signalling an indecipherable message to him by holding up a pencil.

Malte, the revenant, looks at the ruins of a house and sees the remnants of humanity in it, diagnoses the “broken face” of the human-environment and realises that it is his life and his memories wafting from the material remnants of life. Human life holds on to the rusty nails stuck into the walls of a former interior that is now exposed to the environmental forces. Ductile/viscous life hangs on to the remnants of colour on the wall-paper, where once a mirror had been, and the air of these past lives stood out “this viscous, sluggish mildewed air which had not been dissembled by any wind yet. There stood the mid-days and the diseases and all that had been exhaled, the year-old smoke and sweat.”310 Rilke views the one ruinous wall as the anchoring point to an environmental memory. Life is described in elemental terms as the attribute of liquids. As Rilke had described god in terms of the water cycle now life is transposed into the


310 “[...] stand die Luft dieser Leben heraus, die zähe, träge, stockige Luft, die kein Wind noch zerstreut hatte. Da standen die Mittage und die Krankheiten und das Ausgeatmete und der jahrelte Rauch und der Schweiß [...]” (W 3 486).
permutation of elements. The wind here as in uncountable other instances in his oeuvre is the
divine-profaning *communicator* which carries memories away, keeping them as much as
dissembling them. The stagnant air *literally* holds on to humanity, from that which metabolistically
migrated from the innermost places in the body into the physiological traces of habits and
emotions persisting in the air as aroma: “the sweet, long-lasting smell of neglected babies, the
smell of the anxiety of school-children, the stuffy smell of the beds of pubescent boys” (W 3 486).

The novel thus opens up space as continuous and limitlessly extended through the inside
of the one who experiences and the outside of the experienced world. The protagonist and first
person narrator is in no way sheltered but anxiously exposed to the elements, the city and all
personages. Rilke creates a zone of uncertainty as to the ontic status of *Malte*, as the unwittingly
confessed indicators of the fact that he is already dead encounter a first-person consciousness
unable to consider such option. Rilke opens the dream\(^3\) as a prime locus of undecidedness and
undecidability of the ontic status of self-experience. In the night and dreaming undelineated
space comes into a spread-out self-consciousness:

The existence of the horrible in each compound of the air, you breathe it in
with the obscure; within you still it precipitates, solidifies and becomes pointy,
constructs geometrical forms between your organs. Because every torture and
every horror that ever happened on execution sites, in torture chambers, in
insane asylums, in operation rooms under bridges in nightly autumns, all this is
of a viscous durability. All this insists on itself and is suspended in its terrible
reality, envious of all that is in existence. Humans would like to be allowed to
forget much of it. Sleep smoothes over such furrows in the brain, gently, but
dreams divert them and re-inscribe the drawing. And they awake panting and
let a candle’s light dissolve itself in the darkness and they drink, like sugared
water, the half-lightened reassurance. But, oh, on what edge does this certainty
suspend itself! Only the slightest turn and again the gaze protrudes beyond the
familiar and friendly and the contour which was just now so consoling becomes
more discernable as a rim of terror. Guard yourself against the light, which
hollows the room/space. Do not turn around to look, because maybe a shadow
rises behind your self-erecting as your master. Better, perhaps, you had

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\(^3\)The only study that so far deals with dreams and dreaming in Rilke’s poetry and letters, explicitly and exclusively is
Erich Simenauer’s *Der Traum bei R. M. Rilke*. Simenauer first notices the difference between the dreamer and the
poet who creates by wakeful dreaming, a state in which by means of his *ars poetica* he dreams and at the same time
exercises control over his dreaming. However, Simenauer’s approach is psychoanalytic in nature and to him
literature is just another mode of analysing the self in order to gain control over the nocturnal side of life (18).
Simenauer ventures very much in that direction, and suggests that Rilke’s poetic negotiations of dreaming should
be subjected to a rigorous and methodologically strict analysis.
The self is a site of convergences. The furrows in the brain hearken back to the description of the memory of the world as a furrowed field, mentioned in the Chapter Two. But in Malte, the body is suddenly the expanded site where the memory of lived experience from times gone by can solidify. Again, the metaphor Rilke uses to describe this permutation of the memory of the world into subjective experience in terms of elemental natural processes. The light, consistent with all poetic negotiations of light and darkness in Rilke’s prior works, is an agent of *meconnaissance*. It grants reassurance but for the price of a perception of bounded objects which is no longer in accordance with the environmental conditions of earth’s metabolism, its unboundedness. When Malte then starts to address a personal you, the subjective experience of an individual self, the narrative becomes lamenting and didactic. It would have been better to stay within darkness – and here again hospitality and shelter as that which one can physically grant the things and phenomena, appears as an ethical locus: the “heavy heart” of all undifferentiated things. We have talked about the equation of god with gravity, the “falling” of all that is perishing, here again appears this moment as an ethical holding oneself ready for this omnipresent falling, to offer a space in which earth can arise/resurrect invisibly in the *internity*. 

This is also implied in Rilke’s poem “Wendung” which he wrote in 1914. The environmental notion of “greatness” of the motto which he took from Kassner “The path from intimacy to greatness goes through sacrifice” [“Der Weg von der Innigkeit zur Größe geht durch das Opfer”] becomes clearer here. In Malte “das Große” [“the great”] is not the individual heroic stature, renown or exemplary deed as self-achievement but the loss of corporeal being in death as a self-emptying: “das Große” is that which exceeds embodiment, that which exists in extension and expansion and in its sheer size challenges the human, like the landscape in *Worpswede* of which Rilke claimed that its uncanny character, too close for comfort and yet unbounded, had an oppressive effect on humans. Also, we have to remember one of Rilke’s poignant poems “Schlusstück”: “Der Tod ist groß / wir sind die Seinen” [“death is great / we are his own”]. (W 2 346) In this sense “the great” once again emerges in Malte as a destroyed face the grotesque and horrific visage of human decay:

And my blood went through me and through it, as through the same body, and my heart had to make a big effort, to drive the blood into the great: there

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almost wasn’t enough blood. And the blood entered reluctantly into the great and returned sick and spoiled, but the great swell and grew in front of my face like a warm blueish bulge, it grew in front of my mouth and over my last eye already hovered the shadow of its rim.\textsuperscript{313}

The way from the intimacy of embodied subjective experience to the greatness of that which exceeds the human, encounters the sacrifice of the certainty of the living body as shelter, the formation of object and subject within habitual perception. As Malte further addresses the subjective “you” in a didactic manner:

Now you have taken yourself together into yourself. You see yourself end in front of you, in your hands. From time to time you redraw with a vague gesture your face. And within you there is almost no space and it almost pacifies you that this tightness is not very likely to be inhabited by the great; that also the immense/un-heard-off has to become inward and limit itself according to the dominating conditions. But outside, outside it exists without disregard, and when it rises out there it also fills itself within you. Not within your vessels which are partly within your power, or in the phlegm of your calm organs: in the capillaries it increases, tubular, sucked up into the extreme branches of your countlessly-branched being. There it lifts you there it exceeds you/steps beyond you reaches higher than your breath onto which you flee as onto your last site. Oh, but whither then, whither then? Your heart drives you out of yourself, your heart is after you and you almost stand outside yourself and cannot return. As a beetle on which one steps you bulge from yourself and your little superficial solidity is without meaning.\textsuperscript{314}

What is described here is self-emptying, renunciation of subjectivity. The self is being pressed out of itself like a beetle. However, this graphic image is diminished in its effect by the supposition that there is no shelter, and that humans are by nature forced to abandon the body as a shelter. The forces which rise on the outside create the tubes and capillaries through which they then flow and exceed and which they, again, abandon. The self assumes the form of a rhizome, with innumerable capillaries, stretched out into non-self and dissolving, pushed from the last outpost of the breath into the environment by the motions of the heart. The similarity between Rilke’s extended heart and Yeats’s Unity of Being in the image of the victim is quite clear. Being is inter-


\textsuperscript{314} “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, in den Folterstuben, den Tollhäusern, den Operationssälen, unter den Brückenbögen im Nachherbst: alles das ist von einer zähen Unvergänglichkeit, alles das besteht auf sich und hängt, eifersüchtig auf alles Seiende, an seiner schrecklichen Wirklichkeit. Die Menschen möchten vieles davon vergessen dürfen; ihr Schlaf feilt sanft über solche Furchen im Gehirn, aber Träume drängen ihn ab und ziehen die Zeichnungen nach. Und sie wachen auf und keuchen und lassen einer Kerze Schein sich auflösen in der Finsternis und trinken, wie gezuckertes Wasser, die halbhelle Beruhigung. Aber, ach, auf welcher Kante hält sich diese Sicherheit. Nur eine geringste Wendung, und schon wieder steht der Blick über Bekanntes und Freundliches hinaus, und die eben noch so trostliche Kontur wird deutlicher als ein Rand von Grauen. Hüte dich vor dem Licht, das den Raum hohler macht; sich dich nicht um, ob nicht vielleicht ein Schatten hinter deinem Aufsitzen aufsteht wie dein Herr. Besser vielleicht, du wärest in der Dunkelheit geblieben und dein unabgegrenztes Herz hätte versuchs, all des Ununterscheidbaren schweres Herz zu sein” (\textit{W} 3 505-506).
5.1.4. Das Ganze and das Offene - Rilke’s Unity of Being and the Notion of ‘The Open’

Throughout the preceding chapters Rilke’s notion of being has been explored in its dimension of an environmental re-conceptualisation of the human self. Without closely defining Rilke’s concept of Das Offene, a term which has become highly relevant to late 20th century environmental philosophy, especially the thought of Martin Heidegger and Giorgio Agamben, we have explored its fundamental dimensions in the previous chapters:

a) the uncertainty of any difference between self and world

b) the delimitation of the sacred as a restless self-destitution of the divine into profane existence, which is extended through the human self

c) the inclusion of death into the centre of self-experience and the emergence of the self as openness to the world.

In the following we will look more closely at the emergence of the concept of the Open [“Das Offene”] in Rilke’s later poetry and its relevance to contemporary environmental philosophy. What appears most fundamentally important for understanding this concept is to understand “openness” not as being laid bare or opened for penetration, but much rather to read the term open as in “open question” undecided, uncertain – a pure potentiality and ambiguity which is not narrowed down by a defining ascription. Going back to the very earliest poetry of Rilke, we can already see his decision for “openness” in his criticism of speaking things too clearly. The previous chapters have tried to describe the “openness” as a strategic undecidedness. Thus, they prepared the ground for a reading of the Duineser Elegien and Die Sonette an Orpheus, which are doubtlessly Rilke’s most widely received and commented upon works which Yeats in all likeliness read. The previous chapters attempted to approach the central questions of these works via elaborating the continuities of Rilke’s environmental thought: the pursuit of the central strategies of delimiting the self and the sacred and the integration of death as the ground of experience. In the following, Rilke’s notion of the Open as it emerges in Duineser Elegien and Sonette an Orpheus will be explored.

5.1.4.1 Das Offene – The Open

The Open is a foundational concept in Rilke’s oeuvre [“tragender Grundbegriff] (Bollnow 85). It can, first, in the most general sense be understood as a continuity of inside and outside, their mutual pervadedness. (See Oestersandfort 109) It denotes the transformation of both the imagination and the subjective experience of the body pervaded by and belonging to the divine-
earthy Other and its passing and “falling” into one continuous Weltinnenraum – internity. Christian Oestersandfort points out that in Hölderlin, who uses the term abundantly, it denotes an openness of nature, which the human eye answers with openness. It also functions as a “metaphor of pervadedness” as a way of signifying the experience of unity with god, an idea that originates in German Pietism. (Ibid.) But opposed to the experiential immediacy of unity in pietism, Oestersandfort defines the open in Hölderlin and hence in Rilke as a promise of “seeing and insight. The one who sees and thus understands is open as well, is part of the open […] of the ‘empty field’ of vision where seeing in context is possible.”

The previous chapters have elaborated Rilke’s scepticism towards seeing as a way of grasping the world. Rilke favours darkness, the night and twilight as modes of perceiving the mystery of being as such “not as something that is to be revealed but as the secret which is so solidly, throughout its entirety a secret as a piece of sugar is wholly sugar. Perhaps, if we understand it in that way, it will dissolve itself in our being or within our love while otherwise we might have achieved no more than a mechanical atomization of the secret without it passing into us.” The open for Rilke is a participatory mystery of being which can maybe be felt but certainly not be seen via habitual perception with one’s physical eye. To Rilke’s scepticism towards the speaking of things, we can add the scepticism of the seeing of things. Hölderlin’s imperative: “Come, that we may see the open!” is not prolonged by Rilke since the Open is first and foremost denoting an ontological uncertainty and undecidedness, which resists clear vision. It manifests in oscillation of forms, and a non-delineation of objects. It is not, as Bollnow suggests, that which is not-yet solidified into figuration [“das noch selber Ungestaltete”], “natura naturans as opposed to natura naturata,” but the Open describes a threshold: the principle of figuration and the figured form within perception as well as the loss of form coincide and are not moving anywhere, they remain on the threshold (Bollnow, 168). Furthermore, the Open in Rilke has an occult dimension in that Rilke develops the term in conjunction with the peripheral view of the revenant, as we have seen. All those who are not completely bounded into idiosyncratic self-experience: the dead, children, the animals, lovers are able to experience the Open (See Pasewalck Die fünffingerige Hand 85f).

316 “[…] das Geheime als Solches aufzunehmen, nicht als ein zu Entlarvendes, sondern als das Geheimnis, das so bis in sein Inneres, und überall, geheim ist, wie ein Stück Zucker an jeder Stelle Zucker ist. Möglicherweise, so aufgefaßt löst es sich unter Umständen in unserem Dasein oder in unserer Liebe, während wir sonst nur eine mechanische Zerkleinerung des Geheimsten erreichen, ohne daß es eigentlich in uns überginge” (Briefe aus Muzot 1921-1926, 294).
317 “So komm, daß wir das Offene schauen!” (Hölderlin 278)
5. Conceiving dLeIaFtEh – The Open in R. M. Rilke and W. B. Yeats

Alfred Schuler and Carl Vogl but also Lou Andreas-Salomé must be regarded as influential sources from which Rilke derives his notion of the Open, which allows the dead to return to the living and life to be non-religious in being actually divine (see Fülleborn 1999, 21; Pott 364). The inability to grasp, see and understand the Open in the works of Rilke prevents the term form becoming a foundation for a thinking of totality.

5.1.4.2. The Open in Die Duineser Elegien (1923)

Animal voices are from the very beginning of his writings formatively present to Rilke’s speakers, as in “The Ball” the thrown “thing” is able to assign a new place a new site to the humans [“eine neue Steele’’], the bird in Erlebnis II does the same, only that the emerging site is cosmic:

He thought of the hours spent in that southerly garden (Capri), where a bird's cry was identically present on the outside and on the inside, not breaking at the boundaries of the body, taking both together into an uninterrupted space, in which mysteriously protected, only one site/place [“Stelle’’] of purest, deepest consciousness remained\[319 \text{W 4 668}].

This uninterrupted unity of environmental consciousness is “gathered” into existence by the bird’s cry, it locates us but at the same time it awakens earth itself into Buddha-consciousness. As Rilke, addresses the “Buddha in glory” as a centre of awareness to a body that spans the universe: “centre of all centres” [Mitte aller Mitten], an almond sweetening, a kernel “this all, unto all stars, is your fruit-flesh: be hailed!” [dieses Alles bis an alle Sterne/ ist dein Fruchtfleisch: Sei gegrüßt!”] (W 1 586). The paradoxical unity, the non/identity of self and world that we have seen to pervade all of Rilke’s works is figured yet again in a speaker who, logically speaking is part of the Buddha’s fruit-flesh and yet recognises an Other at the centre within and by appellation, thus this fruit-flesh of the extended cosmic environment is always already “more-than-ours.”

In a letter to Ellen Delp on 12th of August 1915, Rilke describes the divine as a lighthouse in a space which is “more-than-ours” “ein Leuchtturm im mehr-als-unsrigen Raum” (75).

\[318 \text{Jana Schuster traces the conceptual development from Weltinnenraum – intemity to Das Offene- the Open to Salomé’s “Three Letters to a Boy” [,Drei Briefe an einen Knaben” which are partly based on letters to a son of a friend and were published in 1918. Rilke receives them in manuscript about which he writes in his pocket book and which he mentions enthusiastically in a letter to Salomé. They contain the hypothesis of an ever deeper transposition of the emerging creature from the external world into the interior [“immer weiter Hineinverlegtsein des entstehenden Geschöpfes aus der Welt in die Innen-Welt”] Since the homeliness/intimacy of the womb [“Heimlichkeit”] of the mammal carried in the womb results in a lifelong retrospective melancholy longing for the closed off interior. At the other end of the spectrum are those animals that did not know the inside of the womb but had only the open as a shelter (See Schuster 322). Humans try to recover the loss in overcoming the separation and make “the entire wold an interior” [“die ganze Welt [sich] zum Innenraum [zu] machen”] and win an intimacy of sensation as an exterior which only the animals know that were born outside the womb. Similar to the revenant also in the 8th elegy it is a dead One [“Tot-Sciender’’], who is able to perform this onto- and phylogenetic emersion. (323)\]

\[319 \text{Er gedachte der Stunden injenem anderen südlichen Garten (Capri), da ein Vogelruf draußen und in seinem Inneren übereinstimmend da war, indem er sich gewissermaßen an der Grenze des Körpers nicht brach, beides zu einem ununterbrochenen Raum zusammennahm, in welchem, geheimsnissvoll geschützt, nur eine einzige Stelle reinsten, tiefsten Bewußtseins blieb.}\]
Rilke responds to Ellen Delp’s mention of the curious and tragic death of thousands of birds which were found at the bottom of light houses in the Netherlands. Rilke employs Uexküll’s thought of divergent overlapping environments to explain how, for the birds the light house is not apparent as it is for us. It is merely a ghost, a tremendous presence, which the birds misapprehend. Thus, Rilke muses that perhaps in our innermost being we do not become true via contact with the truth but that which does not pertain to us, which should not be there, some light house, constantly signalling but above our heads, not meant for us, not knowing us: the incomprehensible excesses of a force which only resides as a question within us. The divine is then described as this signalling flame in a shared environment which exceeds single beings and in which we wait “for the most extreme misapprehension we are capable of and to throw ourselves into its flame and perish in it – which is our life” (Letter to Ellen Delp 12. 08. 1915, 75f). In this sense, the open is dangerous and Rilke loses his trust that communication with the divine and thus with the being of all beings can be established.

