THE LANGUAGE OF REAL LIFE:
SELF-POSSESSION IN THE POETRY OF PAUL CELAN, T. S. ELIOT,
RAINER MARIA RILKE, AND PAUL VALÉRY

by

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The Language of Real Life: Self-Possession in the Poetry of Paul Celan, T. S. Eliot, Rainer Maria Rilke, and Paul Valéry

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In his “Letter on Humanism,” Martin Heidegger conveys the importance he attributes to poetry when he states: “Language is the house of being” (“Letter” 239). In response to his early Jesuit education, he developed a secular alternative to theology with his existential phenomenology. Theology, poetry, and phenomenology share the basic concern of explaining the foundations of being. For Heidegger, ownership characterizes being in a fundamental way; in Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning), he establishes the “Ereignis” (“event of appropriation”) as the foundation of being. Ownership lies at the core of being in his thinking following Being and Time. Yet his philosophy ignores the material circumstances of ownership. By way of a materialist critique of Heidegger’s Idealist phenomenology, I expose how property-relations are encoded in the modern poetry and philosophy of dwelling with the question: who owns the house of being? The answer lies in “self-possession,” which represents historical subjectivity as the struggle for the means of production. Paul Celan, T. S. Eliot, Rainer Maria Rilke, and Paul Valéry are all poets who address the relationship between being and ownership in expressing what Marx and Engels call the “language of real life” in The German Ideology (26). In 1927, Eliot converted to Anglicanism and found solace in the realm of faith; by opting for the theology of
dispossession, he surrendered his historical subjectivity. Rilke thought that he could find refuge from the marketplace in aesthetic beauty and pure philosophy but eventually disabused himself of his illusion. Similarly, Valéry sought refuge in the space of thought; basing reality in the mind, he forsook the social realm as the site of contestation for gaining ownership over being. As a poet who distinguished himself from the Idealism of his predecessors, Celan developed a structure of dialogue based upon shared exchange on common ground. A materialist approach to the poetry and philosophy of dwelling exposes property-relations as the foundation of the house of being.
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Introduction

High upon a mountain terrace in the Upper Rhône Valley, the Château de Muzot sits snugly in the surrounding trees girding the property with their roots. Built in the thirteenth century, the château still housed furnishings from the seventeenth century when Rainer Maria Rilke moved into it in 1921. In July of that year, he discovered the château in the town of Sierre while trekking across the Swiss region of Valais in search of a suitable dwelling in which to undertake his next creative venture. He moved into the château in November in order to begin the most ambitious creative phase of his life. Having gradually loosened the ties of family, friends, and finances, Rilke sought in the remote château the calm and solitude that he needed in order to mobilize all of his energies towards writing. By January 1922, Rilke would quickly become inspired to write the culminating works of his career, the Duino Elegies and The Sonnets to Orpheus. By going to the château, Rilke performed the decisive task of setting apart his own space for creating. Much like the studio of visual artists such as his mentor, sculptor Auguste Rodin, Rilke’s retreat functioned as a specially designated space in which he could fully devote himself to his art. The trajectory of Rilke’s career is precisely the task of seeking out the space for living the way of the artist.

Just as the artist needs a space in which to work, the artist also opens a space with the work of art. Earlier in his career, Rilke had written a poem entitled “Eingang” (“Entrance”) in which he invites the reader to step out of a room in a house, cross the threshold to the outside, and imagine planting a tree in the air.

WER du auch seist: am Abend tritt hinaus
aus deiner Stube, drin du alles weißt….
Mit deinen Augen, welche müde kaum
von der verbrauchten Schwelle sich befrein,
hebst du ganz langsam einen schwarzen Baum
und stellst ihn vor den Himmel: schlank, allein.
Und hast die Welt gemacht.

Whoever you are: in the evening step out
of your room, where you know everything.…
With your eyes, which in their weariness
barely free themselves from the worn-out threshold,
you very slowly lift one black tree
and place it against the sky: slender, alone.
And you have made the world. (my ellipsis; Sämtliche 371; Images 5)\(^1\)

The poem is fittingly placed at the beginning of his collection Das Buch der Bilder (The
Book of Images), which invites the reader to enter the space of poetry. As he grafts branches from Charles Baudelaire’s “forêts de symboles” (“forests of symbols”), Rilke establishes for poetry a privileged space apart from the cares of the quotidian (Baudelaire 11)\(^2\). Yet what constitutes the world of verse? Is the tree that Rilke asks the reader to imagine merely growing in the imagination or does it correspond to concrete reality? Likening the tree to “ein Wort, das noch im Schweigen reift” (“a word which grows ripe in silence”), Rilke’s invitation is a call to enter the realm of poetry – the space that seems to exist apart from the material world. (Sämtliche 371; Images 5). As Rilke’s retreat to Muzot indicates, entering the space of poetry requires an appropriate place for dwelling in it. Muzot was the refuge where he could foster his creativity in an unfettered state of self-possession. Defined commonly as “equanimity” or “self-composure,” self-possession is the optimal condition for inhabiting the space of creativity. In other words, Rilke’s retreat

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\(^1\) Rainer Maria Rilke, Sämtliche Werke, ed. Ruth Sieber-Rilke, vol. 1 (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1957) 371. All original German citations from Rilke’s poetry refer to this edition. The English translation of “Eingang” refers to the following edition: Rainer Maria Rilke, The Book of Images, trans. Edward Snow (New York: North Point, 1994) 5. All citations will first be given in the original language and followed by the translation. Short citations in translation will be enclosed with parentheses, while long citations will be indented without parentheses. Unless otherwise indicated, parenthetical references for all bi-lingual citations will first indicate the title and page number of the original citation followed by a semi-colon and the bibliographical information for the English translation.

points to the relationship between place and self-possession. As maps draw the lines of geographical borders, poetry delineates the boundaries of Being.