Language, in terms of cognitive message is undergoing radical doubt in Die Duineser Elegien. Rilke wanders into that “dark abyss” of the unfathomable presence of god stretched throughout all phenomena even perceived absence, which he described to Uexküll in the letter discussed earlier. Crying out to the mystery of being is not considered effective: “But who, if I screamed heard me from among the orders of angels?” [“Wer, wenn ich schrie, hörte mich denn, aus der Engel / Ordnungen?” (W 2 201)]. The angel of the Elegien is not a personified vis-à-vis as it is in the religious imagination of the 19th century. Egon Vietta already in his 1939 essay “Über die Duineser Elegien” describes the angel as the most intense and terrible radiating force of being [„die höchste und furchtbarste Leuchtkraft des Seins“] – not unlike the terrible misapprehended light house of which the birds perish (12). Direct communication with the “terrible beauty” of the angel is not possible [“Denn das Schöne ist nichts als des Schrecklichen Anfang” 201, “Ein jeder Engel ist schrecklich.” 205]. The human voice as an insufficient means of establishing contact is at the centre of Rilke’s long silence during the war years, the 12 years that passed between the onset and the finalisation of the elegies.

Shortly before being drafted into the military in 1915 he writes to Ellen Delp of the devastation and meaninglessness of war [“Un-Heil…Un-Sinn”]. He wishes he there was a human scream:

Can nobody prevent and halt it? Why aren’t there a few, three, five, ten, standing together and screaming on the places: Enough! And are being shot and at least gave their lives so that it be enough- Why isn’t there One who can’t bear it any longer? […] If he screamed only one night through in the midst of this untrue city, obscured in flags […] How many are holding back this scream with effort – or am I wrong? Are there not many who could scream like this?
Then, I don’t understand humans am no human and have nothing, nothing in
common with them. \(^{320}\)

From human helplessness in the depths of the evil of war the speechlessness of the Duineser Elegien begins in conjunction with the vague hope that the birds might feel the release of emptiness which we fling from our arms: “so that the birds might feel with more intimate flight the enriched/widened air” [“daß die Vögel die erweiterte Luft fühlen mit innigem Flug”] (201).

The deprivation of verbal communication between human and angel also results in an imperative that reminds of Hölderlin’s appeal to see the open. The speaker urges to “hear the wafting/blowing, / the ceaseless message, accumulating itself out of silence” [“Aber das Wehende höre, \(^{321}\) / die ununterbrochene Nachricht, die aus Stille sich bildet”] (202).

The failure of communicating messages with the angel leads to a search for the medial preconditions of communication, the static which makes it possible. “Wafting/blowing” as a transfiguration of the wind into its attributive function connects the living and the dead, again not through concise messages, only through the activity of wafting: [“es weht jetzt von jenen jungen Toten \(^{322}\) zu Dir”] (Ibid.).

Already in the first elegy the speaker’s position fluctuates between assuming the revenant’s point of view, expressing how strange it is not to wish one’s wishes anymore or “not to be anymore, and even to let be one’s own name like a broken toy” [“nicht mehr zu sein, und selbst den eignen Namen/ wegzulassen wie ein zerbrochenes Spielzeug./ Seltsam”] (203).

Then again, the dead are referred to in third person plural, otherness and identity are collapsing into an oscillating flux. Throughout the elegies Rilke fluctuates being between solid body and the flow of life and blood, for example in asking the lovers of the second elegy “Lovers: are you still? When you lift yourselves up, one to the other’s mouth to begin/position/attach: - beverage to beverage, oh how the one who drinks strangely is lost to the act.” [Liebende, seid ihrs dann noch? Wenn ihr einer dem andern / euch an den Mund hebt und ansetzt -- Getränk an Getränk: / o wie entgeht dann der Trinkende seltsam der Handlung] (W 2 207). Loss or dissolution of self into the other pervades Rilke’s later poetry, in the elegies self-dissolution is still present but re-instantiation is not automatically given, as the speaker of the 2nd elegy asks whether the universe “tastes of us” [“Schmeckt denn der Weltraum, / in den wir uns lösen/ nach uns?” as we do not have the ability to watch our heart, which exceeds us, disappear into images (206). The loss of form that all embodied beings undergo in death does not necessarily result in a continuation of a theme – but

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\(^{321}\) Friedrich A. Kittler defines Rilke’s notion of the primordial sound [„Ur-Geräusch“] as „das unmögliche Reale am Grund aller Medien“ (Auskunfts- und Mediensysteme 323).

\(^{322}\) In “The Unbearable Openness of Death” Kelly S. Walsh rightly claims that Rilke’s elegy refigure death:“death can become transformative, and the elegy can begin the endless effort of rearticulating the murmuring message, giving their deaths a poetic function: “Was sie mir wollen? leise soll ich des Unrechts / Anschein abtun” [What they want of me is that I gently remove the appearance / of injustice about their death]. The poet, then, has both the ability and duty to transform death” (17). What the elegist claims here, is that the dead request, in asking for the removal of the appearance of injustice, to abolish the elegy as a medium of mourning.
transformation might result in a turning of one phenomenon or being into its antithesis, as we will further discuss on account of the hero/figtree uncertainty in the 6th elegy.

5.1.4.3 Becoming Animal – Die Achte Elegie

“Das freie Tier hat seinen Untergang stets hinter sich”

Rilke’s notion of the open, especially in the 8th elegy, becomes important to Martin Heidegger in his 1942-43 Parmenides lectures. Heidegger finds it difficult to accept Rilke’s de-stratification of being. In the 8th elegy animals are privileged to see the open whe, humans are not: “With all eyes the creature/creation / sees the open. Only our eyes are / as if inverted and posited around them / as traps all around their free desertion / what is outside, we know only from the animals’ / face; because the young child / already we turn around and force to see figuration in looking backwards, not the open” (W 2:224). Heidegger misses the essential point, that the inability to see the open is entirely an effect of socialisation and habitual apperception, which in grasping objects becomes forgetful of the conditions of their emergence. Rilke’s delimitation of the privilege to see the open frustrates Heidegger, who then decides to turn it on its head by not only reintroducing the privilege of seeing the open to humankind but also making it a distinctive feature: “the capacity to see it constitutes what is essentially distinct about man and consequently forms the unsurmountable essential boundary between animal and man.” (Parmenides, 152) Heidegger’s interpretation misses that it is technically possible for humans to see the open, but this presupposes letting go of apprehensive seeing and opening one’s eyes for the realities of destitution. The animal is free in this regard because it is „past its own destitution“ [“das freie Tier/ hat seinen Untergang stets hinter sich”, W 2:224], and humans in dying and letting go are thought capable of seeing the open with an animal’s gaze: „close to death one does not see death anymore and stares outward, maybe with a great animal gaze” [“Denn nah am Tod sieht man den Tod nicht mehr / und starrt hinaus, vielleicht mit großem Tierblick”] (224). Habitual humanity on the contrary is constantly avoiding/postponing it through cognitive or signifying actions and interventions.

The self-abandoned kenosis of non-human beings, which move “in eternity like the fountains” – conjures once more the images of the environmental cycles of evaporation and precipitation which we have discussed in conjunction with the negotiations of the immanent divine in Rilke’s Das Stunden-Buch (224). To us world is never not under surveillance. In a triple

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323 “The free animal is always already past its own destruction”

324 “Mit allen Augen sieht die Kreatur / das Offene. Nur unsere Augen sind / wie umgekehrt und ganz um sie gestellt / als Fallen, rings um ihren freien Ausgang. / Was draußen ist, wir wissen aus des Tier / Antlitz allein; denn schon das frühe Kind wenden wir um und zwingens, daß es rückwärts / Gestaltung sehe, nicht das Offene” (W 2:224).
nagation Rilke expresses this stubborn inability to let go: “it is always world and never Nowhere, without nothing; the pure, unsupervised/unpoliced, which you breathe and infinitely know and not desire.” Rilke employs the gesture of lament, describing to a first person plural audience, who he thinks “we” have become by our patterns of habit, as to say “what have we done?” The turning away from the open for Rilke is not a primary condition of human existence but an acquired one, and a harmful habit, at that. Heidegger, however in Parmenides insists that the “open” in Rilke has nothing to do with his own notion of truth as the unconcealed.

Rilke is bound within the limits of the traditional metaphysical determination of man and animal. Specifically, Rilke takes over the form of this determination that arose in the modern age and was solidified in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: from the Greek [...] this essential determination of man as the ‘rational living being’ [...] As animal rationale, man is the ‘animal’ that calculates, plans, turns to beings as objects, represents what is objective and orders it. Man comports himself everywhere to objects, i.e., to what stands over and against him. [...] That current metaphysical conception of man is the presupposition for Rilke’s poetic attempt to interpret the essence of man in the sense of modern biological metaphysics (156f).

The previous chapters have argued that the opposite is the case. For Rilke the unnameable, unknowable contingencies that tie human existence into the environment make any attempt to define and demarcate the human impossible from the very beginning. Heidegger’s Parmenides is redolent with fear of the implications perceived within the 8th elegy. This fear articulates itself most clearly in a footnote, where he asks: “For Rilke, human ‘consciousness’, reason, (logos) is precisely the limitation that makes man less potent than the animal. Are we then supposed to turn into ‘animals’?” Peter Atterton points out, that our kinship to animals causes dismay to many great minds - to Nietzsche it was a “painful embarrassment” to Freud a “biological blow to human narcissism”.

Peter Atterton lucidly points out that Levinas’ refusal to extent the status of “Other” to the animal is an inconsistency in his thinking as it would have been inevitable to do so. The next

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325 “Immer ist es Welt und niemals Nirgends ohne Nichts; das Reine, Unüberwachte, das man atmet und / unendlich weiß und nicht begehrt” (W 2 224).
326 Eric L. Santner summarizes Heidegger’s stance on the a animal, thus: “As fundamentally excluded from what he calls the “strife between unconcealedness and concealedness,” the animal is, as Heidegger puts it elsewhere, poor in world (weltarm), while man is essentially world-forming(weltbildend); the stone, by contrast, is simply weltlos, without world [...] what Rilke privileges is uninhibited movement within the Open, Heidegger sees as a purely functional and instinctual capitivation (Benommenheit) by an environment, as absorption in an Umwelt as opposed to an intentional comportment within the openness of a Welt” (8).
327 Heidegger will later in his essay “What are Poets for?” completely renounce his earlier accusations. Without admitting to his earlier misconception he simply commits himself to a more thorough reading of Rilke’s poetry, especially the Sonnets to Orpheus. He makes observations that are diametrically opposed to those made in Parmenides. Blaming Rilke’s poetry to be marked by “confusion, thoughtlessness and flight,” Heidegger has unconsciously condemned his own critique of the 8th elegy in Parmenides (161).
328 “Isn’t it all the more significant,” Atterton asks, “that the gesture with which Nietzsche took his farewell from sanity was the compassionate embrace of a horse, beaten by its owner?” (Ibid.)
Levinas never says that I am obligated to the Other because we have the same mental capacities. On the contrary, “The Other as Other is not only an alter ego: the Other is what I myself am not.” This is not to define the Other in terms of me, of course, using the familiar logic of negation. That the Other is what I am not means that I will never be able to reduce him or her to one of my ideas. As Sartre puts it, the Other is “a little particular crack in my universe” through which he or she sweeps away from me; he or she is no longer fully “present” (to consciousness) in that I am no longer able fully to comprehend him or her. But does not the animal also constitute a similar hemorrhage of intelligibility and meaning? Indeed, are not animals – from ants to antelopes – more other than the Other? (277)

The 8th elegy confirms this: „As a crack runs through a cup, the trace of the bat rips through the porcelain of the evening” [“Wie wenn ein Sprung/ durch eine Tasse geht. So reißt die Spur/ der Fledermaus durchs Porzellan des Abends”] (W 2 225). Rilke’s bat breaks the homely horizon of 19th century metaphysics with its uncanny, uncertain and unsettling presence. A “haemorrhage of intelligibility and meaning” it confronts the human viewer with the limit of his prior horizon. Rilke opens instead a fissure through which we perceive ourselves as being perceived as part of a more-than-human environment. In the first of the Duineser Elegien he states that “the astute animals guess/trace/intuit already that we are not very reliably at home in the interpreted world” (W 2 203).

5.1.4.4. Agamben’s notion of The Open

In his book The Open, which has become a seminal work for contemporary discourses in environmental ethics, Giorgio Agamben investigates the traditional attempt of philosophy to describe the human by way of delineating humanity from animality, thereby creating caesura also within ourselves, marking the animal against the human. Giorgio Agamben opens his deliberations with a description of a Hebrew Bible from the thirteenth century in the Ambrosian library in Milan of which the last two pages show mystic and messianic images (1). The last page which “concludes the codex as well as the history of humanity” is of special interest to Agamben: „It represents the messianic banquet of the righteous on the last day. Under the shade of paradisiacal trees and cheered by the music of two players, the righteous, with crowned heads, sit at the richly laid table” (Ibid.).

What is surprising for Agamben, however, is that the saints are not adorned with human faces but with animal heads – not only the eschatological animals, eagle, ox and lion but also “the grotesque features of an ass and the profile of a leopard. And in turn the two musicians have animal heads as well – in particular the more visible one on the right, who plays a kind of fiddle and shows an inspired monkey’s face” (2). Agamben asks why these “representations of concluded humanity” bear animal heads and insists that no convincing answer has yet been
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found (1f). Agamben thus embarks on a journey to find these answers by venturing to the extreme opposite of the depicted animal-human integration. Agamben observes that in the West, ever since Aristotle's *De Anima*, which separated “vegetative” life from higher organisms “separation” and “division have not only been at the root of talking about life but they are also responsible for the emergence of humanism (13f). In proceeding to read Kojève’s reception of Hegel, Agamben finds man not as a “biologically defined species” nor as a substance given once and for all; he is, rather, a field of dialectical tensions always already cut by internal caesurae that every time separate – at least virtually – ‘anthropophorous’ animality and the humanity which takes bodily form in it.

Man exists historically only in this tension; he can be human only to the degree that he transcends and transforms the anthropophorous animal which supports him, and only because, through the action of negation, he is capable of mastering and, eventually, destroying his own animality (it is in this sense that Kojève can write that ‘man is a fatal disease of the animal’) (12).

Agamben observes that animal life has been separated from man within man and that a caesura runs through us “in the closest and most intimate place, and it is in this light, that he insists the question of man, and of “humanism” – “must be posed in a new way” (15). Where once in Western cultures man was thought as the conjunction “of a body and a soul, of a living thing and a *logos*, of a natural (or animal) element and a supernatural or social or divine element,” Agamben encourages us to investigate not the metaphysical mystery of conjunction, but rather the practical and political mystery of separation, in what way – within man – has man been separated from non-man, and the animal from the human, than it is to take positions on the great issues, on so-called human rights and values. “And perhaps even the most luminous sphere of our relations with the divine depends, in some way, on the darker one which separates us from the animal” (15f).

As these caesurae are ceaselessly dislocated and placed anew, Agamben observes that we have fallen into the automatism of “the anthropological machine,” which “verifies the absence of a nature proper to *Homo*, holding him suspended between a celestial and a terrestrial nature, between animal and human – and, thus, his being always less and more than himself” (29). On a pessimistic note, Agamben observes that the “traditional historical potentialities – poetry, religion, philosophy” have been transformed into “cultural spectacles and private experiences” and are no longer fit to work out reflection or historical change (75). The spectre of a “total management - of biological life, that is, of the very animality of man,” becomes reality and on the site of the “genome, global economy, and humanitarian ideology posthistorical humanity seems to take on its own physiology as its last political mandate” (75).

To stop this monstrous automatism, Agamben suggests that we venture to show the emptiness, “the hiatus,” separating man from animal within man. The way to get there is by an active sense of non-knowing. Agamben favours the Latin verb *ignoscere*, which does not simply mean “not to know” (*ignorare*), but rather “to forgive”, thus the “zone of non-knowledge – or better a-knowledge (*ignoscenza*)” –denotes the act of letting someone or something be “outside of being, to render it unsavable” (91). Thus a “Shabbat of both animal and man” can emerge (92). In this sense, Agamben returns to the saints in the picture in the Ambrosian Library, as
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a figure of the great ignorance which lets both of them be outside of being, saved precisely in their being unsaveable. Perhaps there is still a way in which living beings can sit at the messianic banquet of the righteous without taking on the historical task and without setting the anthropological machine into action. Once again, the solution of the *mysterium coniunctionis* by which the human has been produced passes through an unprecedented inquiry into the practico-political mystery of separation (92).

The preceding chapters attempted to outline the numerous ways in which Rilke explores this mystery of separation and tries to find answers and alternatives, allowing the “anthropological machine” to idle within the twilight of perceived uncertainties and the renunciation of definitions and conquests of being through language. It is hence not so much a post-humanity but an ecocentric humanity that is re-integrated and diaphanous to its environmental interrelationships, which emerges through Rilke’s poetry, a branched out being with no certain delineations which through the facing of itself as partly facilitated by and partly dissembled into the environment can begin to consciously be the “heavy heart of all undifferentiated things.”

5.1.5. The Environmental Heart in *Die Sonette an Orpheus* (1922)

More must be said about the conception of the heart, which for Rilke becomes the most central figure in his poetic conceptions of being. The very dynamics of inside and outside as well as the “root structure” of the vessels branching out of it make it an ideal topos for Rilke, as indeed, the point of his poetry is not to merely depict a heart but to “do heart-work” [“Werk des Gesichts ist getan, / tue nun Herz-Werk”] (H 2 102). Where Enlightenment discourses, especially Cartesian dualism had reduced the heart to a merely mechanical-anatomical device, Romanticism reinstalled it into a nexus of material-divine becoming. Novalis held it to be humanity’s “holy organ” [“des Menschen sein heiliges Organ”].

From Böhme the Romantics derived the image of the heart as the central point of convergence of all principia and forces.

In Rilke’s environmental modernism, the heart becomes a root-structure, a rhizome that functions as a nexus and interface of bodily inside and environmental outside, the divine and the profane, Self and Other – the place where one cannot be effectively differentiated from the other. Rilke’s cosmology is *cardiocentric* – enabling him to think the centrality of the environment instantiated within human form.

Already Aristotle in his deliberations on human-, animal- and plant physiology in *Historia Animalium* and *De Patribus Animalium* likens the heart to the central root of the body. The heart is described as a tap-root or root ball since all the vessels and their intersections originate in it. Aristotle assigns prime importance to the heart: it is the locus of creative force in the body, the origin, beginning and container of the blood:

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329 See Novalis, *Hemsterhuis-Studien* (1797), 214; *Christenheit* (1799), 749.
330 For the following see Ole Martin Høystad, *A History of the Heart* 52ff.
Blood is the sole matter from which all of our animate tissues are generated and nourished. But this nutritive role does not exhaust blood’s significance. We can appreciate this additional import by reflecting upon blood’s metaphysical status. Blood, [...] occupies a middle ground between two otherwise mutually exclusive metaphysical realms—it is unique in being, at one and the same time, both animate and inanimate. Coming to understand this metaphysical status will equip us with the resources to explain how a soul can be both a living organism’s cause of being (αἴτιον τοῦ ἑίναι) and the principle (ἀρχή) of its bodily unity [...]. According to Aristotle, blood is, in one manner of being, inanimate: blood is nutriment ἑνεργεία. But blood is also, in another manner of being, animate: blood is flesh ὀντός. Christopher Frey in his lucid essay on the significance of blood in Aristotle “From Blood to Flesh: Homonomy, Unity, and Ways of Being in Aristotle” (2013) argues that blood occupies the “middle ground between two otherwise mutually exclusive metaphysical realms—it is unique in being, at one and the same time, both animate and inanimate” (1). I would like to employ Frey’s argument to come closer, by analogy, to the paradoxical unity of being that Rilke describes in the Sonette an Orpheus, as one which relies centrally on the blood not only as a metaphor but a physiological phenomenon. Blood is built up of the nutrients of the earth just as much as it carries them into tissues, along with the oxygen and carbon dioxide of the air, yet at the same time it is integral to the living organism and animated itself. Understanding this coincidence, in turn, Frey claims, will enable us to understand how a soul can be both a living organism’s cause of being (αἴτιον τοῦ ἑίναι) and the principle (ἀρχή) of its bodily unity (Ibid.). Frey provides 4 analogies to picture this paradox of which three will be briefly mentioned:

1) What is it for a man to be a house builder? (A man is a house builder in the sense of ὀντός if he possesses the capacity to build a house and is not exercising it. A man is a house builder ἑνεργεία if he possesses the capacity to build a house and is engaging in the many disparate activities involved in building a house. Aristotle thus sees in the latter a “development (ἐπίδοσις) of the thing into itself and its fulfilment (ἐντελέχεια)” (8). In the same way an organism is both the “capacities for nutritive movement” which is at the same time a capacity for form. Nevertheless, this capacity needs to be “exercised upon nutriment and blood in an order and manner that ultimately yields a specific type of tissue because the coming to be of such tissue is necessary for the organism to exemplify” as a specific form of life (Ibid.). For Aristotle, thus the two constitute a unity.

331 Frey points out that for Aristotle “neither being ὀντός nor being ἑνεργεία succumbs to definition. We must instead consider multiple cases (παγωγή), appreciate the ways in which the distinction’s manifestation in these cases are similar and the ways in which they are different, and, as Aristotle puts it, ‘be content to grasp the analogy’ (5). Rilke communicates his Orphic paradoxes with the same qualification: ‘May we enjoy now for a while to believe/grasp the Figure. That suffices!’ [‘Doch uns freue eine Weile nun /der Figur zu glauben. Das genügt!’] (W 2 246).
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2) What it is for a pile of bricks to be a house?

Just as a variety of bricks make up a house without stopping to be bricks and each exercising a vital and integral contribution to there being a house, the different nutrients carried by the blood are only able to make up an organism if they are brought through the veins into contact with a tissue for which they are suited, “for nutriment to be flesh *dunamei*, it must stand ready and unimpeded at the threshold of the nexus of nutritive activity” creating the *energeia* of the flesh” (15f).

3) What is it to be a cake?

As a third example of a unity which involves the permutation of its constituents, Frey mentions the process of baking, in which through the breaking up of the form of the components, the mixing and only through the induction of heat a new unity, which is the form of the cake is achieved. In the same sense, Frey claims, for Aristotle “nutriment does not have within itself the principle of its own concoction and blood does not become flesh in and of itself (α ὑτὸ αὐτό). The principle of the movements that occasion these changes is internal to a living organism, but external to nutriment and blood. This externality has important consequences for blood’s metaphysical status. The final and most important of stages in the processing of nutriment is the conveyance of a novel capacity for movement, viz. being hot (θερµόν), upon nutriment by the heart.” (23) Hence, the vital functions of the blood in a healthy body depend on the heat induction caused by the heart but the heat will then, in a strict sense not be “properly possessed” by the blood. In this sense, Frey claims that “a living organism’s blood is an accidental compound.” (Ibid.)

[T]he shape and the form [of, say, a house] are produced from the carpenter through the movement in the matter. His soul [in which is the form [of the house]] and his knowledge [of the art of carpentry] move his hands, [...] the hands move the tools, and the tools move the matter. Similarly the male’s nature, in those that emit seed, uses the seed as a tool containing movement *energeia*, just as in the productions of an art the tools are in movement; for the movement of the art is in a way in them. (Ibid.)

Here, we have a triple analogy of the coexistence of *dunamei* and *energeia* – the assembling of the house as a unity of human activity and artefact, ejaculation as a unity of matter and movement, and finally artistic performance as a unity of instrument and motion. Concluding his argument, Frey develops a *natural continuity* model, which insists that the capacities of blood (that it is hot, that it delivers nutrient) are not merely external attributes as for example the seatedness of seated-Socrates will not affect Socrates himself, who is still himself when he is standing up. But blood

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332 “This connection to the soul provides a more substantive ground for the organic homonymy that characterizes blood and its disembodied counterpart. The change that occurs upon blood’s separation from a living organism is not like the change that occurs when Socrates stands up from his chair; it is more than the removal of an accidental feature from a persisting quantity of nutriment. None of the movements of disembodied blood will have an organ-ism’s nature as principle or end and it is this fact that grounds attributions of organic homonymy. Blood bereft of soul is blood in name only because it is no longer a partial embodiment of a naturally continuous organism’s unitary capacity for form” (Frey 33).
is a living unity, and when blood is removed from the living organism it will be already permutated into something that is non-blood - only blood by name, in that it is no longer energeiai. The nutritive soul, as a form giving principle which instantiates the nutritive movements in a body is internal and, paradoxically, in being facilitated by these movements, the form for the sake of which these movements occur. Frey concludes that death does not “free” the nutritive soul from the body but destroys a single organic unity, “an ensouled organism” into a “heap of inanimate bodies with proprietary natures, viz. a corpse” (33). In this sense disembodied flesh is “flesh in name only” and Frey comes to the ultimate conclusion that for Aristotle “animate beings are, by nature, isolated from their inanimate environments. Living organisms are not whirlpools or vortices within a plenary sea of Empedoclean matter; they are islands” (33f).

His conclusion, however, is defeating Frey’s earlier lucid elaboration on the paradoxical nature of blood as at the same time being inanimate (in being nutriment energeiai) and animate: (in forming flesh dunamei). It is principally impossible for the living organism to be “isolated from the inanimate environment,” because this inanimate environment insists already within it, within the blood’s very identity of nutriment and becoming-tissue. Life form is not an incubus but a form which the environment assumes. The blood in one way is constituted by the inanimate matter of that which is no longer within the unity of another life form, whatever once was corpse-flesh or fibre is already in the process of becoming life form. The corpse is from a bio-physiological perspective not even for a minute “flesh in name only” because it is facilitated as dunamei into the unity of other living organisms, however minute they be.

It is this dynamism of an antithetical unity of animate and inanimate, external environment and embodied life form – which Rilke is eager to poetically conceive in the. Orpheus is the principle of dissolution as well as transformation, which instantiates, upholds, exceeds and abandons the individual life forms. Rilke realises the paradoxical nature of blood as that which is at the same time inanimate (in being nutriment dunamei) and animate: (in forming flesh energeiai) on both the topical and the structural level in the poems. The stricture of the sonnet form throughout the collection is interrupted by slanting lines which transport syntactic units through line breaks in a way that the flow of reading and deciphering is interrupted at the end of the line at which often unlikely candidates, adverbs, all manner of pronouns, conjunctions and even articles enter Rilke’s rhymes – a unique and singular occurrence

333In a letter to the countess Stauffenberg in February 1919 he writes: “If in the general darkness and incertitude that have descended upon all things human and upon public life in particular I can still see one paramount task before me, independent of all else, it is this: to use the deepest joys and splendours of life to strengthen our trust in Death, and again, to make him, who was never a stranger, more known and felt as the silent sharer in all life’s processes” (translated by Hull, 285).
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in the history of German poetry. R. M. Meyer in *Die Deutsche Literatur des 20. Jahrhunderts* sees a parallel between Rilke’s attempt to risk the utmost in fusing the psyche with the senses and creates a “violent bending of the syntactic fabric, a violent style which prefers enjambements and syncopes” (“die gewaltsamen Biegungen des syntaktischen Gefüges, ein gewaltsamer Stil der Enjambements und Synkopen bevorzugt”) (635). This “force of bending” structurally performs the stringing of a bow, and makes that strain tangible as the precondition for music, so that the “overflowing of the contour” of song becomes tangible as such, too. Orpheus is addressed as the tension of being itself: “pure tension/voltage, oh music of being” [„Reine Spannung, oh Musik der Kräfte“] (W 2 246). This ontic music tightens the muscle of the Anemone (W 2 239) and bends the brow of the boy in the third elegy (W 2 208). For Rilke to live is to be within the quivering strain of “strungness” as well as within the flow. The rhyming of functional “lesser words” at the end of a line create jolts to the reader [“einen gewissen Ruck“] or “extraordinary climactic lyrical spasm[s]” (Wagner 8) and yet as the unit continues into a new line the reader experiences flow and continuity, “being carried in walking.”

The static, formal sonnet structure is also often subverted by dactylic three quarter time dancing rhythms, reflecting the dedication Rilke prefaced the sonnets with. They were “written as a sepulchral monument” [“geschrieben als ein Grab-Mal”] for the dancer Wera Oueckama Knoop, a dancer and daughter of an acquaintance of Rilke’s who died when she was still a young woman (W 2 237). This already indicates ambivalence—a kenotaph construction, built of stone in someone’s memory, signifying on the one hand the absence of the deceased and her merely virtual presence in the memory of the living, on the other hand, the sepulchral monument subterraneously containing the dead body. The Grab-Mal marks therefore the place of transformation within living earth. Rilke consciously exploits this ambivalence by injecting the hyphen “Grab-Mal” so we remember that it is both the sepulchre and the commemorative monument. In German “Mal” has furthermore a temporal dimension as in “dieses (eine) Mal” “this time (only)” denoting an instant in time, *kairos* as opposed to *chronos*. The hyphenation furthermore lays claim to a sepulchral function of the poetry, *containing* the dead, contradicting the

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334 Rilke’s poetry creates both extraordinary flux and at the same time incredible strain through the slanting of syntactic units through line breaks while maintaining fixed sonnet rhyme and iambic or dactylic metres, now placed on minor words. Annemarie Wagner’s dissertation *Unbedeutende Reimwörter und Enjambements bei Rilke und in der neueren Lyrik Rilkes* (1930) focuses on this specific phenomenon and the following overview is cited from her dissertation: Oskar Walzel *Deutsche Dichtung seit Goethe’s Tod* (1920) observes that the rhyming of lesser words creates an effect which he describes as the “overflowing of contours” [“Überfluten der Umrisse”] (8). R. H. Heygrodt in *Die Lyrik Rainer Maria Rilke’s* (1921) observes that the entirety of Rilke’s poetry, with very few exceptions is rhymed and that Rilke achieves the flow of prose by employing words with only auxiliary function as rhyme words (see Wagner 9).

335 Schuster that the lines are literally „running over“ through the enjambment thus the generic form of the sonnet is set into motion” [“erfährt eine Dynamisierung“]. (21)She mentions Rilke’s desire to create to carry the poems in walking without destroying them [“im Laufen zu tragen, ohne [sie] zu zerstören.”] (quoted in Schuster Ibid.). Schuster reads both the latin *versus* as the turning which the “versed” poem structurally performs and the Italian root for the sonnet: *suonare* – to resound – as its transformative function, which she sees closely related to the transposition of experience from vision to sound (22).
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opposition of the monument as the site of the dead and the elegiac song or commemorative text as independent.  

Orpheus is the one who comes back from the dead as the self becoming conscious of how we unspeakably, materially come into existence and are substantiated in every living moment by the dead: the presence of nutriment that has travelled through the death of other selves, of countless species, beings and elements. The human heart is thus always already the heart of the earth. Ernst Leisi points out that Orpheus does not exist as a totality but as infinite trace, which through undergoing destruction performs circulation [“Kreislauf”] (23f). Orpheus insists in circular figures, as Leisi points out, he performs a “return of earth to itself” [“Rückkehr der Erde zu sich selbst”] (25). However, I would object that the beings are not returning to themselves [“kehren immer zu sich selber zurück”] as the circle is “broken” – or Open - in so far as the individual beings undergo destitution. Loss of form is central and adds to every form the gravity of being once-only. Tina-Karen Pusse understands this process as transubstantiation:

This transubstantiation is turned into visibility/comprehensiveness [“Kennlichkeit”] in the killing frenzy of the maenads, its non-symbolic, anthropophagic core is laid open. As Christ 'nurture' the believers with his blood, Orpheus nurtures the listeners through his eternal song.[...][Yet] only after his blood is dissolved into the Hebrons does he become audible to all. His disappearance is, if looked at closely, an endless dissolution – and therein an endless expansion. Vanishing and proliferation become one. (183)

Thus the circulation, rather like a Moebius loop, performs closure only in paradox: antinomies that exhaust and actualise each other: disappearance and omnipresence becoming one. In this sense the divine is profaned and the poet can extend the apotheosis to every single living being as well as the earth’s body when he dedicates the sonnets “to Orpheus”, once again the address of prayer becomes the profane all-address: “Oh you lost god, you infinite trace” [“O du verlorener Gott! Du unendliche Spur!”] (W 2 253). The tree (in being blossom, fruit, seed, sapling, tree, wood), the dancer’s twirl, the human metabolism, the water cycle, the cycle of wind and human breath are no closed cycles, they are “expending”existence as the energeiai of individual life forms into the self-actualisation of other forms and yet different cycles. Orpheus may live in the tree but does not transcendently outlive the trees. Orpheus is a principle, which goes from form to form through destruction. Orpheus, in being the biophysiological principle of the metamorphosis of bodies and elements can in that way obey in transgressing.

| Errichtet keinen Denkstein. Laßt die Rose nur jedes Jahr zu seinen Gunsten blühn. | Erect no tombstone. Let the rose Bloom every year for his benefit. |
| Denn Orpheus ists. Seine Metamorphose in dem und dem. Wir sollen uns nicht mühn um andere Namen. Ein für alle Male | Because it is Orpheus. His metamorphosis In this and in this. We shall not struggle For other names. Once and for all |
| ist Orpheus, wenn es singt. Er kommt und geht. | It is Orpheus, when it sings. He comes and goes. |
| Ist's nicht schon viel, wenn er die Rosenschale | Isn't it already something, when for a few days |

336 See Jan Assmann, Schrift, Tod und Identität 173. For a further elaboration of the functions of inscription and kenotaph in Sonette an Orpheus see Tina Karen Pusse, 179.
um ein paar Tage manchmal übersteht?

O wie er schwinden muß, daß ihrs begriff!
Und wenn ihm selbst auch bangte, daß er schwände.
Indem sein Wort das Hiersein übertrifft,

ist er schon dort, wohin ihrs nicht begleitet.
Der Leier Gitter zwängt ihm nicht die Hände.
Und er gehorcht, indem er überschreitet.

He outlives the rose-skin/bowl?

Oh how he has to vanish so you might grasp it,
Even in his uncertainty of vanishing
In his word’s exceeding being-here

He is already where you cannot follow it.
The lyra’s lattice does not force his hands.
And he obeys in that he transgresses.

We are looking at a personified cosmogonic principle of resounding and kenotic self-shattering but at the same time instantiating all the animate beings. In so far, Rilke alleviates any human privilege in making the rocks and animals the “instances” of the divine in Sonnet XXVI. As its sound “lingers” in lions and rocks / and in the trees and birds. There you still sing. / Oh you lost God! You infinite trace!/ Only because in tearing apart finally enmity distributed you, /we are the hearing one’s now and a mouth to nature.”337

Rilke’s elaborations on water flowing through graves turns the process of transformation into visibility, it expresses the paradox of the adiaphane condition of the blood. In this sense, the blood of the living being is an open kenotaph erected as an environment-interiorty circulation, as Rilke will make even more poignantly clear in his poem “Mausoleum” written in 1924.338 This poem exemplifies and subsumes the circulation that Die Sonette an Orpheus perform


Wo ist, wohin, jenes der leichten Lieblingin? : Lächeln, von außen, auf die zögernde Rundung, heiterer Früchte gelegt;

Golden Heartnut. Urn-poppy
In the mid’st of sky-blue,
As a splinter of silence,
When you stir
because it seems to you
that your former
toad/lod/s: that of the light/easy
Favoured One?
:Smile, from outside,
laid on the hesitant roundness
of jolly fruit;

338 Jana Schuster reads this poem as an instance of circulation as utopos. It describes the „mausoleum“ of the heart as an energetic structure which insists and progresses at the same time in consuming itself [“der Kreislauf, in dessen Vollzug die Gestalt als ein energetisches Gebilde besteht und vor sich geht”] (199).
In rapid succession of dactyls, ruptured through frequent line breaks and interspersed iambic words, the irregular rhythm transports single compound-noun metaphors, which in the first stanza create continuity of heart, tree, nut, and a poppy capsule identified as an “Urn” which is paradoxically up in the air – as poetry’s “well-wrought urn” disseminates its ashes/seeds. The “sovereign-tree” can in this sense be read metaphorically as both the proud lineage of the ancestral tree as well as, humorously, and literally - a plant. Especially the excessive accumulation of herbaceous metaphors implies this vegetable compound of the deceased king's heart’s environmental circulation.