Throughout the twentieth century, a number of Rilke’s fellow poets have drawn different maps for the territory of Being. Amidst the debris in London during both World Wars, T. S. Eliot fought to salvage the wreckage of tradition for a modern generation afflicted with cultural amnesia. Further unnerved by his failing first marriage, he sought existential shelter in the Anglican Church. By turning his back on the secular world, Eliot turned to the realm of inner contemplation and revelation. One of Eliot’s contemporaries Paul Valéry, likewise favoured inhabiting the pure inner realm. Where Eliot found refuge in religion, Valéry built his intellectual home with the materials of reflective consciousness. Fascinated with the operations of heart and mind, Valéry explored the architecture of reason. Although Rilke was also primarily concerned with the inner realm as well, he was not so much preoccupied with structures of logic but rather with ways of Being. In the effort to combat the pressures of material conditions, Rilke sought refuge in a poetic world apart from society. Unlike the other poets, Paul Celan incorporated the modern meditations on reflection and philosophy as founded upon history. Having survived the Shoah, Celan took upon himself the formidable task of preserving the memory of his Jewish culture. His task was even more remarkable in light of the vexed predicament of writing in German, his mother tongue. The cultural contrast led to expressing himself with a formidably strained lyric voice. Ever balancing between two opposed cultures and a language that belonged to him but against which he also fought, Celan lived out the struggle of finding his own voice and space of Being despite inhabiting two opposed cultural territories.
As with the work of these modern poets, the ground of Being is the fundamental field of inquiry according to philosopher Martin Heidegger. In Sein und Zeit (Being and Time), he defines the Being of Dasein as existence in its barest sense without given attributes: “Das »Wesen« des Daseins liegt in seiner Existenz” (“The ‘essence’ of Da-sein lies in its existence”) (original italics; Sein 56-7; Being 40). Closely linked to the problems of existence that religion poses, the question of Being that Heidegger raises is the secular alternative to Saint John’s formulation: “In the beginning was the Word” (Holy Bible, St. John 1.1). If divinity does not animate language, however, what are the secular origins of the word? Heidegger answers with the dictum from his lecture “Brief über den Humanismus” (“Letter on Humanism”): “Die Sprache ist das Haus des Seins” (“Language is the house of Being”) (“Brief” 313; “Letter” 239). While he began his career by explaining how time structures Being, his dictum from later in his career indicates his gradual shift to language as the space of inquiry. In the course of his thinking about language, Heidegger would also eventually question the relationship between philosophical ownership and Being. Over the course of working upon Grundfragen der Philosophie: Ausgewählte “Probleme” der “Logik” (Basic Questions of Philosophy: Selected “Problems” of “Logic”) between 1936 and 1938, Heidegger undertook a confidential project devoted to “Ereignis” (“enowning”). Shrouded in mystery and not intended for publication during his lifetime, the work was eventually published posthumously under the title Beiträge zur Philosophie (Vom Ereignis) (Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)) in 1989. In a footnote to the

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3 Martin Heidegger, Sein und Zeit, ed. Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann, vol. 2 of Gesamtausgabe, 102 vols. to date, 1975- . (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1977) 56-7. All original German citations from Heidegger’s works will refer to the Gesamtausgabe edition according to individual titles rather than volume numbers. English translations of Sein und Zeit will refer to the following edition: Martin Heidegger, Being and Time, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: SUNY, 1996) 40. All subsequent citations from English translations of Heidegger’s works will refer to individual titles.
“Brief über den Humanismus,” Heidegger would attest to the fundamental significance of the concept to the rest of his career: “Denn >Ereignis< seit 1936 das Leitwort meines Denkens” (“For ‘Ereignis,’ ‘event of appropriation,’ has been the guiding word of my thinking since 1936”) (original italics; “Brief” 316; “Letter” 241). On the new path of his thinking, Heidegger would now assert: “Das Seyn ist das Er-eignis’ (“Be-ing is en-owning”) (original italics; Beiträge 470; Contributions 330). Although Heidegger’s word is quite puzzling to the uninitiated, “Ereignis” refers to two separate yet related meanings, “appropriation” and “event”; as such, “Ereignis” is the phenomenon of assimilating a philosophical way of being. The prefix “er-” in the term corresponds to the “en-” in English and encapsulates the manner in which Ereignis refers to a way of Being stretching out in time rather than to a mere idea or concept that is captured and tightly restrained with decoding tools.

Within the field of poetry, the problem of ownership over language is fundamental. When a poet speaks or writes, so the question goes, do the words belong to the poet or someone else? Ownership over the manner in which the words are uttered rather than the meaning of the words per se is the defining feature of Ereignis as it relates to poetry. The problem is as old as poetry itself, with the ancients ascribing poetic inspiration to demon possession. In more recent times, the Romantics placed great emphasis upon being overtaken by emotion as the guarantor of authentic existence in verse. Wordsworth’s famed description of his creative process as the “spontaneous overflow of… emotion recollected in tranquility” is representative of romantic surrender (my ellipsis; “Prefaces” 266). Although he bases his theory upon the unpredictable flood of emotion, he does speak to the importance of cultivation: “Poems to which any value can be attached, were never produced
on any variety of subjects but by a man who being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility had also thought long and deeply” (246). Authentic and therefore enowned being, Wordsworth claims, is based upon the surrender to emotion tempered with intellect. However, as Freud would later reveal, the emotions are often the most inauthentic, dispossessed indicators of Being. The secrets, deceptions, and manipulations of the subconscious have the power to take away all sense of truth and ownership from the conscious individual. The neurotic behaves in spite of conscious intention or well-being. Whether or not conscious of the hidden reasons for behaviour, the neurotic is nevertheless at the mercy of impulse and does not exert full psychological control over thoughts, emotions, and actions. Yet explaining Being with regards to time and language remains quite abstract and immaterial. Despite his claims to situating his thinking within history, Heidegger nevertheless limits the discussion to the realm of Idealism by ignoring the material conditions of existence. Providing a fuller account of Being as a territory requires examining Ereignis from a materialist approach. To imagine how Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels would respond to Heidegger’s claims for language requires asking the crucial question: who owns the house of Being?

According to Marx and Engels, the working class leads a dispossessed, alienated existence until it gets its hands on the means of production. The question of ownership is not simply relegated to the realm of ideas, but depends upon the material conditions of production. Consequently, Heidegger’s Idealist notion of Ereignis must be examined according to property-relations. In Marx and Engels’ materialist view, taking control of the means of production and wielding it amounts to historical subjectivity within the context of class-struggle. Such control over the means of production represents the historical basis of
self-possession. The point at which Marx and Engel’s notion of historical subjectivity passes through the phenomenon of Ereignis opens the critique of property relations as applied to poetic dwelling. The space of poetry that Rilke opened during his stay at Muzot, for instance, corresponds not simply to the physical location of the château but to its materialist position within property-relations. The vague, impressionistic conception of equanimity does not therefore adequately define self-possession as it relates to the modes of production. In the synthesis between Heidegger’s Ereignis and Marx and Engels’ materialism, self-possession represents owning the way of Being of equanimity as it corresponds to property-relations. Examining the way in which property-relations undergird the philosophy of Being lays the groundwork for building a materialist understanding of the struggle for self-possession in modern poetry.