At the same time, we can also read this poem in the other direction, as a description of the “environmental, cosmic heart” as a ruling principle, which circulates in invisible circulation – not as a ruler, whose image circulates on coins but as a principle. While the second stanza traces the smile of the king’s consort, the “light” one, into the roundness of fruits, the preciousness of a moth’s wing. And asking for the place where she sang, as a muse, inspiring the poet’s heart, singing it into Oneness, we get a two-fold answer: wind and wind interior. The colon at the beginning of the line, which is a novum in the late poetry of Rilke, I suggest, functions as a marker of transformation as well as continuity, like a shortened version of the chifre for equality = the colon at the beginning of a line signals becoming and transformation as identity achieved through a caesura: “Lieblingin? /: Lächeln” and “Dichterherz? /: Wind” [“Favourite One? /: Smile” … poets-heart? /: Wind”]. The woman is released into her attribute and the heart of the poet into the wind and wind interior. In this way the grave site is always already the portal for new becoming, the individual heart is transformed into the environmental cycle. The imagery which still pertains to Rilke’s Egyptian experience of 1911, in a letter to Clara Rilke he writes that he thought of the plasticity of the domes of the Kalif-tombs in Egypt as reminiscent of “fruit and fruit-flesh” [das Frucht- und Fruchtkernhafte dieser plastischen Kuppeln] (Quoted in Grimm 16).
alle, die man dem Zweifel entreißt,
ruft ich, die wiedergeöffneten Munde,
die schon wußten, was schweigen heißt.

Wissen wirs, Freunde, wissen wirs nicht?
Beides bildet die zögernde Stunde
in dem menschlichen Angesicht.

(If 2 245)

Both the personification as well as the invocative summons the sarcophagi as human presences. Pervaded by the water cycle or open to the air these entities are “flickering between mortification and vivification” [“Kippbewegung zwischen Mortifikation und Vivifikation”] (Pusse 182). But I would argue not so much as a “macabre fort-da-game” [“makabres Fort/Da-Spiel”], which indicates the attainment of control over a signifier, but as a performative familiarisation with the abject other of death, an introduction to the idea that death is both prior and innermost, so that we may experience the uncertainty of LeFtEh. In this frame of understanding, “communication” can once more become more than the arbitrary shifting of signifiers, as from the transformative sites of graves – not figurative but literal butterflies ascend “enchanted” to the outside. While the active human renunciative silence implied in “Schweigen” on the inside of the sarcophagi, hearkening back to Maeterlinck’s bees and Rilke’s vision of the “bees of the invisible,” is already occupied and worked upon by the Other: “bee-suction.” The second personification of the re-opened mouths, of course alludes to Egypt.

The poems of the entire collection perform this ambivalence in being sepulchre, transformational site of the dead body and disseminating urn. On the topical level, Rilke explores the idea of the living flesh as erected monument, as house or “temple” or bedstead to the dead-in-transformation:

Da stieg ein Baum. O reine Übersteigung!
O Orpheus singt! O hoher Baum im Ohr!
Und alles schwieg. Doch selbst in der Verschweigung
ging neuer Anfang, Wink und Wandlung vor.

There rose a tree! O pure exceeding
O Orpheus sings! O high tree in the ear!
And all was silent. Still, in this concealment
proceeded new beginning, signal and turning.

339 Joseph Metz in his article “Exhuming Rilke’s Orphic Body” points out the ambivalent character of the grave in Rilke’s 1905 poem “Hetären-Gräber” - the title employs the ambivalence of Gräber meaning both the plural of grave and the term ‘digger/excavator’ (257). The graves are “tokens of desire, charged with an eroticism that, in their context, evokes the macabre. And the most startlingly erotic among them are the courtesans’ corpses themselves, with their ‘lange Haare,’ ‘schlanke Knochen’, and—delicately emerging from between ‘Schleiern, die gleich Nebeln fallen’— ‘desFußgelenkes leichter Schmetterling.’ […] Intensely sexualized in life, the hetaerae have lost nothing of their seductive power in death. Indeed, already the erotic opening of the poem […] establishes the grave as an erotic opening” (257). In sonnet XIV Rilke wonders whether the dead enjoy distributing themselves into life, are they slaves to life or are they, in truth, the masters of life impacting and shaping it in granting us out of their abundances a hybrid of silent force and kisses [“Zwischending aus stummer Kraft und Küssen”] (W 2 247).

340 Alfred Grimm extrapolate the significance of Egypt to Rilke, as an experience which transforms “the intensiy of the exterior world into interiority” (10). Rilke was first exposed to “Egyptian things” in Paris while working with Rodin, in 1902 the obelisk of Ramesis II was erected in Paris and shortly after a bust of Amenophis IV. was displayed in the Louvre, but his interest is truly kindled first by a commission-trip to Egypt of his wife Clara Westhoff-Rilke in 1907 which results in a lively correspondence about Egypt (9). In 1911 he then travels to Egypt for the first time, visiting the Sphinx and the Karnak temples, encounters which become formative experiences for Rilke.
The baroque image of a human skull through which a sapling rises comes to mind. The thrice repeated “O” signals the zero point of song, the onset of breath drawn through the open mouth of the singer through which soon the fullness of song will re-emerge. Paradoxically “all was silent” as Orpheus in singing substantiates the silent tree’s being. We have not arrived at a musical performance of any sort but at the onset of the silence of hearkening to the mystery of being. The re-opened mouths of the sarcophagi speak in butterflies, or as sonnet IX has it “only who ate with the dead of their poppyseed / will not lose again the softest tone” [“Nur wer mit Toten vom Mohn / aß, von dem Ihren, / wird nicht den leisesten Ton / wieder verlieren”] (W 2 245). Here, being accomplished and being silent coincide as “verlieren” hovers uncertainly between losing control of the articulation and loosening the sound into articulation.\(^{341}\) As the rhyme couples “Mohn” and “Ton” – poppy and sound Rilke posits the image of the capsule of seeds disseminating the transfigured dead and the sound loosened from within the singer as analogous motions.

The image of a tree growing in the orifice of the ear thus configures the corporeal “articulation” of one life-form within and from out of another. The tree is expressed by the shell of the skull. The animals are the first witnesses to the mystery of being, no three kings from Orient, but the animals who are silent in receiving “this”[“Dies”] – Rilke does not use the personified name of Orpheus here so that the term “this” becomes an openness, a clearing for whatever “this” may be. Because Orpheus has created temples “for them” within their hearing [“da schufst Du ihnen…”] this conjugated pronoun (second person plural, indirect object) both indicates that the temples are made within them and for them, not for external deities. From the image of the corporeality of the grave, Rilke here turns to the corporeality of the temple. The animal\(^{342}\) body becomes a site of the profanation of the divine: A moving, breathing animal temple with quivering pillars. This is why, in sonnet III at the “crossroads of two hearts / there stands no temple for Apollo” (W 2 242). In turn, the human body and its metabolism and breathing are seen

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\(^{341}\) In German „I will not lose another syllable“ “ich werde keine Silbe mehr verlieren” denotes someone’s unwillingness to say another word on a matter.

\(^{342}\) As Eric Santner rightly puts it: “Animality is for Rilke nowhere and in no way radically juxtaposed to humanity, rather they fundamentally belong to each other are situated in a continuum of transformation, passing from death to life and back to death, encountering the open on the threshold and in-between” (3).
5. Conceiving dLeIaFtEh – The Open in R. M. Rilke and W. B. Yeats

as a profane temple. What could be more unspectacular than breathing, than eating and digesting? And yet, some of the most ravishing of Rilke’s poems are celebrations of the curious and extraordinary “composition” of the biophysiological functions of the body: “Breathing, you invisible poem! / Pure cosmos exchanged for one’s own / being. Counterweight” [“Atmen, Du unsichtbares Gedicht! / Immerfort um das eigene / Sein rein eingetauschter Weltraum. Gegengewicht”] (W 2 257). Thus again, the second part of the collection opens with a poem that does not really celebrate song but the mediality which silently connects and sustains it.

5.1.5.1. How can we tell the dancer from the tree? Transformation of Body and Artefact in *Die Sonette an Orpheus* (1922)

The body in Rilke’s poem can become the site for self-realisation of the life-forms that silently sustain it. Where Orpheus was disfigured into obscurity [“Unkenntlichkeit”] through the maenads, so through the disfigurations and refigurations of the metabolism and blood, this disfiguration can come back into consciousness [“Kenntlichkeit”]. Rilke invents the image of an orange which gives itself reluctantly into its own destruction encountered in the process of eating, but then in turn re-emerges in fuelling the dance of the eater’s body into existence:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>XV</th>
<th>Wait…this tastes….it is already on the run</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wartet …, das schmeckt …</td>
<td>…only a little music, a stumping a humming –</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schon ists auf der [Flucht.</td>
<td>Girls, you warm ones, girls, you mute ones,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>… Wenig Musik nur, ein Stampfen, ein Summen —</td>
<td>dance the taste of the experienced fruit!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mädchen, ihr warmen, Mädchen, ihr stummen,</td>
<td>Dance the orange. Who can forget it,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tanzt den Geschmack der erfahrenen Frucht!</td>
<td>how drowning in itself it fights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanzt die Orange. Wer kann sie vergessen,</td>
<td>against its being sweet. You owned it,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wie sie, ertrinkend in sich, sich wehrt</td>
<td>it converted to you succulently.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wider ihr Süßsein. Ihr habt sie besessen.</td>
<td>Dance the orange, the warmer landscape,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sie hat sich köstlich zu euch bekehrt.</td>
<td>throw it out of you, that the ripe one be radiant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanzt die Orange. Die wärmere Landschaft,</td>
<td>in the airs of home! Incandescent ones, uncover</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>werft sie aus euch, daß die reife erstrahlte</td>
<td>fragrances after fragrances.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in Lüften der Heimat! Erfüllte, enthüllt</td>
<td>Accomplish/Manage/Create the relation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Düfte um Düfte. Schafft die Verwandtschaft</td>
<td>with the pure, refusing peel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mit der reinen, sich weigernden Schale,</td>
<td>with the juice filling the happy one!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mit dem Saft, der die Glückliche füllt!</td>
<td>(W 2 248)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The orange fends off her own attributes, resists them, because they are the way in which the orange figures within human environments. The orange itself “resists” identification with any trait, and yet it is being “possessed” and “converted” – here Rilke uses religiously connotated words to inscribe both subjugation and violence. But the strange imperative inverts the relation, the metabolic destruction and disappearance of the wholeness of the fruit into the atoms of the
body, the blood stream, the brain and muscles not only enable the addressed girls to dance, but are, in a way, the precondition for their dance. The energy which fuels the body which then creates the dance is biophysically speaking, still residually “orange.” Thus the imperative here is deceptive. If a dancer has eaten an orange, it is strictly speaking not possible not to dance the orange. And yet, the conscious execution of this shamanic dance of identification has to be brought into consciousness, the relation has to be “created/achieved.” Rilke understands the transmigration of atoms already as “speech” in sonnet XIII whatever we eat – already speaks.

Language comes from the atoms of the fruit which is communicated into the mouth – not to become intelligible but to become transformed into self, a process which can only be intimated or guessed. The living word of the fruit is transfigured in the tongue’s process of deciphering and when the speaker implores that we “read it” from a child’s face, again, we are encouraged to find the Orphic “infinite trace” of the destruction of one form in the process of self-actualisation of another. There is no direct reception of intentional message, only a witnessing of signalling. The uncanny chiasm of namelessness inside, emerges from this actual experience of unity of being in which that which we otherwise name apple, becomes us. Inside our mouth its ambiguity occurs, it is both the ambiguity of the self-emptying of sun and earth into the apple’s attributes which through the passage of the O343 of the open mouth figuratively comes into the further ambiguity of human embodiment thus connected by “–:/O.” We have here a pictorial equivalent of the transit from eye to open mouth in the two dots of the colon and the shape of the O, connecting the attributes of the apple with the experiential, interior self- dimension it assumes on the tongue. The “great”, as so often in Rilke, here appears again as the exceeding of emotions which are still connected to the body from which they originate and the idiosyncrasy of which is destroyed in the process of this exceeding.

343 The characteristic trope of lyric, apostrophe, with its “O”- devoid of semantic reference (Culler Reading Lyric’99).
5. Conceiving dLeIaFtEh – The Open in R. M. Rilke and W. B. Yeats

In the same manner the human body of a dancer can transmute into a tree. As the space-time image of a dancer whirling on the spot with uplifted and moving arms would resemble a “tree of motion”:

Tänzerin: o du Verlegung
alles Vergehens in Gang: wie brachtest du's dar.
Und der Wirbel am Schluß, dieser Baum aus Bewegung,
nahm er nicht ganz in Besitz das erschwungene Jahr?

Blühnte nicht, daß ihn dein Schwingen von vorhin umschwärme,
plötzlich sein Wipfel von Stille? Und über ihr,
war sie nicht Sonne, war sie nicht Sommer, die Wärme,
diese unzählige Wärme aus dir?

Aber er trug auch, er trug, dein Baum der Ekstase.
Sind sie nicht seine ruhigen Früchte: der Krug,
reifend gestreift, und die gereiftere Vase?

Und in den Bildern: ist nicht die Zeichnung geblieben,
die deiner Braue dunkler Zug
rasch an die Wandung der eigenen Wendung geschrieben?

Dancer: o you transposition
Of all passing into gait: how you celebrated/performed/sacrificed it.
And the whirl at the end, this tree of motion,
Didn’t he wholly own the afforded (vibrated/rotated-into-being) year?

Didn’t he bloom, so that your earlier vibrating/winging may buzz/flirt
around him, suddenly, his tree-top of silence? And over her,
wasn’t she sun, wasn’t she summer, this warmth,
this uncountable warmth from out of you?

But he was solid/carried/transmitted, your tree of ecstasy.
Aren’t they his quiet fruit: the jug,
in ripening striped, and the more ripened vase?

And within the images, didn’t the drawing remain,
which the dark stroke/pull/train of your brow
inscribed quickly on the wall of your own turning/turn/phrase?

Rilke employs androgyny consciously in this poem. Concerning the objects and things, the gendered nouns in the German language already perform prosopopeic traces: He, the jug, she, the warmth, he, the tree and she, the dancer. The tree of motion is a site of transformation, as self drops into non-Self and back into self. The dancer performs her motions so as to buzz and flirt around her own plastic, saptio-temporal “achievement” of dance, as a bee buzzes around a flowering tree. Her own motion becomes ‘attractive’ to her. This motion assumes her, turns her into a dancer. However, these observations are strictly not what the poem puts forward. The speaker

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344 Jana Schuster views the dancer as eternal motion, turning her own energy into an environment, heightening it to the status of ‘face’: “indem sie Raum einholt und diesen mit der eigenen Bewegung anfüllt. Mit der erzeugten Wärme entwirft sie den eigenen ‘Innenraum’ und macht ihn zur ‘Umgebung’ eines Anderen, dessen Gestalt, derart konturiert, sich ‘steigert’ und für Augen-Blicke zum ‘Gesicht’ wird” (250f).
merely puts suggestive questions in front of the dancer. Thus, the apostrophe makes this dancer, as principle or mystery, as woman or as textual turning, the only locus of a potential answer. So, as we were encouraged to “read” the fruit from the face of the child now we have to “read” the truth from the image of the performing dancer. As intimation, intuition and approximation are more suitable for this reading than rational deduction. Rilke, like Aristotle, traces the principle of Orpheus through the analogous metaphor of the jug and vase as “fruit” of the “tree of motion.” The whirling motion of the dancer which substantiates the “tree of motion” transfigures into filiation: the tree’s fruit, which are the jug and the vase.

The reader has to perform this leap of thought and suspense into pottery, the manufacture of earthen vessels out of the mixture of earth and water the rotation of the potter’s wheel and the centrifugal forces in combination with the form giving touch of the potter. Thus, we are presented with a jug “striped in ripening” by the brush of the decorator, and in leaping back to the image of the brow of a dancer, which she herself “drew” in the process of achieving/affording bodily existence within vibration, we can understand the dancer (who in being addressed is Orpheus) as the principle of transposition of “Gehen” in “Gang” “walking” into “walk” of “moving” into “motion” of “going” into “gait.” The human becoming of this poem is consummated through the artefact’s becoming and both are understood as living forms.