Understanding twentieth-century poetry cannot proceed without digging up the roots of modern European history and shaking the dirt off them. Ever since Europe’s bourgeois revolutions, one historical perspective has dominated thought and stood as a premise of modern art: Idealism, the philosophy that history is the unfolding of ideas. As the struggles of the French Revolution brought about a fundamental change in social relations, the culture of the time registered the abrupt historical break and recorded the new values. Born into the historical juncture of the French Revolution, G. W. F. Hegel argued that the individual was a divided self. While tossing out the monarchy brought democracy in its modern form, the nascent French merchant-class was simultaneously empowered and constrained by the new political form of the nation-state. Hegel argues philosophically that the individual is alienated externally in relation to the state and therefore internally as well. In Die
Philosophie des Rechts (The Philosophy of Right), however, self-possession comes about in actualizing the concept of the self:

Man, pursuant to his immediate existence within himself, is something natural, external to his concept. It is only through the development of his own body and mind, essentially through his self-consciousness’s apprehension of itself as free, that he takes possession of himself and becomes his own property and no one else’s. This taking possession of oneself, looked at from the opposite point of view, is the translation into actuality of what one is according to one’s concept, i.e. a potentiality, capacity, potency. In that translation one’s self-consciousness for the first time becomes established as one’s own, as one’s object also and distinct from self-consciousness pure and simple, and thereby capable of taking the form of a ‘thing’. (original italics; Rechts 122-23; Right 47-8)

Although he acknowledges the need to actualize self-possession, Hegel does not entirely explain the material domain in which to realize it. The inability to actualize self-possession materially accounts for alienation. The popularity of the doppelgänger figure in E. T. A. Hoffman’s tales during Hegel’s time, as well as later in Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s The Double and Nikolai Gogol’s “The Nose” form exemplary images for rendering visible the modern malaise of divided subjectivity. While having a constant companion should be consoling, it is instead rather disconcerting for Hoffman’s and Dostoyevsky’s protagonists. As later, with Freud’s ego/id/super-ego model, the divided self was recognized more clearly as a set of forces in contest with one another, which corresponds to the structure of competition that characterizes capitalist social relations. The divided self, therefore, is not simply a concept
that Hegel invented out of thin air, which is an Idealist way of thinking; rather, a materialist understanding recognizes that ideas, structures, and images of the self bear relation to historical circumstances.

In fact, Hegel, Hoffmann, and even Dostoyevsky were absorbing in their blood the values of the new European reality and formulated them in philosophical and literary terms. A crucial object of inquiry that philosophers and writers pursued upon the historical break was the matter of time in relation to subjectivity. While prior to the French Revolution, the self was considered divided from nature, the new era of thinkers started to consider that the subject was divided in time. Without the waning of the constancy of God’s presence, as held under belief in Medieval Christendom, the self lost the stable symbolic system in which it had hitherto represented itself coherently. Those who lived through the revolution became disabused of the illusion that the self no longer bore the apparent temporal continuity of nature or of the divine order of Christianity, and began to see themselves as being divided according to temporal discontinuities. One of the twentieth century’s foremost commentators upon the romantic period Paul de Man observes in “The Rhetoric of Temporality” that the romantic poets struggled with subjectivity divided not from nature as prior poets had done, but by a “void of temporal difference” (“Rhetoric” 207). He adds his post-structuralist twist to Hegel’s philosophical argument by placing the temporally-divided self within the sphere of language: the self is split into “temporal relationships that exist within the system of allegorical signs” (208). Defining allegory as “a sign that refers to another sign preceding it,” de Man uses the trope as a structuring image for thinking about subjectivity divided in time and language. Since understanding is linguistic and always broken by temporal chasms in reference, so de Man argues, no coherent self is possible.
Although de Man’s twist on Hegel’s argument cleverly reflects the linguistic turn that became the defining template for thinking in the humanities from the 1970s to the present, his thinking still contains Hegel’s fundamental flaw, which Marx and Engels exposed in *Die deutsche Ideologie* (*The German Ideology*)⁴. Proclaiming that consciousness does not originate in the mind itself, but rather in the material world, they criticized the cornerstone of Hegel’s philosophy, namely Idealism: “Ganz im Gegensatz zur deutschen Philosophie, welche vom Himmel auf die Erde herabsteigt, wird hier von der Erde zum Himmel gestiegen” (“In direct contrast to German philosophy which descends from heaven to earth, here it is a matter of ascending from earth to heaven” (*Ideologie* 26; *Ideology* 36). De Man’s argument of consciousness divided in language and time is merely a symptom of Idealism, since he never accounts for language or time in a historical manner; as far as de Man’s argument goes, time is an entirely abstract mental category. By contrast, Marx had revealed how temporality is a social phenomenon manifested in labour-time, which is bound to alienated consciousness in divided class-relations. Time, therefore, is marked by social relations.

While Marx posits materiality as the basis of consciousness, he does not deny the power of ideas. Although consciousness is at a remove from experience, Marx argues that the mind can still grasp experience; that mediation obscures reality is due to motivated political obfuscation, for instance. Consciousness is in fact crucial to improving humankind’s condition; it constitutes the potential for altering the course of history as the

means to self-possession. Yet spirit needs embodiment in action. Criticizing Ludwig Feuerbach in Die deutsche Ideologie (The German Ideology), Marx and Engels point out that he merely sees humans as a “‘sinnlichen Gegenstand’, nicht als ‘sinnlichen Tätigkeit’” (“‘object of the senses’, ‘not as ‘sensuous activity’”) (44; 41). Rather than a conception of human relationships in mere objectified terms, they recognize that humans are active social agents who are best understood in terms of ways of active material being. In other words, Marx and Engels acknowledge the necessity and strength of spirit as historical subjectivity in social activity. They argue that Europe would have the spirit to succeed in building an equitable, classless world, which they forecasted poetically in their introduction to the Communist Manifesto: “Ein Gespenst geht um in Europa – das Gespenst des Kommunismus” (“A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of Communism”) (Manifest 461; Manifesto 481).

While a superficial reaction is to assume that in declaring religion “das Opium des Volks” (“the opium of the people”) Marx and Engels had no use for any notion of spirit, the case is otherwise (original italics; Kritik 378; Critique 175). In fact, another philosopher is attributed with having discarded spirit with religion. Nietzsche’s famous proclamation “Gott todt ist” (“God is dead”) represents the last nail in the coffin of divinity in the industrial, scientific era (original italics; Zarathustra 14; Portable 124). Yet try as he might, the philosopher cannot kill the spirit. In lieu of spirit, Nietzsche proposed the force of primal will in brute terms as the basis of human endeavour. Marx and Engels, however, provide a historical explanation for the death of the divine and the attendant rift in the moral order. In Die deutsche Ideologie (The German Ideology), they locate the erosion of the moral foundation in the historical moment “als der Gegensatz zwischen Bourgeoisie und
Proletariat kommunistische und sozialistische Anschauungen erzeugt hatte” (“when the contradiction between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat had given rise to communist and socialist views”) (Ideologie 403-404; Ideology 419). Preceding Nietzsche’s statement by nearly forty years, Marx and Engels argued that social antagonism, rather than a philosophical proclamation “Damit war aller Moral… der Stab gebrochen” (“shattered the basis of all morality”) (my ellipsis; 404; 419). Instead of proclaiming that god is dead, Marx and Engels declared capital dead.