In this sense, we can consider Sonnet XIII of the second part of Die Sonette an Orpheus

With its dense succession of imperatives:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>German</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Be ahead of farewell as if it was behind you, like the winter just now departing.</td>
<td>Sei allem Abschied voran, als wäre er hinter dir, wie der Winter, der eben geht.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For among winters, one is such infinite winter, That your heart can only come through, overwintering.</td>
<td>Denn unter Wintern ist einer so endlos Winter, daß, überwinternend, dein Herz überhaupt übersteht.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be forever dead in Euridike - rise up more singingly, More praiseingly rise back into pure relation</td>
<td>Sei immer tot in Eurydike -, singender steige, preisender steige zurück in den reinen Bezug.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Here among the vanishing in the realm of depletion, be a ringing glass that shatters in resounding.</td>
<td>Hier, unter Schwindenden, sei, im Reiche der Neige, sei ein klingendes Glas, das sich im Klang schon zerschlug.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be- and yet know non-being’s condition, the infinite ground of your in-most vibration, so you restless consummate it this once-only time.</td>
<td>Sei - und wisse zugleich des Nicht-Seins Bedingung, den unendlichen Grund deiner innigen Schwingung, daß du sie völlig vollziehst dieses einzige Mal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To the used as well as the dull and dumb store-holds of nature, the unspeakable amounts, count yourself, jubilantly, and destroy the sum.</td>
<td>Zu dem gebrauchten sowohl, wie zum dumpfen und stummen Vorrat der vollen Natur, den unsäglichen Summen, zähle dich jubelnd hinzu und vernichte die Zahl.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This sonnet, as many other in countless imperatives, extends the urgent appeal of the participation of transformation and transposition as a self-execution in the full ambiguity of this term. And the Sonnets always seemingly ask the impossible, to be ahead of all parting, to become a shattering Glas, “is drinking bitter for you, become wine” [“Ist Dir Trinken bitter, werde
Wein!” (W 2 272) As non-plussed readers we may reply, initially with the question of the third sonnet in the first part “a god may do it, but how, tell me, shall a man follow him…?“ [“Ein Gott vermags. Wie aber, sag mir, soll / ein Mann ihm folgen…”] (W 2 242). Rilke’s imperatives always ask the impossible, as Alan Watts in *Beyond Theology: the Art of Godmanship* (1968) understands the biblical commandments as “upaya” or ‘holy cunning’ (91) leading the believer who tries to fulfil them to self-consciousness:

God’s first and greatest commandment is to tell the sons of Adam to persist as hard as they can in the primal sin of trying to control spontaneity. Thou shalt love. Thou shalt be artificially natural. Thou shalt try not to try. Thou shalt wilfully give up thine own will. Thou shalt attempt, for the next five minutes, not to think of a green elephant. Presumably, then, the Lord believes, with William Blake, that ‘the fool who persists in his folly will become wise.’ […] The situation is in sum that I must surrender myself, but I cannot possibly do so. This is the apex of the discipline of self-consciousness. (99f)

The *Sonnette an Orpheus*, are asking the impossible and are showing the permanence of transmutation, the laws which govern processes of becoming and decaying of life forms. The imperative apostrophe’s345 to the dancer, the god and at the same time the reader, becomes such a cunning call to attention. It is not possible to will the kind of transformation the sonnets ask the reader to perform. It is only possible to see how by nature these imperatives are fulfilled.

Rilke’s poetry is engaged in self-reflectively elaborating the medial preconditions communicating, which is always material as well as immaterial, sensory and medial: “Antennae sense antennae and the empty distance carried” [“Die Antennen fühlen die Antennen / und die leere Ferne trug”] (W 2 246). The difference between trug and trog (to carry and to deceive) is only slight, and in this expression, we are also bereft of any intelligible content, any message which the distance could carry. Paul De Man’s specification of lyrical poetry as ‘the instance of represented voice’ in that ‘the principle of intelligibility’ is given expression ‘through the phenomenology of the lyrical voice’ does not apply to Rilke’s poetry, which consistently investigates the conditions for language, calling the possibility of representation into question (de Man 1984: 239–262).

The poetic heart and circulation that this chapter has explored can be imagined as a Moebius loop which, as can be seen in the image by M C. Escher below, pictures identity as a procedural continuity between sides, poles or dimensions that still remain visible as distinct and yet are shown to be emanations of the flux of the same. This is the reason why the oxymoron *Weltinnernraum* can ultimately not be translated as world-interior because it is pervaded by and everted into the vast expanse of the exterior. Rilke’s God-Self-Nature permutations become the performance of a dynamics as which the world happens.

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This depiction of an inter-dimensional, dynamic, self-devouring unity, embracing a primary and antithetical pole as reversible features a textural middle, as a zone of indifference seems to come very close to the dynamics of the $\text{dLeIaFtEh}$ unity, which Rilke’s *Sonette an Orpheus* perform. It is the center of his own idea of a Unity of Being, which he outlines to Witold Hulewicz (13. 11. 1925).346

The true figure of life extends/suffices through both realms, the blood of the greatest circulation drives through both. There is neither a Here nor a Beyond but only the great Unity in which the beings which exceed us are at home. We, who belong here and now are not happy for one moment in the world of time nor are we bound to it, we cross over and over all the time to those who preceded us, to where we come from and to those who seemingly come after us. In the vastest of worlds they all are, one cannot say how, because the absence of time allows them all to be. Mortality plunges everywhere into a deeper Being. All phenomena, therefore, must not only be considered as limited in time but have to be introduced into the superior significance of which we partake. Though not in a Christian sense (I am departing more and more from it) but in a profoundly earthly, blissfully earthly sense it is our task to introduce into the wider, the widest circumference, all that we’ve seen and touched. Not into a Beyond whose shadows is darkening earth but into Unity, All-Unity.

5.2. “What Rough Beast?” – ‘Open Questions in W. B. Yeats

5.2.1. *The Avatar*– Vision of Unity or Tyranny?

Yeats’ *A Vision* in 1925 is framed as a hoax. The opening of the 1937 version takes the reader straight back to the opening of *The Wanderings of Oisin*. The collective mediumist endeavour is introduced to the reader with a twilight image of Rapallo in “A Package for Ezra Pound”:

Mountains that shelter the bay from all but the south wind, bare brown branches of low vines and of tall trees blurring their outline as though with a

soft mist; houses mirrored in an almost motionless sea; a verandahed gable a
couple of miles away bringing to mind some Chinese painting. Rapallo’s thin
line of broken mother-of-pearl along the water’s edge. The little town described
in the Ode to a Grecian Urn. (AVB 3)

An ekphrasis of an ekphrasis, the city of Rapallo in “A Package for Ezra Pound,” which opens A
Vision of 1937, hovers between the virtuality of the Urn, Eastern art, the environment and the
dead. It is a work of experimentation that short-circuits its potential as a universal myth or
political philosophy, this is the uncertain and shifting frame which should not be destroyed in
reading A Vision as political commentary or dogma.

Although Yeats never developed the vision of an avatar into a detailed elaboration in his
publication, in the automatic script and notebooks there is evidence of his pursuit of the question
of a new incarnation of the divine at the closing of the present historical cycle and the opening of
the next. As Helen of Troy was born through divine intervention and by way of an animal’s body
– the swan, so was Christ – the dove, and now at the end of a primary and coming of an
antithetical cycle around 2100, a new incarnation was to be expected. The notion of the coming
avatar is still only deductible from the questions asked of the communicators and the answers
received. From June 1918 in the automatic sessions, “the word ‘avatar’ was to become
increasingly seminal in the script,” George Mills Harper notes (38). Yeats was “still unsure of
many mathematical details of the cyclical theory.”(Ibid.) He asked a series of questions about the
nature and the timing of the avatar and he made suggestions pertaining to the symbols by which to
understand it:

8. Can we call it the Sphynx.
8. possible but many (YVP 2 54).

This answer, which will be repeated patiently by the communicators, implied that the avatar
would be a multiplicity. This is both consistent with Yeats’ notion that the coming antithetical
cycle would be inclined towards polytheism whereas the past primary was monotheist and
marked by moral religion. George Mills Harper mentions as a source for the forming notion of
an avatar a letter by George Russel on 2nd June 1896 in which he sees the coming Ireland in a
vision, he sees a child rising up above Ben Bulben and proclaims “The Gods have returned to
Erin and have centred themselves in the holy mountains and blow the fires through the country,
they have been seen by several in vision, they will awaken the magical instinct everywhere and the
people will turn to the old druidic beliefs” (YVP 2 131). Thou in general the communication
about the avatar is not entirely consistent, the most emphatically repeated message is that the
avatar will “come as many not as one” (YVP 2 134). The whole world will be “mediumistic to
avatar,” the spirit communicators confirm (YVP 2 57). Yeats envisions the arrival of an avatar as
the advent of a mediumistic unity of many beings (See YVP 3 83ff). The coming avatar for Yeats
is collective and global, not merely national – it is “one” person which is at the same time “many”
(Ibid.). Claire Nally misreads the avatar as a “despotic leader […] one who emerges from the
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masses but is not of them,” marked by a “proto-fascist, political inflection” and “Spenglerian Caesarism” (258).

Contrary to these claims, the *Vision Papers* outline a notion of shared consciousness and posit violence and tyranny, which Claire Nally reads as characteristic of the avatar, into the time before its coming. The coming of tyranny is “preparatory only” (*YVP2* 536f). The avatar for Yeats does not “herald a dark and oppressive mode of government,” it is preceded by one (Nally 337). The idea of the avatar prompts Yeats with questions of embodiment and consciousness as he probes his way towards an adequate image. The hybridity of the Sphinx seems to fit best.

In the final chapter of his 1937 *A Vision*, ‘The End of the Cycle,’ Yeats wonders about which vision to pursue for the political future of Europe: “How far can I accept socialistic or communistic prophecies” (*AVB* 301)? Yeats half-temptedly toys with images: “the apocalyptic dreams of the Japanese saint and labour leader Kagawa” and a communist (described “by Captain White in his memoirs ploughing in the Cotswolds Hills, nothing on his great hairy body but sandals and a pair of drawers, nothing in his head but Hegel’s logic” (*AVB* 301). Yeats tries to resort to symbol because “it seems I should know all if I could but banish such memories and find everything in the symbol.” But then, “Nothing comes.” The “artificial unity” he witnessed in rising totalitarianisms in Europe are signs of the tiredness of the cycle widening towards its end “only dry or drying sticks can be tied into a bundle” (*AVB* 302). Yeats finishes the explanatory part of his occult work of *A Vision* with a similarly suggestive question, advocating the open: “Shall we follow the image of Heracles that walks through the darkness bow in hand” (*AVB* 302) or “mount” to that other Heracles the husband of Hebe who “sits glad at the feast” (Ibid.; Raine, *Yeats the Initiate* 264)?

### 5.2.3. The Open Question of the Sphinx

*A Vision*’s penultimate chapter ‘The Great Year of the Ancients’ finishes with an ominous open unresolved vision that proclaims to be prophetic but reveals the future as nothing but concealment:
Yeats summons the Sphinx of Sophocles from the historical point of “breakup of racial consciousness and the birth of individuality,” to posit the reader as well as the coming generations in front of a pivotal question (Ross 553). Before that question was posed anew in his poem “The Second Coming,” Yeats had considered what went wrong the first time someone attempted to respond to the Sphinx.\(^\text{348}\) David R. Ross in his overview of Yeats’ interest in Sophocles claims that “Yeats proposes the related notion [to Hegel] that Sophocles brought into the world a new Humanism” in his introduction to The Holy Mountain (1934) (Ross 553). “Greece, [Hegel] explained, first renthumanityfrom nature, the Egyptian Sphinx, for all its human face, was Asiatic and animal, but when Oedipus answered the riddle, the Sphinx was compelled to leap into the abyss; the riddle “What goes first on four legs, then upon two, then upon three? called up man?” (Ibid.). It needn’t have called up man, the fact that it called up man signifies the centre of the tragedy of the age. Oedipus replied to the Sphinx “yet that riddle was not / for the first comer to read; it needed the skill of the seer. And / none such had you! Neither found by help of bird nor straight from any God. No I came, I silenced her, I the ignorant Oedipus it was I that found / the answer in my mother wit, untaught by any birds” (The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats Vol II: The Plays 376).

Of this Oedipus Yeats says in A Vision: “[He] knew nothing but his mind, and yet because he spoke that mind fate possessed it and kingdoms changed according to his blessing and his cursing” (AVB 28). Fiona Macintosh in An Oedipus for our Times? (2000). observes that it is the duality of Oedipus, the complexity that makes him interesting to Yeats in the 1920’s: “Oedipus becomes a powerful persona for Yeats during the turbulent 20s, when he too raged against developments in the public arena in the newly independent state. The ambiguity of

\(^{347}\)Yeats, at times personifies the Thirteenth cone, as Neil Mann observes. The Thirteenth cone cannot be understood without the Upanishadic Self in mind, it is a paradox individuality of multitude. It does not abnegate the individual. Neil Mann mentions Yeats’ personification and duality of the concept: “By each man called ‘his freedom’ though the Thirteenth Cone is an earthly view of a spiritual whole, it is also a community or congeries of beings[,] […] When Yeats writes of the Thirteenth Cone as acting in some way, for instance sending forms (AVB 230n), calling spirits ‘to the care of the newly dead’ (AVB 233), giving ‘assistance’ and ‘consent’ to them, or summoning them (AVB 235), using ‘messengers’ (AVB 237), being ‘conscious of itself’ (AVB 239), or when he states that ‘it can do all things and knows all things’ (AVB 302), it operates in this dual aspect” (Mann “The Thirteenth Cone” 170).

\(^{348}\)He was familiar with Sophocles via two translations he had done of Oedipus: Sophocles ‘King Oedipus’ (1928) and Sophocles ‘Oedipus at Colonus’ (1934).
Oedipus — both sinner and saint, swordsman and saint, hunter and hunted — make him the perfect exemplar of the Yeatsian antithesis of mask and anti-mask” (532). But Oedipus also matters, because in Yeats view he is indicative of the coming antithetical age. Brian Arkins observes that “[i]n A Vision Yeats opposes the antithetical Oedipus to the primary Christ: Oedipus lay upon the earth’ and ‘sunk soul and body into the earth,’ while Christ was crucified standing up and went in the abstract sky soul and body” (Arkins 2010, 18). This “laying upon the earth” is part of Oedipus’ desolation and return to unity. Brian Arkins rightly asks: “But why Sophocles and why the Oedipus plays?” – and why, most of all, has there been this “extraordinary neglect” of the question in scholarship? (Ibid.) Fiona Macintosh implicitly answers:

There is a real sense in which the figure of Oedipus, especially in the post-Freudian world, has proved problematic in just the way that Modernism and Yeats himself have often proved problematic in the postmodern world: all are identified in varying ways with dubious politics and dangerous ideas of heroism. (544)

Oedipus, on some level, reveals the self-condemnation of the modern sovereign state, the exclusive-inclusion of ‘bare life’, which Agamben outlines – from the baby left to die on the hill side to the old man killed outside the polis. The tragedy is exposed in that all that appears to have been done to or by strangers was ‘part of the family’ already relating to and defining Oedipus’ while he thought himself autonomous. He does not seek the council of the birds and gods in the quest for an answer. His cogito alone cannot reveal the full picture so he does not understand how he might be personally and physically implied in the animal that goes on four legs in the morning, two at noon and three in the evening. The riddle cannot be answered abstractly and ‘man’ simply does not suffice as an answer. However, once realisation has dawned Oedipus will sink ‘body and soul into the earth.’ He ‘takes upon himself’ the implications of his error that has made the Sphinx leap into the abyss. At the end of his days he comes to sit in the middle of the holy grove, thus profaning it by refusing to participate in the abstraction of earth from god and from man. Being blind he will listen to the birds: “Come praise Colonus’ horses, and come praise / The wine-dark of the wood’s intricacies, / The nightingale that deafens daylight there” (VP 446).

As Rilke moved from vision to sound, smell and touch, Yeats deafens the daylight with the voice of nightingale, making the animal too obvious to be ignored: “The secret knowledge is gradually enforcing itself,” A. Norman Jeffares writes of the moment of realisation in Yeats poem Meru (Yeats the European 44). But it is a secret knowledge of earth and its contingencies. What Oedipus fails to acknowledge in his response, Yeats traces in his poem “Meru”:

Civilisation is hooped together, brought
Under a rule, under the semblance of peace
By manifold illusion; but man’s life is thought,
And he, despite his terror, cannot cease
Ravening through century after century,
Ravening, raging, and uprooting that he may come
Into the desolation of reality:
Egypt and Greece, good-bye, and good-bye, Rome!
Hermits upon Mount Meru or Everest,
Caverned in night under the drifted snow,
Or where that snow and winter’s dreadful blast
Beat down upon their naked bodies, know
That day bring round the night, that before dawn
His glory and his monuments are gone. (VP 563)

The slanting lines here function again as a progressive consummation of an inner paradoxical unity. As Civilisation is brought up, it is immediately brought under a rule, a peace that is no peace, because man, when under the illusion of being the disjunct two-legged man, himself is already the apocalyptic boar without bristles that Yeats invoked in The Wind among the Reeds, “ravening, raging and uprooting” in his ignorance until realisation dawns in desolation. This “ravening, raging and uprooting” is characterised as the centre and present of civilisation, not its distant future. It is the violence of the self of civilisation that reveals itself veiled as destructive Other in apocalyptic vision. In today’s ‘free modern democracies,’ this “ravening, raging and uprooting” is done by manned machines. It takes the form of large-scale deforestation, atomic disasters and industrial animal slaughter.

Yeats counters abstract ‘man’ and his civilisational schemes with the personal acts of exposure of the plural yet solitary ‘hermits’ who, as if already dead, are “caverned in night under the drifted snow.” They consciously perform the logics of self-destitution, exposing their bodies to the snow and “caverned in night under the drifted snow” prefigure their own burial. They are past any fascination with human greatness, because: “before dawn His glory and his monuments are gone.”