Without God as the primary explanation for existence, divine spirit no longer animated the European world as it had done during the Middle Ages and even the Renaissance. Instead of medieval divine wisdom or Enlightenment human reason, subjectivity comes to be considered a void. Although unwilling to abandon God, Hegel nevertheless asserts the nothingness that reflection introduces into philosophy. As an interruption in the temporal flow of consciousness, reflection is a negating mental gesture that Nietzsche eventually develops into the blank slate potential for an eternal cycle of smashing established values and replacing them with new ones. Heidegger later adds to Hegel’s concept of nothingness and Nietzsche’s dismantling of divine metaphysics by positing the human as Dasein (Being-there) in the passage of time. Within the purview of Heidegger’s existential understanding of time, Dasein is pure Being. Although he insists that his philosophy is historical, Heidegger nevertheless repeats the same error that his predecessors Hegel and Nietzsche had made. In positing philosophy as the basis of all the sciences, natural and human, Heidegger errs in presenting philosophy as a way of understanding history as though philosophy were the agent of history. Yet history is not philosophy. Although Heidegger’s existential phenomenology provides a philosophical
understanding of Dasein’s existential position in history, it does not explain the individual’s social position within history proper. By contrast, Marx and Engels argue that philosophy does not explain history. In other words, any explanation of history that does not take as its foundation social relations with regards to modes of production is hopelessly Idealist and – worse yet – obfuscating. In their critique of ideology, Marx and Engels describe the connections made among the ruling class, Idealist philosophy, and the notion of the self:


Once the ruling ideas have been separated from the ruling individuals and, above all, from the relationships which result from a given stage of the mode of production, and in this way the conclusion has been reached that history is always under the sway of ideas, it is very easy to abstract from these various ideas “the idea”, the notion, etc. as the dominant force in history, and thus to understand all these separate ideas and concepts as “forms of self-determination” on the part of the concept developing in history. It follows then naturally too, that all the relationships of men can be derived from the concept of man, man as conceived, the essence of man, Man. This has been done by the speculative philosophers. Hegel himself confesses at the end of the Geschichtsphilosophie that he “has considered the progress of the concept only” and has represented in history the “true theodicy”. (original italics; 48-9; 61)

In the course of modern philosophy, the idea defining the essence of the human becomes negativity. By describing humans as essentially void of any markers, modern philosophers have either concealed or ignored the reality that we are born into given conditions that shape
much of our existence. However, as Marx and Engels argue, such conditions are not necessarily deterministic: “Die Individuen gingen immer von sich aus, natürlich aber von sich innerhalb ihrer gegebenen historischen Bedingungen und Verhältnisse, nicht vom ‘reinen’ Individuum im Sinne der Ideologen” (“Individuals have always proceeded from themselves, but of course from themselves within their given historical conditions and relations, not from the ‘pure’ individual in the sense of the ideologists”) (75; 78). The materialist insight into the dialectical formation of the self shines as one of the brightest lights in modern critical thinking. Twofold in its understanding of the self, Marx and Engels’ formulation accounts for the dynamic between objective historical conditions and the historical subjective ability to act upon them.

The developments that Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger brought to philosophy all have their ostensible basis in formulating a philosophy of individual freedom, the philosophical analogue to Marx and Engels’ understanding of historical subjectivity. Ever since the French Revolution, the problem is a historical one in which individual rights comprise a political premise of modern bourgeois democracy. However, individual “freedom” serves the ideological justification for the free-market economy. As Marx and Engels contend, the state, which Hegel benevolently praises, does not guarantee freedom for all; instead, freedom is primarily a promise to the bourgeois minority. What Marx and Engels’ arguments express is that philosophy is an ideological tool that serves to promote the values of the ruling class and conceal the inner contradictions of capitalist social relations: “Die herrschenden Gedanken sind weiter Nichts als der ideelle Ausdruck der herrschenden materiellen Verhältnisse, die als Gedanken gefaßten herrschenden materiellen Verhältnisse” (“The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant
material relations, the dominant material relations grasped as ideas”) (46; 59). In other words, philosophy merely abstracts from concrete social relations ideological allegories; in turn, these allegories are reduced to geometrical patterns that are reiterated endlessly in ideas and images. The ideological image is the crucible for the alchemy of bourgeois values and contradictions. Consequently, the ideological image functions like a hieroglyph from an unknown language, the obscurity of which conceals social reality. While the hieroglyph contains its given ideological meaning, it needs illumination as to the significance of those values. As a result, the revelations that occur in the world of ideas act as substitutes for, and concealments of, revelations of the social world. Images of dwelling, home, and homelessness for instance, obtain the status of hieroglyphs in the struggle for self-possession.

Playing a significant role in ideological debate, poets have also struggled to reconcile mind with matter. Ever since the European ruling-class began so intensively promoting science in the modern period to further its interests at the expense of religion, poets inherited an important role in the spiritual lives of people. The notion of the poet as prophet or priestly vates in its modern manifestation comes from the historical hunger to fill the void left by the loss of religion in the scientific age. However, the forms that poets gave to spiritual life were never systematically developed into a spiritual system or vessel for the spirit in the manner that organized religion embodies a codified worldview and rules for behaviour. As a theological term, the word “spirit” summons the notorious superstitions against which the Enlightenment fought to dispel and bears a pejorative sense so as to deny the existence of any sense of it, theological or otherwise. This is suspicious. Not even the radical materialists, Marx and Engels deny that something deserving the name “spirit” exists
apart from religion, “das Opium des Volks” (“the opium of the people”) (original italics; Kritik 378; Critique 175). Criticisms of Marx and Engels bear the familiar argument that they present an economic form of messianism that is just as mystical as Christianity or Judaism. While Marxism and theology may share some archetypal features, the case is so only because they are dealing with fundamental problems of human existence. However, theology and Marxism come at such problems from entirely different approaches for entirely different interests. Therefore, yes, Marx and Engels acknowledge that there is human “spirit,” but this spirit is not a divine substance; rather, it is the subjective life that is caught in social struggle and functions as “‘sinnlichen Tätigkeit’” (“‘sensuous activity’”) (Ideologie 44; Ideology 41). The problem that Marx and Engels saw with regards to the understanding of spirit in Hegel’s thinking was his placing the spirit at the basis of reality, rather than vice-versa; and while their understanding of spirit differs they do not at all deny that spirit does exist. The spectre haunting Europe is, after all, the spirit of the proletariat embodied in revolutionary action.

The question of Being that modern philosophers present is a problem of value. Nietzsche recasting the problem of metaphysics with his declaration “Gott todt ist” (“God is dead”) is also congruent with his notion of the transvaluation of values; without divine measure, human values are in turn historical and therefore subject to change through time (original italics; Zarathustra 14; Portable 124). Rather than the mere relativism that many thinkers take for Nietzsche’s philosophy, the transvaluation of values is comprehensible from a materialist perspective as precisely grounded in history and therefore subject to change as society changes. Nietzsche’s philosophy of eternal return, however, helps
understand the recurring cycles of destruction and creation of values characteristic of free-market competition; eternal return mimics the cyclical crises of capitalism.

In Marx’s critique of capitalist social relations, value is unstable and fluctuates according to the ebb and flows of exchange on the market; if the market crashes for instance, the commodity loses its value. Such instability constantly threatens the commodity with the prospect of devaluation. The tropes of instability (e.g. deferral, fragmentation, groundlessness) that are commonly used to describe the modern self – or rather, lack thereof – is not just an idea detached from reality but based on the material conditions of exchange-value characteristic of capitalism. Understanding the modern condition of fragmentation requires determining whether it is the symptom, the illness, or even the remedy. Drawing the correspondence between exchange-value and philosophy towards the elimination of stable value reveals modern Idealist philosophers’ sublimation of social alienation into subjective nothingness. What no longer appears to bear use-value takes on its alienated form as exchange value; the correlative for modern subjectivity is that the individual living in alienated social relations is constantly at the mercy of the eternal return of exchange-value and therefore has the sense of being subject to the circulation of currency. As Marx revealed, the modern individual is at the mercy of exchange-values, as the now familiar trope of the pure subject without stability or historical traces indicates.

Yet how can poetry, the language of metaphor, give any sense of materiality? It does so by giving image to the meaning of material existence. Rather than being merely the ornamental language of flights of fancy, genuine poetry renders visible the invisible dimensions of material existence – whether historical, psychological, or even philosophical. What appears to be merely a semblance of reality or even pure fantasy nevertheless forms an
existential response to historical facts. As long as the modern insistence upon maintaining a void between language and the world remains, the bridge cannot be spanned between word and thing; just as language is a social construct, so is the referential void. Demystifying the question of language, Marx and Engels describe a link between language and the world: (“Die Produktion der Ideen, Vorstellungen, des Bewußtseins ist zunächst unmittelbar verflochten in die materielle Tätigkeit und den materiellen Verkehr der Menschen, Sprache des wirklichen Lebens” (“The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men – the language of real life”) (Ideologie 26; Ideology 36). Marx and Engels’ conception of language provides a compelling counter-argument to the contemporary ideological focus upon the arbitrariness of the sign. The image of interweaving is the dialectical answer to non-referentiality in modern semiotics; rather than being separated by a void – as de Man would have it – language and reality are bound up with one another socially. Indeed, the weave that Marx and Engels describe between ideas and activity is understood poetically as the intertwining of breath and stone. The transformation of breath-stones provides a clue to the very experience of Being as a feeling of torsion itself – what Rilke calls the “innigen Schwingung” (“inner vibration”) (Sämtliche 759; Elegies/Sonnets 163)\(^5\). Such figurative thinking is a way of imaging a different space; as another kind of logic, figuration opens a space of thinking and feeling different from quotidian, instrumental logic. Rather than being a tool for obfuscation, poetry can actually provide images for exposing the fancies of the world of ideas and revealing the weave between language and material reality. In other

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\(^5\) Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies and the Sonnets to Orpheus*, trans. A. Poulin, Jr. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977) 163. All citations from the translations of the *Duino Elegies* and *Sonnets to Orpheus* will refer to this edition.
words, metaphor gives embodiment to the invisible matter of the “spirit,” which is only ever material. When entered into fully, the space of metaphor becomes tangible upon crossing the threshold of revelation into the terrain of material reality. The understanding of the world that Marx and Engels have in mind constitutes precisely the “Sprache des wirklichen Lebens” (“language of real life”) as it is lived in society (Ideologie 26; Ideology 36). The kind of thinking that can see the reality of breath-stones is capable of recognizing that the task of bringing a poem to life is precisely that of situating it within history.

As a poet devoted to keeping the past alive for modern readers, Eliot held a formidable understanding of literary history. Famed for having notoriously claimed that “immature poets imitate, mature poets steal,” Eliot had no qualms in the early part of his career with leaning so heavily upon past sources (Essays 206). Under the threat of lost contact with tradition, Eliot sought to recuperate from the past what he deemed to be its literary and cultural treasures. As his poetry attests, he succeeded in making that tradition his own. The distinctiveness that Eliot brought to the English language with such poems as The Waste Land and even “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” is astounding. Who had written anything remotely recognizable to those poems in the English language before Eliot entered the literary world? Only James Joyce could lay claim to having outdone him with his innovations in the novel Ulysses. Taken historically, these developments in literary history are attributable to the caesura of World War I. Taken within such a historical context, tradition took on a nearly unfamiliar form despite attempts to keep it alive. In his essay from 1921, “The Metaphysical Poets,” Eliot describes the creative imperative by which the poet should write, think, and live:

When a poet’s mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man’s experience is chaotic,
irregular, fragmentary. The latter falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes. (Essays 287)

The process of forming patterns that Eliot describes amounts to a form of appropriation in which word and world combine in the poet’s own voice. By taking the various materials from his reading and his experience, Eliot combined them into patterns of his own making. The extent to which he made such unique patterns involved a tremendous amount of self-investment. In the modern analogue to religious love and devotion, Eliot performed what Heidegger refers to as “Sorge” (“care”) (Sein 240; Being 169). In contrast to love for divinity, care refers to the concern for one’s own existence. Such existential investment is directed to earthly existence in the form of reading Spinoza, falling in love, and eating dinner.

Gradually, however, Eliot could not withstand existence without religion. His conversion to Anglicanism in 1927 marks a redirection of his investment away from the historical agency of his earthly existence to his faith in surrender to the afterlife in the celestial sphere. The culmination of his career, the long poem Four Quartets, is the spiritual autobiography of his development from unconfirmed believer to public member of the Anglican Church. Instead of transforming literary and cultural tradition, Eliot shifts his devotion to contemplating the process of divine incarnation. By examining time in pure philosophical and theological terms, he arrives at the formulation “through time time is conquered” (Complete 173). The paradoxical manner by which he views conquering time culminates in the theological principle of dispossession: “In order to possess what you do not possess / You must go by the way of dispossession” (181). To provide structure and discipline in his life, Eliot considered his surrender to Anglicanism as the means to self-
possession. However, in the eyes of the many incredulous and skeptical people with whom Eliot circulated, including Leonard and Virginia Woolf, Eliot’s conversion amounted to a flight from reality and a divestment of his being. What remains of Eliot’s conversion as represented in *Four Quartets* is to understand on a more fundamental level the paradox of self-possession. As J. Edward Chamberlin understands the relationship between meaning and ownership across cultures in *If This Is Your Land, Where Are Your Stories?*, Eliot’s conversion illustrates “the way in which we are possessed by stories and songs even as they belong to us” (*Land* 120). In Eliot’s case, the problem lies not so much in the paradox as such but in the divestment of historical subjectivity by surrendering to divine faith. Examining his decision opens speculation as to what can be recuperated for self-possession from theological dispossession.