Yeats’ discovery of Eastern philosophy and art is having a profound impact on his thought in the 1930’s, especially his friendship and collaboration with Shri Purohit Swami. They translate the Upanishads together. Joseph Allen Lennon comments of what he calls Yeats’ “Irish Orientalism” (286f). Although Lennon himself admits that the Upanishads and other Indian texts became important to Yeats on his quest to undo the colonial trauma of centuries of having a foreign mentality inflicted on Ireland, Yeats does not look to India so as to own or define the East but so as to allow the East – or whatever he understood of it – to impact Ireland and the West. In turning to India he wanted to rediscover what had characterised Druidic philosophy and religion, beyond dim memories of nature worship. Hence, the “Upanishadic Self” becomes attractive. Yeats and Swami’s translations begin with an invocation of perfection as non-hierarchically and unconditionally present, disabling strive: “That is perfect, this is perfect. Perfect comes from perfect. Take perfect from perfect, the remainder is perfect. May peace and peace
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and peace be everywhere” (TPU 15). “Whatever lives is full of the Lord. Claim nothing; enjoy, do not covet his property. Then hope for a hundred years of life doing your duty. No other way can prevent deeds from clinging, proud as you are of your human life” (Ibid.). The Self is invoked as: “The Self is one. Unmoving it moves; [...] is far away, yet near; within all, outside all.[...] How can a wise man, knowing the unity of life, seeing all creatures in himself, be deluded or sorrowful?” (15f.) This might be the way in which Unity of Being in the definition discussed earlier, can appear Upanishadic:

Christ, a legitimate deduction from the Creed of St Patrick, as I think, is that Unity of Being Dante compared to a perfectly proportioned human body, Blake’s ‘Imagination,’ what the Upanishads have called ‘Self’ nor is this Unity distant and therefore intellectually understandable, but imminent, differing from man to man and from age to age, taking upon itself pain and ugliness, ‘eye of newt and toe of frog.’ (E&I 518)

Yeats opens the notion into heterogeneity of cultures and faiths framing it with the validation of the Imagination. The Upanishadic all-uniting Selfhood is accepting the karmic burden of the past and present. Oedipus is implicitly present in eye and toe. The ideal unity is not revealed in a cult of perfection but as the coming age must reflectively integrate the last, this unity must take upon itself pain and ugliness, the abjection of ‘bare life.’ Neil Mann points out that for Yeats the coming Avatar was characterised as “victim or antithetical revelation” (354). In a letter to Maud Gonne, whom he cannot hope to convince of his views at this point (“we will never change each others politics they are too deeply rooted in our characters”), Yeats puts forward an “abstract impersonal statement of what I believe to be the ancient doctrine — which must soon be modern doctrine also — of the effects of hate & love. The whole of mystical philosophy seems to me a deduction from this single thought” (CLU #5036). What

As things only exist in being perceived (or as Bergson puts it, echoing Plotinus, “The universe is itself consciousness”) when we forget a thought or an emotion, which we will recall perhaps years later, it does not pass out of existence. It is still somewhere, still a part of some mind. I will add to that commonplace of philosophy this further thought that when we forget something for ever, or die, that thing — thought or emotion — still remains in some other mind, all the bad passions so remain and only come to an end through those minds, who are in the mystic sense of the word victims. A victim is a person so placed in life that he would be excited into the most violent hatred or into some other bad passion, if he did not dissolve that passion into the totality of mind, or to use the common language into God. Until that act of Victimage takes place, an act not of simple renunciation, but of sanctification, the passion remains passing from mind to mind from being to being among the living and the dead. In so passing it arouses everywhere its like just as do the good passions, those who hate receiving the influx of hate, subjecting themselves as old writers believe to streams of disaster, those who love receiving the influx of love, human and divine. I said the victims “would be excited”. But I should perhaps have said “is excited”, for the struggle to “sanctify” — to make “holy” or make “whole” — must be the greatest possible to the human mind. Think of S. Lyduine of
If indeed this is what Yeats expects of the coming incarnation of the *Avatar*, in saying that it would be “victim,” we can lay aside the notion that the *Avatar* in Yeats is a despotic, fascist leader.

A memorable seminar at the Yeats Summer School in Sligo in 2012 comes to mind in which Terence Brown performed an inspiring reading of the “The Second Coming,” highlighting the fact that there is something forcefully, brutally seductive about the shape that emerges at the centre of the poetic elaboration, suggesting that Yeats wanted to enthrall and to fascinate. This seductive force is indeed palpable. Oedipus might have freed the polis from the Sphinx but Yeats brings it back with a vengeance. As the title suggests, we are presented with an emergence – a *coming*. In view of the vast and excellent body of scholarship pertaining to this poem, I will restrict my discussion to making a few directly relevant observations to the present question.

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born? (VP 402)

Yeats presents us not with the Sphinx but with a vision thereof, filtered through his ‘troubled sight.’ A nightmare induced by the observation of ‘things falling apart.’ The animal mind of the falcon does not obey a human call. Where the first stanza presents impressions of the state of things, it also reveals these impressions as marked by the overgeneralisations of a despondent mind: best, worst, everywhere, all – imply that the speaker has given up the attempt of disentangling the subtle knot of his present situation. The opening of the second stanza presents in mocking terms the emotions bound up in the image. Both in the exacerbated repetition of the word ‘The Second Coming’ as well as in the repeated ‘surely’, the point is overstated the overly heightened emphasis on a complex, technical term is distancing the reader from the craze. This repetition creates a sceptic impression, a disbelieving “well, surely” rather than a mode of panic.
The vision that follows of a creature with “a gaze blank and pitiless as the sun” operates on our willingness or unwillingness to subscribe to the negative prosopopeia. Is the sun blank and pitiless? Here the de-psychised world of modernity and the mind frame that has prohibited the emotional identification with nature are cooperative in the emergence of the image; the very erasure of positive affection towards the sun imbues the eye of the creature with terror.

The knowledge that the speaker takes from the image is that vision itself is not objective, the preceding twenty centuries were “vexed to nightmare” and we are not told whether or not he is participating in it. The speaker makes himself incredible. “Nightmare” hovers uncertainly between reality and irreality, is it a living nightmare or a dream illusion? It clearly confronts the reader with the vital importance of understanding the relation between perception and perceived world. “What rough beast?” leaves us hovering uncertainly between the roughness of something that is not clearly defined as in “undefined entity,” a rough sketch that allows us to withstand the urge to put a fearful or violent point on it. Richard Ellmann’s “dreadful medley of man and beast,[that] slouches toward Bethlehem as a symbol of the Antichrist who will destroy all that has been begotten” is an answer that throws the riddling Sphinx off the cliff again.

Yet, every time a reader interacts with this text, the Sphinx is back and poses her question. Giorgio Agamben in The Open suggests that we simply refuse an answer and leave the question open.

To render inoperative the machine that governs our conception of man will therefore mean no longer to seek new – more effective or more authentic – articulations, but rather to show the central emptiness, the hiatus that – within man – separates man and animal, and to risk ourselves in this emptiness: the suspension of the suspension, Shabbat of both animal and man. And if one day, according to a now-classical image, the “face in the sand” that the sciences of man have formed on the shore of our history should finally be erased, what will appear in its place will not be a new mandylion or “Veronica” of a regained humanity or animality. The righteous with animal heads in the miniature in the Ambrosian do not represent a new declension of the man-animal relation so much as a figure of the “great ignorance” which lets both of them be outside of being, saved precisely in their being unsavable. Perhaps there is still a way in which living beings can sit at the messianic banquet of the righteous without taking on the historical task and without setting the anthropological machine into action. (92)

5.2.4. “The house door left unshut” – Transformations of the Hare in Yeats

Yeats poetry performs this ‘Shabbat of both animal and man’ in one remarkable way in which it does so is by invocations of hares and rabbits.

Yeats takes up the image of hare and rabbit on a number of occasions. The Poem “I Walked Among the Seven Woods of Coole,” which opens his play The Shadowy Waters, questioningly and

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uncertainly suggests a continuity between the animals and the supernatural, from which human wisdom comes:

\[ \text{they that cleave} \]
\[ \text{The waters of sleep can make a chattering tongue} \]
\[ \text{Heavy like stone, their wisdom being half silence.} \]
\[ \text{How shall I name you, immortal, mild, proud shadows?} \]
\[ \text{I only know that all we know comes from you,} \]
\[ \text{And that you come from Eden on flying feet.} \]
\[ \text{Is Eden far away, or do you hide} \]
\[ \text{From human thought, as hares and mice and coneys} \]
\[ \text{That run before the reaping-hook and lie} \]
\[ \text{In the last ridge of the barley? (V/P 217)} \]

The “immortal, mild, proud shadows” are not only addressed personally but are asked whether they lie “as hares and mice and coneys” fleeing from the reaping hook into “the last ridge of the barley.” Thought and threatening harvest technology are implicitly equated. “The Last Ridge of the Barley” becomes a potential sanctuary. The wilderness of syncretist and unorthodox creative thought and the poetic prosopopeia all create this last ridge of barley as a hiding place in which the animals as well as the immortal shadows and with them “all we know” may find an open shelter and hide in unknowability. Whether the question is framed as a synecdoche or metaphor, whether the shadows hide like the animals or are animals depends on how we read the ‘as’ – as hypostasis or reference.

Something about Yeats’ evocations of the feminine shape-shifting animal seems to automatically suggest ‘Maud Gonne’ as, in fact, the poet intentionally and publically celebrated his unrequited love for her and evokes her figure, constantly. “The Fish” celebrates both her presence and her absence:

\[ \text{Although you hide in the ebb and flow} \]
\[ \text{Of the pale tide when the moon has set,} \]
\[ \text{The people of coming days will know} \]
\[ \text{About the casting out of my net,} \]
\[ \text{And how you have leaped times out of mind} \]
\[ \text{Over the little silver cords,} \]
\[ \text{And think that you were hard and unkind,} \]
\[ \text{And blame you with many bitter words. (V/P 146)} \]

This poem would not work without Maud Gonne in mind, yet it gains its evocative power also as a place of the metaphoric eradication of Maud Gonne – there is only a fish, and even she or he disappears. The woman’s image is released into the wilderness of the imagination of the reader as the fish is escaping the nets of the fisherman. The wilderness is a constant companion in Yeats’ poetry, from wild geese, wild bees, wild stag and doe to “the wild old wicked man.” There is never a clear dichotomy between humans and the wild and this makes Yeats’ poetry such a pertinent ground for investigating the way in which the human is figured and merged with the non-human.

Maud Gonne certainly posed a ‘threat of the wild’ to Yeats in a very literal sense. Her views were radical and Yeats felt at times overwhelmed and threatened, afraid of what her political fervour might do to herself and the world. She was not only an Irish nationalist and an
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inspirational activist but, as Claire Nally observes, “consistently supported the Blueshirts in Ireland and fascism abroad: along with Arthur Griffiths, Gonne openly expressed anti-Semitic tendencies, especially in her support of the anti-Dreyfusard cause in France (by contrast Yeats was Dreyfusard)” (“The Political Occult” 330). Yeats poetry tries in many ways to deal with the tension of his love for the woman and his objection to her views. The ‘wild’ Maud Gonne that Yeats portrays creates poetic disturbances, and the poetic negotiation of ‘her’ images always encounters the speaker’s toying with different options of controlling and possibly domesticating that wildness and in the end always decide for a paradoxical solution in which neither the wildness is quenched or expelled nor violently subdued, mollified or neutered. Elisabeth Cullingford sees Maud Gonne in Yeats’ poetry as “the puppet controlled by the ringmaster” and in turn the woman and lion in “Of Unworthy praise” as “animals that need taming” (Gender and History in Yeats’ Love Poetry 1996, 1) Contrary to this claim, there is are many instances which suggests that Yeats does not compulsively quench the wild either in the woman evoked nor in the symbolic animal, in fact, not even the wilderness of the text, ‘leaping’ from the page into the reader’s imagination. In “Against Unworthy Praise” creates an uncertain space:

Yet here’s a haughtier text:
The labyrinth of her days
That her own strangeness perplexed; (V/P 259)

The “haughtiness” implies a text that snubs and exceeds easy categories. The semicolon at the end of the line suggests a unity over the gap of transfiguration. The text and her days are continuous but not as a mathematical formula, one is disfigured into the other. Her days, then, are the labyrinth it is not a solid structure, but to keep Minos from the Minotaur, but it is her own strangeness that does not monolithically erect but ambiguously ‘perplex’ these walls into the poem’s landscape. The poet certainly owns no manual to this perplexed labyrinth; also it is out in the open: “Yet she, singing upon her road / half lion, half child, is at peace” (V/P 260).

The Sphinx that emerges here is left out in the open, out to the danger that she poses to herself and the reader. Earlier she was named “woman” now she is also animal and child. Yet the Sphinx that rises from the labyrinth of the text is at peace in her unpoliced hybridity. We can say of Yeats’ human-animal figures that they are “becomings” in the definition Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari have given the term:

Yes, all becomings are molecular: the animal, the flower, or stone one becomes are molecular collectives, haecceities, not molar subjects, objects, or form that we know from the outside and recognize from experience, through science or by habit. If this is true than we must say the same of things human: there is a becoming-woman, a becoming-child, […] Becomings-animal are basically of another power, their reality resides not in an animal one imitates or to which one corresponds but in themselves, in that which suddenly sweeps us up and makes us become – a proximity, an indisernability that extracts a shared element from the animal far more effectively than any domestication, utilization or imitation could: ‘the Beast.’ (A Thousand Plateaus 275, 279)
Yeats’ beasts are unsafe, a hazard to themselves and to the reader who, through this mysterious “shared element” has to behave towards them, in reading, interpreting or even just observing them.

If, as Yeats put it, ‘in dreams begins Responsibility’ than certainly the sleeping in the presence of animals is fraught with it, too. The first part of his “Two Songs of a Fool” paints a homely image:

I
A speckled cat and a tame hare
Eat at my hearthstone
And sleep there;
And both look up to me alone
For learning and defence
As I look up to Providence.

I start out of my sleep to think
Some day I may forget
Their food and drink;
Or, the house door left unshut,
The hare may run till it’s found
The horn’s sweet note and the tooth of the hound.

I bear a burden that might well try
Men that do all by rule,
And what can I
That am a wandering witted fool
But pray to God that He ease
My great responsibilities? (VP 381)

Man as steward of the animals, protector and learned master, endowed with his responsibility to defend and instruct by “Providence.” The image could be oppressively quaint if it wasn’t for “the house door left unshut” that turns his care into hospitality and restores to the tame animal the choice of their freedom. It also restores to them the choice of their own death, of both, the sweet guileful illusion of the horn, and the bitter reality of the predator’s tooth. “The hare may run” burdens the warden with the freedom of choice of the animal in his care. It may choose wrong. This, being the song of a “Fool,” can make the reader wonder about the wisdom or folly of either the attempt to police the door or to leave it open. In 1918 Yeats sent this poem to Maud Gonne’s daughter Iseult. “It is riddled with Yeats’ feelings about his poetic responsibilities in relation to Maud Gonne’s politics” Angela Leighton writes (On Form 2007, 167). Yet it is also quite simply, about a human-animal situation between a domesticated sheltered space and the wilderness. In the course of his poetic negotiations of animals or animal-women, Yeats resorts to images of wilderness and the animal human boundary which can only be appreciated if we abstain from closing it by default. A. Norman Jeffares’ commentary kills the hare and the poem before it has even begun to breathe: “A speckled cat; Mrs. W. B. Yeats […] a tame hare; Iseult
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Gonne” (A Commentary on the Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats 214). Not only because the authoritative ascription of the anthologist and commentator hampers the imagination of the reader but also because without a qualifying remark it disrespects the poet’s symbol. Secondly, we break the text by such choices. The door is deliberately left open by Yeats for the animal. In the Second part of the poem, in fact, there is a strange ambiguity to the notion of enquiry “we never thought to enquire / Where the brown hare might be” – it has obviously used its freedom to escape, hide, or to get killed. Her fate is left to the imagination “who knows.” But at the same time the poet meticulously outlines her departure and his uncertainty is full of care.

Who knows how she drank the wind
Stretched up on two legs from the mat,
Before she had settled her mind
To drum with her heel and to leap:
Had I but awakened from sleep
And called her name she had heard,
It may be, and had not stirred,
That now, it may be, has found
The horn’s sweet note and the tooth of the hound. (VP 381)

Here, the allegory breaks down completely, neither of the women could be easily pictured stretching up on their hind-legs and drumming with their heel. The transformation through the detailed description invokes an animal presence as familiar and wild at the same time, the familiarity of the implication that the hare has a name, but the name is not called. The hare is not there, all we see are the scenarios of a worried mind, not knowing the whereabouts of a beloved being. Angela Leighton’s is a brilliant reading: “But even without [this] autobiographical reading, the hare, which is also a woman, goes the way of all hares. Its leaving is dramatic, powerful, the emotional point of the poem. Who knows if it was a hare or a woman? Who knows where it went? […].” (168) And pointing to the short poem “Memory” which ends in the lines “Because the mountain grass / Cannot but keep the form / where the mountain hare has lain” (VP 350). “Here” Leighton observes “form doubles up on its other meaning.” “Such a ‘form’ stays in the memory, though the hare has gone, and all the poet can do is keep the impression of it, its warmth or after shape” (Ibid.). I would suggest that the hare’s form is not only an after shape, since hares return to their form to rest in it by day. The human sensory apparatus, the mountain grass and the poem through the irresolvable ambiguity of ‘form’ are described as the hare’s environment, to which it might return, at will. We are back in the Boehmian irresolution between the word and Being. We are presented with the curious irresolution of the beloved, the animal, the poem and the page on which it is written: “Yeats ability to think unallegorically, to turn a woman into a hare ‘as quick as any hare that ever lived’ is the key to his poetry’s peculiar power.” (167) It is an emotional power of affective outreach to and invocation of the animal Other that which is dear and not hierarchically subjected and removed into utility. It is also a disquieting power, as transformation is not necessarily voluntary and humans and readers may find ourselves transfigured. The openness that implies us creates a space “which suddenly sweeps us up and makes us become” (Deleuze & Guattari 279).
Yeats’ poetry from his very earliest on is abuzz with the murmur of animal voices. Birds and bees, squirrels, foxes and hares populate his poetry. Their voice has the power to disturb and unsettle the human world as they are never clearly separated from it, in the first place. The twilight, as a zone where man and animal borders are negotiated and habitual conceptions are demolished, emerges as an ethical dimension. “The Old Men of the Twilight” is an interesting text, already for its peculiar setting “At the place, close to the Dead Man’s Point, at the Rosses, where the disused pilot-house looks out to sea through two round windows like eyes.” Like Elsinore, Yeats’ uncle’s house near Rosses Point in Sligo, this personified house was also a smuggler’s hide-out and was characterised by a “glimmering of messages” (Myth 191). Near this place a man hunts for a heron: “But when he looked along the barrel the heron was gone, and, to his wonder and terror, a man of infinitely great age and infirmity stood in its place. He lowered the gun, and the heron stood there with bent head and motionless feathers, as though it had slept from the beginning of the world” (192). The heron is shot but an ancient Ollamh, dying, telling his story to unreceptive ears (See also Putzel, Reconstructing Yeats 101f).

An entire book could be written about the bird-human-dead threshold in Yeats’ poetry and especially in his plays, where the uncertainty seems to be the pivotal point: The Hawk-Guardian of the well in At the Hawk’s Well, (1917) the owl-shaped merchants in The Countess Cathleen, (1892) the moon-crazed white heron of Calvary (1920) and finally, the mysterious presence of the animal-divine Herne in The Herne’s Egg (1938). They have in common their uncertain sharing in the human self. The supernatural-human-birds in The Shadowy Waters (1911) are another such instance:

There! there they come! Gull, gannet, or diver, But with a man’s head, or a fair woman’s, They hover over the masthead awhile To wait their Fiends; but when their friends have come They’ll fly upon that secret way of theirs. One - and one - a couple - five together; And I will hear them talking in a minute. Yes, voices! but I do not catch the words. Now I can hear. There’s one of them that says, ‘How light we are, now we are changed to birds!’ (VP 233)

This shape shifting between human agency, animal and the dead could offer an interesting question for further research, especially with regard to Yeats’s plays. However, the poem “Cuchulainn Comforted,” which occupies a crucial place in the closing of Yeats’s works, is a quintessential example of this bird-human-death continuity and it will be explored in the fifth chapter in more detail.

5.3. “What may become important to me” – Yeats’ Encounter with Rilke and their Shared Interest in dLēIaFtEh
5. Conceiving dLeIaFtEh – The Open in R. M. Rilke and W. B. Yeats

The world of the living in Yeats poetry, plays and most importantly in A Vision, is woven into a continuous yet ruptured texture with the world of the dead. Many studies have been written proving this point and exploring the implications and interrelations between Yeats’ poetry and his occult system (See Kathleen Raine’s essay “Death-in-Life and Life-in-Death”1974) Most important with regard to Yeats’ theatre is Helen Vendler’s Yeats’s Vision and the Later Plays (1963) in which she understands the Noh-plays as dramatisations of the Dreaming Back of the dead. This idea, that the dead are re-experiencing the pivotal points or Critical Moments of life posthumously without knowing the ontic status of their experience has been analysed in detail with regard to A Vision in Graham A. Dampier’s “The Spiritual Intellect’s Great Work” (2012). The dead are reliving the drama of their life, initially ignorant of their post-mortem condition. What this thesis could prove to be an underlying assumption in Rilke’s novel Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge, has been established with regard to Yeats in scholarship already, and does not need to be proven anew.

5.4. Yeats’s Encounter with the Poetry of Rilke

The influence that Rilke had on the works and thought of W. B. Yeats is restricted to the last years, most importantly, the last six months of his life. His interest, then, was directed specifically to the question of death in Rilke’s works - or what Yeats understood of Rilke through an anthology of essays edited by William A. Rose and J. Craig Housten Rainer Maria Rilke. Aspects of his mind and poetry (1938) sent to him by the editor. It can be assumed with some certainty that Yeats also read Rilke in translation as he states in a letter to William A. Rose on August 15th 1938, whom he thanks ”very much for what may become important to me”(CLU #7292). He admits: “I have read almost all the book, but will only understand when I have re-read it with a competent translation of the poems. I have read such translations in a friend’s house but I will now get them from Bumpus” (Ibid.). The house is Penns-in-the-Rocks and the friend is Dorothy Wellesley, Duchess of Wellington, whom he met through his London circle and with whom he struck an immediate friendship at their first shortly before his seventieth birthday in 1935 (See Foster W.B Yeats: A Life vol. II 2003, 519).

In the biography of her family Jane Wellesley notes that “[i]f people suspected that her good wine and soft beds had anything to do with Dorothy’s appeal, they may have been right; since the death of Lady Gregory there had been a vacancy in Yeats’s life for an aristocratic, intelligent woman with a beautiful, peaceful home.” (A Journey through my Family 2009, 295) But Yeats first and foremost appreciated Wellesley as a poet, whose works he had read and approved of before their meeting and lavishly praises in his introduction to the Oxford Book of Modern Verse 1892-1935. She became a close friend in the last years of his life and was present in the days before his death, having taken a villa near the Hotel where the Yeatse were staying. The two
translations Yeats read of Rilke are most likely a limited edition of Rainer Maria Rilke’s *Duineser Elegien* (1931), translated from the German by Vita Sackville-West and her husband. This edition was printed at the Cranach Press for Hogarth, a publishing house that had a great interest in promoting foreign language authors. Sackville-West and Wellesley had had a momentous affair in the twenties and Yeats had met Sackville-West as a guest at Wellesley’s house. The other translation of Rilke he read would most likely have been J. B. Leishman’s *Sonnets to Orpheus*. Rilke, *Rainer Maria* (1936) published by Leonard and Virginia Woolf at the Hogarth Press. Sackville-West and Woolf had been famously, liaised as well and through this web of liaisons and shared interests Yeats came to read Rilke’s poetry before he read William A. Rose’s essay in 1938. Whether or not Yeats bought a translation himself cannot be ascertained since there is no translation of Rilke in his library. It is possible that he owned a copy or borrowed one from the library at Penns-in-the-Rocks and that at his death in France, his wife George gave it back to Dorothy Wellesley along with the manuscript of “The Death of Cuchulain.” Locating the translations he read in the library of Dorothy Wellesley’s might perhaps provide the missing lines that Yeats repeatedly claims he had composed “on the margins” of the essay on Rilke, but which are notably absent. To William A. Rose he writes “I got back about ten days ago & began to read your book. I began with your essay. At first I was repelled by the brooding on death & the importance given to it, a theme foreign to our Irish literature & wrote upon the margin

\[
\begin{align*}
& \text{Draw rein; draw breath.} \\
& \text{Cast a cold eye} \\
& \text{On life, on death.} \\
& \text{Horseman pass by.} \\
\end{align*}
\]

(#7292)

He repeats the claim almost verbatim to Dorothy Wellesley three days later: “I found a book of essays about Rilke, waiting me, one on Rilke’s ideas about death annoyed me. I wrote on the margin: [see above]” (#7290).

There is, however, nothing on the margins of this essay except for what looks like an accidental pen mark on page 59 at the bottom of a page on which the author discusses Simmel’s take on Shakespeare. Yeats’ frustration, expressed in the two letters above is arguably directed at the “brooding on death & the importance given it” by the essay and not primarily at Rilke’s work. Yeats was not repelled enough to turn away from his interest in Rilke, whose thought and works preoccupied him in the last months of his social life, as Dorothy Wellesley observes:

Some days later he dined with us to meet Schnabel, the great pianist, and W. J. Turner who was staying at my villa and who was a friend of both Yeats and Schnabel. Madame Schnabel was there who knows small English and less Irish. Schnabel could not himself understand much of what Yeats said (which was a great deal) owing to his Irish brogue. They talked about Stefan Georg[e] and Rilke, but the approach of the musician and the poet was so diametrically opposed, that points of contact were few and far between. I sat with the Austrian Jew on my right and the Irish Nationalist poet on (Letters on Poetry from W. B. Yeats to Dorothy Wellesley 211)

Rilke clearly occupied Yeats’s mind, and it is interesting to imagine this as a Moment of Modernism in a French restaurant where an English Aristocrat, an “Irish Nationalist,” and an “Austrian Jew” only half-understanding each other discuss a poet who wrote in German but
abhorted any form of nationalism and was neither seeing himself as German, Austrian Swiss nor Czech, but described himself as a person with a “somehow Slavonic” mentality [“ein irgentwie slawisch gesinnter Mensch”] (Demetz *Rilke: Ein Europäischer Dichter aus Prag* 1998, 7). There is not much that ties Yeats’s political ‘rant’ and its “hectoring didacticism” of “Under Ben Bulben” meaningfully to Rilke’s influence but much to suggest Rilke’s influence on the epitaph (Foster *W. B. Yeats: A Life*, vol. 2, 649).

There is nothing to justify the reductionist claims of W. J. McCormack’s *Blood Kindred* (2005) taking Yeats’s interest in Rilke as evidence of Nazi sympathies. McCormack is satisfied to base his argument on the sole fact that Rilke spoke German. The absurdity of McCormack’s claim can be measured by this statement: “In 1934 [on receiving the Goethe medal], he had confessed to the Frankfurt authorities that he knew little or nothing of German culture beyond Goethe and Jakob Böhme. Now he was reading Rilke, and even delving into German philosophical art history” (McCormack 87-88). The idea that Yeats read Rilke as part of a ‘brush up’ on German culture so as to appeal to authorities in Nazi Germany is showing that McCormack is willing to construe Yeats as a fascist no matter what the cost. What McCormack calls “delving into German philosophical art history” is in fact the attempt to come to terms in a short letter with William A. Rose’s essay on Rilke and its brief excursion on Georg Simmel’s study on Rembrandt (Simmel was a *Jewish* author). This letter will be discussed in the following in connection with the essay on Rilke by William A. Rose.

### 5.5. Yeats’s Understanding of Rilke through William A. Rose’s Essay

Yeats’s notion of death in Rilke can only be understood as mediated by the essay of William A Rose. Among its many strengths, which lie especially in introducing the discussion of Rilke and death to English speaking readers and also in some astute close readings of Rilke’s poetry and letters, a weakness of the article is its wavering between text related observations of death in Rilke’s works and interpretive short-circuits fitting Rilke back into a traditional understanding of death and human behaviour towards it. As the previous chapters have argued, Rilke’s is not a “preoccupation with the thought of death” as a horizon or expected event, but it is a transformation of this horizon into internal experience (Rose 43). The poetry of Rilke is not anxious in the face of death but aware of its indwelling and procedural presence as a dual force of execution – that which instantiates and at the same time extinguishes individual life, thereby making it visible as an aspect of a wider environment. Rose wavers between moments in which Rilke’s understanding of death as outlined above is acknowledged and moments in which he drops back into death as it is commonly understood. He sees Rilke’s poetry in the context of death as the motivation of philosophy (Schopenhauer) and death as the desired state of transcendent union with the beloved (Novalis) (44ff). Mentioning Rilke’s famous one stanza poem “Death is great / we are his own / laughingly / When we deem ourselves in the middle of life / he dares to cry / in the centre of us.” [“Der Tod ist groß. / Wir sind die Seinen / lachenden Munds. /Wenn wir uns mitten im Leben meinen, wagt er zu weinen/ mitten in uns.”] (W 1 347). Rose observes the shift in Rilke from death as abject and external to death “lurking inside us”and
that “death is a quality of organic existence” (53; 59). Contrary to Rose’s claim, there is no systematic developments between a small and a great, a strange and an own death. Rose claims: “He postulates two kinds of death which he calls ‘Der große Tod’ and ‘der kleine Tod,’ or ‘der eigene Tod’ and ‘der fremde Tod’ (54). However, Rilke does not systematically use these terms. Death emerges as a consummation of life that is unique.

One of the hurdles to understanding that this essay presented for Yeats would have been the fact that the author chose to integrate the original German into his English syntax. Yeats had to take most of what Rose said on trust. However, Rose clearly works out that “[i]t is Rilke’s idea that each individual contains within himself his own death, peculiar to himself, which grows and matures as he grows and matures” (55f). However, death is never, as Rose claims, “the eventual fulfilment” or “ultimate experience” because it is the ultimate dimension of every experience. Rose juxtaposes Rilke’s idea of an alienated mass death in the city (as described in Malte) and a meaningful celebration of a personal death. For Rilke, death has “an ethical or educative significance” since “preoccupation with it affects the nature of the values one sees in life” (58). This is certainly one of the statements by which Yeats got annoyed and irritated at the notion of the pedagogy of Rilke’s “brooding” on death (80). “[I]t was only in coming to grips with the problem of death that life was for [Rilke] worth living,” Rose claims (This, in essence is the gravest misunderstanding that Rose presents).

Death and life in Rilke’s works have been read in this thesis as in a relation of performative non/difference or duo-unity and brooding on death in Rilke equals celebrating life. Rose reads Rilke’s novel subsequently as a psychological expression of the author’s state of mind, mentions the importance of the ripening and growing of death and God, without looking at the details, and in the midst of slight confusion develops an argument that is clearly reflected in Yeats’s understanding of Rilke as explained in a letter to Ethel Mannin on 9th October 1938. The argument Yeats picks up on in this letter is reflecting Rose’s discussion of Georg Simmel’s Rembrandt: An Essay in the Philosophy of Art as expressive of Rilke’s conception of death. Here, Rose actually comes closest to understanding Rilke’s notion of death: “death is inherent in life from the outset […] an ever present inner reality” but then he adds “without which our lives would be unimaginably different from what they are” destroying the preceding notion that without it, life wouldn’t be (58). But it is Rose’s account of Simmel’s notion of Rembrandt that captures Yeats attention: The portraits painted by Rembrandt contain life in its widest sense which includes the immanence of death. In the case of many Italian portraits one has the impression that the subjects in them are likely to meet their end at the point of a stiletto. In the case of Rembrandt’s portraits one feels that a person’s death will be a consequential development of the totality of his life, as a river merging at last into the sea is not overwhelmed by a foreign element, but pursues to the end the natural flow, which was inherent in it from its source (58f).

Stating that it is the same in Shakespeare’s tragic heroes, as opposed to the comic ones who are types, Rose goes on to observe that that death is “an a priori determining factor of their lives” (59). Thus Rose contents, “if Simmel is right” Rilke was part of a “great tradition” to which death was an “essential element in life itself” (60). Rose quotes the italicised quatrain below without context in his essay. Rilke wrote it as part of a Requiem for Gretel Kottmeyer, a friend of his
It is unlikely that Yeats ever managed to find a translation of this poem yet it is clearly expressing what it was that fascinated Yeats about Rilke and similarities are clearly visible. The use of ambiguity deliberately left open, as in the address of the dead girl as a play mate as “Gespiel” which hovers uncertainly between “Gespielin” (playmate), the process of play and the noise or waves tinkling on the shore.

On 9th of October 1938 Yeats writes to Ethel Mannin:

[…] I re-read an essay on “the idea of death” in the poetry of Rilke & compared your thought with Rilke’s & with the same thought as it is in what I call my “private philosophy” (The Vision is my “public philosophy”). My “private philosophy” is the material dealing with individual mind which came to me with that on which the mainly historical Vision is based. I have not published it because I only half understand it. […] According to Rilke a man’s death is born with him & if life is successful & he escapes mere “mass death” his nature is completed by his final union with it. Rilke gives Hamlet’s death as an example. In my own philosophy the sensuous image is changed from time to time at predestined moments called Initiationary Moments […]. One sensuous image leads to another because they are never analysed. At The Critical Moment they are dissolved by analysis & we enter by free will pure unified experience. When all the sensuous images are dissolved we meet true death. […] A German philosopher has said that men in Italian portraits seem to wait an accidental death from a blow of a dagger whereas the men painted by Rembrandt have death already in their faces. Painters of the Zen school of Japanese Buddhism have the idea of the coincidence of
achievement & death & connect both with what they call “poverty.” To explain poverty they point to those paintings where they have suggested peace & loneliness by some single object or by a few strokes of the brush. (CLU #7312)

The “German philosopher” mentioned is William A Rose, as Yeats nearly verbatim reproduced his account of the difference between Rembrandt and the Renaissance. Yeats views the idea of death being already within life “born with him.” Yeats adopts in parts William A. Rose’s interpretation of death in Rilke does not describe a sudden union of disjunct entities but rather claims that life and death are proceeding and approximating each other. Rose uses the metaphor of a river joining the sea. Yeats came to understanding Rilke’s notion of death despite Rose’s partial misconstruction. Yeats understands that the inherent presence of death within embodied life is essential for in Rilke. Yeats recaptures Rose’s “in their faces.”

Yeats further claims that there is a concurrence between Rilke’s notion of death and his own “private philosophy.” Neil Mann suggested in correspondence that the term ‘private philosophy’ relates to manuscripts and notebooks concerning certain aspects within incarnate as well as discarnate life described in A Vision, specifically concepts Yeats outlined as ‘Moments of Crisis’, such as ‘Initiatory Moments,’ ‘Critical Moments’ and the ‘Beatific Vision.’ This material had never been included in his publications and he felt unsure about it, himself, as it relates to aspects of his private life, including sexual experience. Colin McDowell’s essay “Shifting Sands” (2012) deals with the “Critical Moments” Yeats mentions. A full discussion of this topic, however, would exceed the frame of this study.

5.6. Tracing Rilke’s Influence in Yeats’ Last Poems (1936 – 1939)

It has not been the goal of this thesis to trace direct influence but rather to show the inherent similarities of Yeats’s and Rilke’s poetic works and thought, and their ontological foundations and structural procedure. In the following final passages, however, three single moments in Last Poems will be analysed as they suggest points of direct contact between Rilke’s poetic cosmos and Yeats’s. “A Bronze Head” and “Cuchulain Comforted” seem to share common topoi and procedures with Rilke’s Duineser Elegien. This comparison are based on the English translations of Vita-Sackville West as these are the translations Yeats would most likely have read.

The 6th, 7th and 10th elegy, one could say, are centred around the process of becoming-animal, which Felix Guattari and Gilles deleuze describe as follows:

Becomings-animal are basically of another power, their reality resides not in an animal one imitates or to which one corresponds but in themselves, in that which suddenly sweeps us up and makes us become – a proximity, an indiscernibility that extracts a shared element from the animal far more effectively than any domestication, utilization or imitation could: ‘the Beast.’ (A Thousand Plateaus, 275, 279)
The name of the beast itself stirs fear even on the word being uttered. Enlightenment and all the efforts of Western civilisation were directed at banishing the beast from inside humanity, which has unfortunately not prevented humanity from becoming bestial – paradoxically towards the animal. If we enquire today ‘where the hare may be’, or the rabbit whose squeal disturbs Yeats’ thought in ‘Man and Echo’ we will have to face the facts of 180 Million rabbits slaughtered annually for their fur. The rabbit is “hawk-stricken” in being exploited by a species that has lost touch with its inner animal that has become complacent in the shelter of its self-abstraction. Against these complacencies and against the forgetfulness of proximity the poetry raises the human-animal voice.