Throughout his career, Valéry was consumed by reflection, beauty, and creativity. The lines at which these interests converged, however, posed for him challenges with which he continued to grapple. After a tumultuous infatuation with an older woman in his youth, Valéry forsook publishing poetry for nearly twenty years and instead opted to devote his attentions to intellectual activities that exercised his logic and powers of reflection. By turning his back on the poetic Orpheus in favour of the reflective Narcissus, Valéry dissociated his emotional and intellectual sides. In a couple poems “Narcisse parle” (“Narcissus Speaks”) and “Fragments de Narcisse” (“Fragments of the Narcissus”), he portrays the classical figure as preoccupied with his own image and beauty. Enchanted by his own beauty, Narcissus feels a sense of ownership in the aesthetic and reflective realm. His reflection is so important because it provides him with proof of his own existence, which reveals the link between self-reflection and self-ownership that is fundamental to the
ideology of bourgeois individualism. The situation of Valéry’s Narcissus figure symbolizes the equation that one of Valéry’s primary intellectual beacons, René Descartes, formulated: “I think, therefore I am” (original italics; Discourse 18). However, as Valéry gradually realizes, beauty does not last forever. Susceptible to the ravages of time, beauty is not a viable source of self-possession and it loses its hold on Narcissus. Once the spell of beauty wears off, he experiences a sense of dispossession and must face his own mortality: “Hélas! L’image est vaine et les pleurs éternels!” (“Ah, the image is vain, and tears are eternal!”) (Oeuvres 1: 82; Poems 29).

The struggle with which Valéry had to reconcile himself in poetry did not relate strictly to his unruly emotions but also to the creative process itself. Dissatisfied with the romantic conception of inspiration deriving from the so-called natural source of the emotions, Valéry sought to temper his creativity with conscious intention. As she analyzes Valéry’s position in Literary Polemics, Suzanne Guerlac indicates that his aesthetic position “reflects the situation of symbolist modernism, which marks a transition between a lingering romanticism and an emerging avant-gardism” (Guerlac 112). Valéry, she argues, sought a middle ground with his theory of ‘l’attente,” which can be translated literally as “waiting” and “expectation”. Representing a humble relationship to the muse, the theory of l’attente consists of a willed spontaneity that harmonizes the tension between subjective control and the given forces that lie beyond the poet’s own control and consciousness. The dialectical view that Valéry suggests provides a working analogue for creativity to Marx and Engels’

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subjective/objective axis. However, Valéry’s concerns do not confront ideology. Although he counters the Surrealists’ dependence upon the unconscious, he altogether forsakes the ideological realm in favour of pure aesthetics. But ideology is just as much inscribed in aesthetics as it is in any other form of cultural expression.

The point at which Narcissus must face his own mortality constitutes the threshold that Valéry needed to cross. At the behest of André Gide, then the editor of the influential Nouvelle Revue Française, Valéry returned to publishing poetry with his long-poem La Jeune Parque, the record of a young Fate undergoing an awakening in consciousness as she literally wakes up one morning upon being bitten by a serpent: “J’y suivais un serpent qui venait de me mordre” (“I was tracking a snake there that had just stung me”) (Oeuvres 1: 97; Poems 71). Now a mature man, Valéry shows evidence of having reconciled himself to his emotional side in a manner that he was incapable during the romantic upheaval of his youth. Inspired in part by his niece who was coming of age, La Jeune Parque provides the manner in which Valéry could review his youth with a mature perspective. While having previously dissociated heart from mind, he now re-associates them and begins to reinvest in his emotional side. Whereas he shows investment in reflection alone in the Narcissus poems, Valéry values the bond between heart and mind in La Jeune Parque. But he is not fully reconciled to the emotional realm. While the emotional crisis of Valéry’s youth meant forsaking his emotions in his intellectual pursuits, the reconciliation with emotion in La Jeune Parque marks a shift that nevertheless remains internal. As her awakening unfolds, the young Fate confesses to her self-investment and even frets about it as a possible universal condition: “Hélas! de mes pieds nus qui trouvera la trace / Cessera-t-il longtemps de ne songer qu’à soi?” (“Ah, whoever finds the print of my bare feet, / Will he cease for
long to think only of himself?”) (1: 105; 91). Fearing that everyone is totally self-invested, the Fate worries that anyone who stumbles upon traces of her existence will not recognize her. Characteristic of self-investment in the reflective mind or heart, autonomy underwrites Valéry’s aesthetics and conception of the self. By investing his attention upon the internal mechanisms of the logic of heart and mind, Valéry eschews the social dimension of the self. By forsaking the forms of the social in favour of the categories of reflection and pure aesthetics, he substitutes aesthetic dispossession for political dispossession.

In 1905, Rilke worked as Rodin’s secretary for nearly a year. In exchange for taking care of the sculptor’s correspondence, Rilke received free room and board, unfettered access to his mentor, as well as afternoons to write poetry at leisure. What struck Rilke in particular as an aesthetic problem was the intangible aspect of words. While walking around Rodin’s sculptures, he could not help but feel the necessity of making words as solid as stone. Eventually, he would keep working away at a solution and carve sculptures out of air with the genre of the “Ding-Gedichte” (“Thing-poems”), which were popular in the early 1900s. Although he moved beyond the form of the thing-poem, Rilke would not lose his commitment to sculpting language in a concrete manner. What he had learned from his mentor, he was now able to incorporate into his own verse. His learning from Rodin amounted to a form of aesthetic and existential appropriation: “Was ihn beunruhigte war gerade der Schein dessen, was er für unentbehrlich hielt, für notwendig und gut: der Schein der Schönheit. Er wollte daß sie sei” (“What troubled him was precisely the appearance of that which he considered indispensable, necessary, and good: the appearance of beauty. He
wanted it to *be*”) (original italics; Andreas-Salomé/Rilke 85; 71). As part of his apprenticeship under Rodin, Rilke’s more mature work is the reckoning with the concrete aspects of language in its most apparently intangible qualities. Supported throughout his career by another mentor, Lou Andreas-Salomé, Rilke eventually succeeded in achieving in his own voice what she had described in a letter from November 6, 1910 the “Zauber” (“magic”) of lyric poetry (244; 173).

The magic that Rilke performs in his later poetry as it relates to possessing Being is understood according to the way in which he invests himself in words and events. In the process of naming, Rilke fills his words with the fullness of ways of being. However, he also performs the opposite manoeuvre, the reveal of his magical literary feats. While he does in fact invest himself in his words and actions, he also suspends his investment. Rather than describing existence in terms of closed, fixed values, Rilke describes an openness that corresponds to Heidegger’s understanding of Being as moving in time. Rilke develops his existential economy out of his recognition of mortality. Death, the ultimate form of negation, represents a force of renewal in which no existential value is permanent and potential can be renewed infinitely: “Sei – und wisse zugleich des Nicht-Seins Bedingung, / den unendlichen Grund deiner innigen Schwingung” (“Be – and at the same time know the implication / of non-being, the endless ground of your inner vibration”) (Sämtliche 759; Elegies/Sonnets 163). As part of his thinking about the relationship between temporality and value, Rilke acknowledges that preserving the past requires active effort. By referring

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7 Lou Andreas-Salomé, and Rainer Maria Rilke, Briefwechsel, ed. Ernst Pfeiffer (Zurich: Max Niehans, 1952) 85. All original German citations from the correspondence between Andreas-Salomé and Rilke refer to this edition. English translations refer to the following edition: Lou Andreas-Salomé, and Rainer Maria Rilke, Rilke and Andreas-Salomé: A Love Story in Letters, trans. Edward Snow and Michael Winkler (New York: Norton, 2008) 71.
back to the archetypal poet Orpheus, Rilke develops a mode of transformation that keeps alive in new forms past ways of being. Since it is dependent upon capturing the sense of Being, Orphic transformation requires a kind of vision that relies not so much upon the intellect as on the heart: “Nirgends, Geliebte, wird Welt sein, als innen. Unser Leben / geht hin mit Verwandlung” (“Love, the World exists nowhere but within. / Our life is lived in transformation”) (711; 51).

In the trajectory of Rilke’s career, the shift in his vision from eye to heart represents a turn in his poetic development towards singing “Einklänge ins Allgemeine” (“in harmony with the prevailing voice”) (Andreas-Salomé/Rilke 368; 261). As an image from one of the “Fünf Gesänge” (“Five Hymns”) that he wrote while overtaken by the historical rift opened with World War I, the “Einklänge ins Allgemeine” (“harmony with the prevailing voice”) represents the collective will of a people unfettered by the manipulations of Europe’s rulers at the time (368; 261). Although he was quickly disabused of his philosophical nationalism, Rilke nevertheless held out for a special terrain devoted to the free traffic of Being. In the Duino Elegies, he distinguishes between the boundaries of poetic dwelling and the marketplace with a sarcastic description of urban life:

Für Erwachsene aber
ist noch besonders zu sehn, wie das Geld sich vermehrt, anatomisch, nicht zur Belustigung nur: der Geschlechtsteil des Gelds, alles, das Ganze, der Vorgang –, das unterrichtet und macht fruchtbar.

For adults only
there’s something special to see: coins copulating, not just acting, but actually, their gold genitals, every thing, the whole operation – educational and guaranteed to arouse you. (Sämtliche 722; Elegies/Sonnets 70-71)
The crass reality of the market is that money is copulating in a beastly spectacle. The distinction between the home and the market represents the recognition that ever-increasingly in the modern period, the most intimate spheres of existence have been further annexed to the marketplace. Rilke, as the poet who fights to protect the reserve of Being, more directly points to the home as a fundamental trope that serves as a kind of refuge from the market. Having seen two choices, Rilke opted for an uncompromising dwelling in poetry. The ruthlessness with which he devoted himself to his art even meant abandoning his wife Clara and young daughter Ruth. As the fundamental condition of modern existence, the rift of alienation that Rilke confronted provides the basis for examining the relationships among property-relations, existence, and poetry. In response to a number of thinkers with whom he engaged, Celan would thoroughly develop the trope of dialogue as a structuring principle. The Jewish philosopher and theologian Martin Buber had developed the I/Thou structure as the basis for understanding existence. For his part, Heidegger had focused on the question/answer structure: “Dieses Seiende, das wir selbst je sind und das unter anderem die Seinsmöglichkeit des Fragens hat, fassen wir terminologisch als Dasein (“This being which we ourselves in each case are and which includes inquiry among the possibilities of its being we formulate terminologically as Da-sein”) (original italics; Sein 10; Being 6). Dasein is the Being that questions Being, according to Heidegger. Earlier, Hegel had laid the groundwork for thinking about the relationship between Self and Other in his elaboration of dialectics. As with all three thinkers, the fundamental structure that they each examined served the purpose of coming to an understanding of how to establish relations among Self and Other. What is peculiar about Celan’s development of the problem is the manner in which he internalizes dialogue as a structure by engaging different thinkers
and historical figures in his poetry. By implication, his practice serves as a model for the reader to adopt a form of recognition that promotes fair exchange. “Sprich auch du” ("Speak you too"), he urges (Gesammelte 1: 135; Selected 77). Calling upon his reader to engage with his poetry by responding to it, Celan promotes an active and assertive model of reading that has implications also for social interaction. Celan’s use of such linguistic and cultural tropes as dialogue, the encounter, and the meridian resonate with historical and social implications that go beyond the merely interpretive. In fact, Celan rejects mere taste as the value by which to judge art; instead, he gauges art according to the manner in which it presents life. Citing Georg Büchner in his Meridian Speech, Celan called for the need in art to create “‘Das Gefühl, daß, was geschaffen sei, Leben habe, stehe über diesen beiden und sei das einzige Kriterium in Kunstsgen’” (“‘The feeling that what’s been created possesses life outweighs both of these and is the sole criterion in matters of art’”) (3: 190; 403). His trope of dialogue is motivated precisely by the need to impress upon the reader the need to establish a living dialogue. As a survivor of the Shoah, Celan was particularly sensitive to the need to preserve dialogue across the ages. Having once lamented the condition of being “‘one of the last who must live out to the end the destiny of the Jewish spirit in Europe,’” Celan was implying the need to preserve his culture not simply as a bunch of lifeless artifacts but in terms of its spirit (Celan 80). The spirit that he had in mind was not necessarily theological; rather, he provided a more fundamental understanding of Jewish

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8 Paul Celan, Gesammelte Werke, ed. Beda Alleman and Stefan Reichert, 7 vols. (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1993) 1: 135. All citations from Celan’s original German poetry and prose will refer to this edition. Parenthetical references will include the volume number followed by a colon and the pager number. All English translations from Celan’s poetry and prose will refer to the following edition: Paul Celan, Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan, trans. and ed. John Felstiner (New York: London, 2001) 77.

life. Holding onto that heritage in its lively form, Celan understood, was the means by which to remain self-possessed and to share his culture with other people.

Despite his insistence upon transmitting the spirit of the cultures, literatures, and histories with which he engaged, Celan understood that huge distances could not be bridged. As encapsulated in his trope of the Sprachgitter (Speech-Grille), after which he entitled a poem and his most well-known collection, Celan saw in language the latticework by which contact is made in language through history – however partial it may be. Celan conveys his shaky faith in historical transmission with the trope of the message in a bottle from one of his poetic beacons, Osip Mandelstam. In his essay “On the Addressee,” Mandelstam describes the peculiar situation of the poet as a stranded sailor sending out a message in a bottle (“Addressee” 68). He goes on to further prescribe for the poet the task of writing not to contemporaries but rather to future readers. In Mandelstam’s estimation, the distances that the poet must cover are historical.