“A Bronze Head”

Rilke’s country of the *Elegien* is one of the newly-dead. It is as discussed earlier, Egypt in the consciousness of a young dead travelling man who encounters a personified female *Klage* (wail, or plaint). The *Zehnte Elegie* subsequently takes the reader on a journey beyond Western urbania into the desolate realm of nature of the dead, where they discover the Sphinx as an image of a desolate humanity, hovering between the stars and earth, monument human face and bird:

```
And often a bird, in sudden fright, flies straight
Across their upward vision, drawing far
The image of its isolated cry. _
As evening approaches
She takes him to the cromlechs of the ancients
Of the sorrow race – the sybils and the prophets.
Then night comes on; they go more silently,
And soon the tombstone climbs up like a moon
To watcho’er all. Brother to him of the Nile,
This awful Sphinx – a face on the silent room
And they are amazed at the crownworthy head,
Which soundlessly, once and for all, has laid
The face of man on the balance of the stars.

Giddy with the approach of death, his glance
Perceives it not, but hers, from beyond the bar
Of the God’s home, affrights the owl. And it,
Streaking down that ripely rounded cheek
In a slow curve, all soft, designs,
In the new audience of the dead, on double
Opened page, the indescribably line
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*(Duineser Elegien trans. Sackville-West 118, 120)*

The Sphinx that emerges as a crownly head, an “indescribable line” is traced by the bird’s wing, the vision of the dead and the ancient monument as it rises like the moon. Yeats’ “Bronze Head” shares the setting, the theme and the uncertainty between the human, the animal and the dead:

```
Here at right of the entrance this bronze head,
Human, superhuman, a bird’s round eye,
```
Everywhere else withered and mummy-dead.
What great tomb-haunter sweeps the distant sky
(Something may linger there though all else die)
And finds there nothing to make its terror less
Hysterica passio of its own emptiness?

The poem was inspired by a plaster cast Bronze of Maud Gonne which was displayed in the Municipal Gallery in Dublin. Again, Yeats attempts to give an outline of an aspect of Maud Gonne but ends up at a “rough beast,” an uncertain outline of animality, humanity, the dead and the artefact, all in one place, all part of the same continuous ‘incredible line,’ or, as Helen Vendler puts it, the “metaphysical enigma of Maud’s many contradicting self-manifestations” (Our Secret Discipline 351).

No dark tomb-haunter once; her form all full
As though with magnanimity of light,
Yet a most gentle woman; who can tell
Which of her forms has shown her substance right?
Or maybe substance can be composite,
profound McTaggart thought so, and in a breath
A mouthful held the extreme of life and death.

What McTaggart could do, Rilke could do as well, to hold this wavering yet uninterrupted line of continuity in a single poetic breath. Yeats is thus reassuring himself that “all of Maud’s forms have ‘shown her substance right.’” (Ibid.). This, in retrospect, validates the fish, the hare, the countless other images that trembled with the implication of Maud Gonne as forms of her composite nature. Poetically, Yeats has thus elevated all animals to the status, not only of abstract non-human Other, but of inmost beloved, which by the power of her becoming-animal “suddenly sweeps us up and makes us become” (Deleuze & Guattari, 279). This process of becoming confronts the poet with his own wilderness, and provokes a personal address of “everywhere”:

I had grown wild
And wandered murmuring everywhere, “My child, my child!”

“Cuchulain Comforted”
Another elegy exploring human whereabouts after death is the Sechste Elegie which opens with a hero transfigured into a fig tree.

Long it is now since I was made aware
How you, o fig-tree, in despite of flower,
Thrust your pure mystery home into the fruit,
Which takes its final shape in early bud,
Before maturity has reaped its praise,
A fountain’s throat, your bended branch drives up
Against the stream of sap, and out of sleep
Leaping with consciousness not yet awake,
5. Conceiving dLeIaFtEh – The Open in R. M. Rilke and W. B. Yeats

Enters the bliss of its most grateful act.
Thus did the god take on its swanlike form.
(Duineser Elegien, Sackville-West, 68)

In her ground-breaking essay “Rilke’ Sixth Duino Elegy or The Hero as Feigenbaum” (1985), Kathleen L. Komar argues that “this elegy may not depict the hero quite so positively as critics have heretofore assumed.” (26) She suggests a revision of the general direction of the interpretation of the Elegien, based on the following observations:

In German the term “Feige” designates the fig and is derived from a Latin root, “ficus,” associated with an earlier Greek root, “sykon.” However, there is another meaning of the term. Existing as an adjective, the word means “cowardly” or “timid.” The adjective admittedly derives from an entirely different root (MHG “veige,” OHG “feigi,” OE “fige”) and is related to the English term “fey.” In its earliest form, “feige” like “fey” meant doomed to death. Late in the fifteenth century in Germany, it developed into the concept of “afraid of death” or “cowardly.” That Rilke, who is so conscious of and careful with language as well as botany, should choose this particular term to symbolize the hero cannot be entirely accidental. (Ibid.)

These roots reveal an ambiguity which Rilke certainly employed consciously. The translation does not maintain the final line of the message in which the energies literally drive the god into the swan, without there being a chance of resistance. As through a fountain’s tube the water is pushed, it is pushed into the tree, as the god is pushed into the swan. “Like the hero’s essential, active drive that forces him into action, the tree and the fountain force potential essence into physical movement and life” (Komar 28). The poem describes an urging and pressing of sap that is identified as in essence the same as the hero’s irresistible drive into action. The hero is a principle of self possession that throws itself into being, it is a principle of consummation. The hero, like the fig tree, possesses himself fully in each instant, in having blossom and fruit at the same time. He “whom fastidious death has chosen early” was already the sperm that won out at the expense of every other sperm: “myriad were they who surged within your womb / and would be; but lo! He seized the chance, / Broke from within your body, / chose and prevailed.” The hero is thus identified with a principle of begetting of mammals, the myth of the victory of one sperm over many that suddenly includes the entirety of life begotten in the womb in the image of the radical individual. (Duineser Elegien, Sackville-West 72) the poet interjects the virtuality and artefact of the book into the circulatory image of the hero as boy in the lap of his mother reading in a book about Samson. The mothers of the heroes are imagined as “cloven gorges, into which, lamenting, / Daughters, the future sacrifice to your son / from the heart’s edge on high have thrown themselves!” (74). The hero may rush through the life of women, making their lives a sacrifice to his but there is at least poetic, humorous justice in the fact that he is finally transformed into his antithesis. As the poem is taken back to the initial image of the fig tree: “He came to a standstill at the long smile’s end, - / transformed” (Ibid.). The long smile might also be the reader’s at the realisation that the hero has come to be the ‘cowardly’ tree.
The initial passage of the seventh elegy takes up an image of the sixth in which the poet describes himself as seeing the hero tossed into the air by fate like a bird; it begins with a dawning spring morning and a soliloquy:

May this outgrown voice no more be tainted with 
The note of supplication; though your cry 
Take to itself the purity of a bird’s, 
When the ascending year so lifts it up 
Forgetting that it is a busy bird 
And not alone a free and single heart,- 
Forgetting that it wafts it up on high [...] (76)

This coincidence of a hero converted to his antithesis after death and the transformation of human voice into bird-cry in “Cuchulain Comforted” suggest that Yeats had read Rilke’s elegies as a source of inspiration:

“A MAN that had six mortal wounds, a man 
Violent and famous, strode among the dead; 
Eyes stared out of the branches and were gone.

Then certain Shrouds that muttered head to head Came and were gone. He leant upon a tree As though to meditate on wounds and blood.

A Shroud that seemed to have authority Among those bird-like things came, and let fall A bundle of linen. Shrouds by two and three

Came creeping up because the man was still. And thereupon that linen-carrier said: 'Your life can grow much sweeter if you will

'Obey our ancient rule and make a shroud; Mainly because of what we only know The rattle of those arms makes us afraid.

'We thread the needles’ eyes, and all we do All must together do.' That done, the man Took up the nearest and began to sew.

'Now must we sing and sing the best we can, But first you must be told our character: Convicted cowards all, by kindred slain

'Or driven from home and left to die in fear.' They sang, but had nor human tunes nor words, Though all was done in common as before;

They had changed their throats and had the throats of birds.
Only by title is this poem associated with the hero of the Irish Ulster cycle: “Cuchulain, literally: "the hound of Culann,” who kills his host’s dog as a child and takes the place as a guard dog in the legend. Cuchulain is a warrior hero and the central hero in Yeats’s oeuvre, who became an evoked as a national archetype in the Irish Revival. Cuchulain here is abstracted into “a man,” and just as in Rilke, calling the dead “Klage” (plaint, wail) Yeats uses a *pars pro toto* to name them: “Shrouds.” They are the compositions, the textures that clothe them. I have nothing to add to Peter Sack’s illuminating reading of “Cuchulain Comforted” which he delivered at the Yeats Summer School in Sligo and which is available as a digital copy in the Yeats archive at IT Sligo as well as the Yeats memorial building, other than to say that it is not alone in what it performs and achieves in European Modernism. Sack’s lecture is aptly titled “Yeats’s Heart,” and it is indeed here that Yeats connects the dead, human and animals in the circulation of the environmental self.

Poetry as the instrument and medium of several kinds of interchange should shake us into an encounter with what makes poetic language poetic: Interchange, even boundary crossing, this is ‘Cuchulain Comforted,’ one of the great poems of crossing a threshold, strolling among the dead. These crossings are often transgressive. Remember the inventor of the Lyre was Hermes, not Apollo. Poetry as a social or cultural resource depends for its power on this almost neurological, as well as psychological and philosophical way of tuning and turning into this process of mind-breaking and heart-breaking and then mind-making and heart-making. (Sacks, n.p.)

Sacks analyses the iambic pentameter and terza rima as “Dante’s very form” thereby aligning himself with the “Greatest poet-journeymer among the dead” and quoting John FitzGerald’s *Poetics of Conversion* – describes terza rima as the form that is “best suited to both pilgrimage and conversion.” The conversion, in this poem, however, is literal and physical. It is also a form of “tuning into other than human sounds” as it is also the form of Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind.” For Peter Sacks it is the form which “lead[s] the mind to its own edges and beyond” – a beyond which is togetherness. Referring to *A Vision* and Helen Vendler’s reading of Yeats’ Plays in conjunction with his occultist texts, Sacks sees the poem related to the Shiftings, a post-mortem state “whereby the dead undo their previous identities but also complete them by integrating what has hitherto been excluded, coming to terms with an entire set of antitheses.” The hero thus has to integrate human weakness and previously excluded otherness. “The poem,” as Peter Sacks notes “makes its own corresponding gesture of opening a relation, of relinquishing itself to inhuman song, celebrating the metaphoric as well as bio-morphological turn between language and its other, between man and shrouds, between human and birds.” The central moment of the poem for Peter Sacks is:

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350 The following quotations are from a transcript made from the audio copy: Sacks, Peter. “Yeats’ Heart,” Yeats summer school lectures 2004; 15, M021698
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The momentary ambiguity of will: ‘Your life can grow much sweeter if you will/ (suggesting that you can choose or have a kind of will towards that, but that word will has to morph across the line break, across the stanza break to the will of simple futurity) obey.’ It introduces obey which it takes to be the central word of the poem. It is located literally in the very middle of the poem. The central line with twelve lines above it, twelve lines below it is ‘obey or ancient rule and make a shroud.’ The vectoring bending of that word will and its one meaning like a beam refracted in the waters of poetic language, an injunction in the reorientation of the will between sounding and listening” (n.p., e.a. to indicate aural emphasis in the original talk).

This bending of willing and obeying was analysed in Die Sonnette an Orpheus, which ask the drinker to become wine, and in asking confront him with the seeming impossibility of such task until, after considering the way humans pass into the atoms of their environments through death and metabolism, laws of embodiment become conscious, which make are laws of nature and cannot be disobeyed. Yet, through the address and the call to conscious participation, the freedom is restored. The texts of Yeats and Rilke refuse to be reduced to reference and allegory the human-animal continuities which unsettle as much as they comfort are acting out on the reader’s imagination and repertoire strengthening him to leave the question open of what it is to be human.

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This thesis has addressed questions of poetic ontology, namely the thinking of Unity of Being emerging in two different European contexts yet out of similar artistic sources and reflections on the discontents of modernity. The engagement with the poets’ conceptions of Unity of Being has highlighted the central importance of personification and address of nature, and has argued for an aesthetic as well as ethical merit to the use of uncertainty in poetic images. Both poets were seen to be viscerally engaged with delimiting the sacred and with kenosis, the idea of existence as the divine poured out restlessly into temporality, devastating in its process all embodied forms yet paradoxically preserving them in the act of transformation. Kenosis was seen to be part of the poetic structures and themes. The radical re-conceptualisations of death in the oeuvres of both poets was seen as a point of great affinity. This thesis introduced philosophical concepts, such as The Open, by Giorgio Agamben and demonstrated the environmental validity of anti-closure in the works of Rilke and Yeats.

Two questions, however, were neglected: the question of Unity of Being in relation to Ireland and Unity of Culture, and the question of the Rilkean dimension of Yeats’ epitaph. Both are, however, related and will be addressed here, by way of conclusion. Yeats’ claim in “The Trembling of the Veil” that he did not know that Unity of Being would not be possible “however wisely sought” without “a unity of culture in class and people that is no longer possible at all,” seems to suggest that he had given up to believe in the idea of Unity of Being ever shaping reality
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in Ireland in his life time (Au 268). It seems that he despaired of the hope of seeing his concept root in reality as he became disillusioned by politics: “the dream of my early manhood, that a modern nation can return to Unity of Culture, is false” (Au 229). The supposition that it cannot be attained at this moment in history is based on the progression and return of historical cycles outlined in A Vision, and the observations of disunity shaping the present “all out of shape from toe to top.” (VP 639)

Where Unity of Being is impossible for humanity alone it might not be impossible for the human-animal community. The three poems in Michael Robartes and the Dancer ‘Easter 1916’, ‘The Rose Tree’ and ‘On a Political Prisoner’ all conceive a Unity of Ireland that stretches continuously between the land, the animals and the humans. This unity of the environment it is rather than a Unity of Culture in which Yeats will remain invested. One day, Unity of Being will come around again as it did around 1450, being a harmonious state in which “prince and ploughman” were sharing one thought before the “scattering came, the seeding of poppy, the bursting of the pea-pod” (Au 229). Yeats does not use the image of a bursting pod by accident, as even the bursting of the pod cannot be thought without the circular unity of the plant. It is this notion of an earthly unity, which attains its continuity in revolution – chronos pertaining to the revolution of the stars and kairos, pertaining to the shattering lightning rod of unexpectable incidents, political revolution. Only in this context of unity is it possible to release the self for the sake of the Other, does it become “O plain as plain can be” to the men and women of the Easter rising that: “there’s nothing but our own red blood. Can make a right Rose Tree” (VP 396). The terrible beauty of ‘Easter 1916’ against the background of the three main aspects of Unity of Being outlined in this thesis is the harrowing yet all-sustaining Orphic song of existence, which flings all creatures into earth’s continuous revolution:

Hearts with one purpose alone
Through summer and winter seem
Enchanted to a stone
To trouble the living stream.
The horse that comes from the road.
The rider, the birds that range
From cloud to tumbling cloud,
Minute by minute change;
A shadow of cloud on the stream
Changes minute by minute;
A horse-hoof slides on the brim,
And a horse plashes within it
Where long-legged moor-hens dive,
And hens to moor-cocks call.
Minute by minute they live:
The stone’s in the midst of all. (VP 393)
“Yeats chooses […] a quick trimeter march-rhythm suitable both to military enterprise and to the second subject of the poem, the rapidity of natural change,” Helen Vendler writes (Our Secret Discipline 17). This meter indicates the two dimensions of revolution. Natural entities are flung around: stone, stream, horse, road rider, birds, cloud, shadow of cloud, stream horse-hoof, horse, moor hens, hens, moor-cocks, stone, in a giant tumbling cycle of images. Now at the beginning, now at the end of a line the frantic galloping of ‘minute by minute’ and the resting monosyllabic ‘change’ describe the elliptic logics of the gravitational forces that have compacted earth into existence. In the midst of all, there is no longer anthropos, but a stone, hovering unresolved between the enchanted “hearts with one purpose,” the stone of Tara which gave Ireland unity and the earth itself.

When “hens to moorcocks call” it is not merely “the essential role in natural change played by sexual generation” as Helen Vendler writes, but it is also the joyful omnipresence of voice and relation between all things (21). “As Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge. There is no speech nor language, where their voice is not heard.” Yet a horse breaks out of this unity, veering off the conventional, habitual path that its servitude to humanity foresees, violently plashing into the river. We know it bore a rider the heavy impact of the plosive and the lack of further mention makes doubtful whether they emerge on the other side of the stream. In the sliding hoof and the plashing horse man’s vulnerable union with the animal becomes tangible, both rider and horse are sliding on the brim, the fate of the one bound to the other.

It is only now that the question after a Rilkean influence on Yeats’s epitaph can be raised. About half-way into the writing of the thesis I had a dream, which I would like to share because it shaped my reading of the two poets enormously. I was sitting cross legged on the grass and I heard someone asking me “The Horseman in Yeats epitaph, is it a horse or is it a man?” I had no answer and in the strange way of dreams it seemed to be very important that I came up with one. I got quite nervous but nothing came. A short while after waking up the word ‘Horseman’ was still lingering in all its compound, unresolved strangeness and it is only now, about two years later, that I feel fully confident to refuse an answer. The Horseman is a Horseman in the way in which the duckrabbit is a duckrabbit – a humanimal, a duo-unity in which is inscribed the history of Western civilisation, the conquest of distance, velocity and power. But in it is also inscribed an endless reservoir of human emotion, myth, story and song-making. In eradicating the first line of the epitaph in his process of revision, “draw rein, draw breath” Yeats not only gave the poem a more pronounced caesura and the last three lines more gravity, but he also relinquished the instrument of subjugation in editing out the reign. The nature of the compound foresees in conventional understanding that the second part is the actual object and the first part its qualification. Hence, the noun tells us what kind of man is passing by. Yet no reign needs to be drawn on the ambiguity of their union. And after the many explorations of bird-women, lion-children and heron-men this thesis has conducted, there is no need to draw rein on the ambiguity of the Horseman, as Rilke draws no reign. Yeats in all likeliness read Rilke’s ninth sonnet of the
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first part of the *Sonette an Orpheus* in the translation of J. B. Leishman to which will be given the last word:

Look at the sky. Is there no “Horse-man” reckoned
Among the constellations? For we share
So much with the proud first. And with the second
That curbing rider, whom it has to bear

Is not just this, first hunted and then broken,
The sinewy nature of the course we run?
Turf and turning, pressure, nothing spoken
New horizon. And the two are one.

Are they, though? Or are they never able
To will like none the way they both pursue?
Divided from the first by stall and table.

Even the stellar unities deceive.
Still, let it please us for an hour or two,

To believe the figure, to believe. (57)
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