By connecting with a reader on a distant future shore, Celan understood that he would be creating a special place if he were successful. With the combination of tropes that include dialogue, encounter, speech-grille, and the message in a bottle, Celan imagines opening a shared space that stretches across historical time. Imagining the special space where poet and reader reach across eras, Celan conceptualizes the dwelling-place that both share. The process that he describes of going out of the self, he describes as “Ich-Ferne” (“I-distantness”) that promises the return of a homecoming (Gesammelte 3: 193; Selected 406). Having widely explored Heidegger’s thinking, Celan was very familiar with the trope of dwelling as the space for allowing Being to emerge. Just as the poet creates an opening for the space of the encounter, the reader must also reciprocate with the same openness. The
reader must turn an attuned ear to the poet’s words. The space of the encounter where poet and reader meet amounts to the space of dwelling that Heidegger describes: “Wohnen, zum Frieden gebracht sein, heißt: eingefriedet bleiben in das Freie, d. h. in das Freie, das jegliches in sein Wesen schont. Der Grundzug des Wohnens ist dieses Schonen” (“To dwell, to be set at peace, means to remain at peace within the free, the preserve, the free sphere that safeguards each thing in its nature. The fundamental character of dwelling is this sparing and preserving”) (original italics; Vorträge 150-51; Poetry 147).

Just as winning the space of dwelling involves a relationship between writer and reader, it opens the question regarding property-relations. In the exchange that occurs, issues regarding ownership and appropriation are decisive. From the philosophical and hermeneutical aspect of the verifiability of appropriating the meaning of a text or event to the political questions surrounding the ownership of culture, property-relations characterize such transactions in meaning. In the interpretive realm, whether or not the reader succeeds in grasping and internalizing the spirit of encounter that Celan describes is crucial for appropriation. In the conversation over modern alienated existence, Celan, Eliot, Rilke, and Valéry respond to the question of Being as it relates to ownership. Faced with the dispossession of their spiritual homelands, they fought to hold their ground. As the record of historical dialogue, their poetry testifies to the modern struggle for dwelling.
Chapter One: “You must go by the way of dispossesson”

For a brief moment in the period between 1914 to 1922 during which he worked on The Waste Land, Eliot left London for an open-air retreat in Lausanne, Switzerland. Having taken a three-month leave of absence at the end of 1921 from the Lloyd’s Bank where he had been working since 1917, he needed to recuperate from his inability to reconcile his uptight sensibility with his wife’s lack of restraint. According to his brother Henry, Eliot also suffered from the constant demands of having to live a life in disguise. As an American in England, he could never fully assimilate to British mores. Whatever other factors contributed to his psychological problems, Eliot was not fully equipped to maintain his composure in the face of life’s pressures. Rationalized in a more intellectualized manner, Eliot was undergoing a spiritual crisis regarding the lack of direction attributed to the lost generation of the 1920s. Without having God or any other established cultural authority from which to draw direction in life, Eliot internalized the crisis of his age. As embodied in the epigraph “‘The horror! The horror!’” from Joseph Conrad’s The Heart of Darkness that Eliot placed in the original manuscript of The Waste Land (Facsimile 3), modern existence was deeply troubled by the prospect of human depravity and the inability to overcome it (Gordon 177).

Throughout the course of his difficult first marriage, Eliot’s troubles persisted while struggling to survive World War I, evading poverty, and combating general weariness. As far as appearances went, he comported himself with a charming modesty among acquaintances. With confidants however, he seemed a man ever on the verge of breakdown. His need for respite culminated, to the surprise of many of his friends, in his conversion to the Church of England in 1927. Some, however, had seen it coming. At a dinner party four
years prior, Virginia Woolf detected the turn in Eliot’s relationship to the gods both domestic and cosmic: “That strange figure Eliot dined here last night. I feel that he has taken the veil, or whatever monks do…. Mrs Eliot has almost died at times in the last month. Tom, though infinitely considerate, is also perfectly detached. His cell, is I’m sure a very lofty one” (original ellipsis; 208). Unable to cope with the various pressures that life exerted upon him, Eliot sought equanimity in the rigour and discipline of religious order. Just as he recuperated literary tradition for modernity, Eliot needed to recover from the stresses of his personal life. By foregoing the powerlessness that he felt before the chaos of his life, Eliot paradoxically performed a kind of surrender upon joining the Chuch. What so alarmed his incredulous friends was precisely his attempt to regain control by surrendering to Christianity.

Eliot’s recuperation took a long time. Once he ended his marriage, he did indeed perform a sort of retreat by living with his friend and fellow bachelor John Hayward for a number of years. Having reached stability with his literary reputation and career at the Lloyds Bank where he earned his living, Eliot led a life devoted to literature according to the via disciplina from which he drew so much inspiration with his guide Dante of the Divina Commedia (The Divine Comedy). While amassing the shards of culture and history for infernal modernity throughout his work especially in The Waste Land, Eliot recorded his own sort of spiritual purgatory and redemption in Four Quartets. Although it also draws on Eastern sources, Eliot’s late long-poem is the Christian culmination of his wisdom acquired at a point of maturity. In a career that amounted to the literary equivalent of sifting for sources, Eliot constantly sought to recuperate from the past what he thought should be preserved for the well-being of the modern spirit. But his attempts to spread the word were
met with incredulity for another reason. Faith between the wars was on the decline and simply out of fashion. However much speculation remains regarding the authenticity of Eliot’s faith, he was putatively a believer and he registers his faith in such a late poem as *Four Quartets*. By virtue of his extensive reading in the philosophies and religions of India, Eliot’s poetry, however, is not reducible to theological readings. One of the reasons why Eliot’s poems make such a deep impression and have such a powerful hold upon his readers is that they resonate at a much more fundamental level. Following the lead of the thrush into the garden at the beginning of “Burnt Norton” invites a different trajectory for reading Eliot’s *Four Quartets* – one that provides a recuperation for a secular understanding of self-possession.

As a man torn by the times, Eliot reflected upon the place that he would occupy among the debris. At the core of Eliot’s preoccupation with reflection lies a strategy for coping with modern life. Although his earlier poetry indicates the striving after a viable way of being, Eliot’s later poetry does not necessarily promise resolution. Instead, Eliot lives with a temporary means of reconciling himself to the fragmentation of thinking, being, and history before the promise of divine incarnation towards which he directs himself. Developing his paradisiacal longing, Eliot uses images familiar to Christianity for reflection, such as light, sight, and blindness:

> When the short day is brightest, with frost and fire,  
The brief sun flames the ice, on pond and ditches,  
In windless cold that is the heart’s heat,  
Reflecting in a watery mirror  
A glare that is blindness in the early afternoon.  

*(Complete 191)*

By contrasting such elemental opposites, Eliot enters into the territory of parable with images of fiery frost, warm winter wind, and blinding light; such a rhetorical move opens
the path into existential territory. Although refracted through the Christian divinity’s blinding light, Eliot’s image of the overwhelming glare illuminates the fundamental structure of selfhood that he depicts throughout *Four Quartets*. As a blinding light, Eliot’s image is a paradox that needs to be resolved. Most strikingly, the blindness from the light reflected on the ice is beneficial; the blindness itself is somehow revealing, which suggests that something needs to be covered – or rather a certain set of eyes needs to be blindfolded. The added allusion to the Narcissus myth in the form of the watery reflective surface – in addition to resonance from the greater, general tradition of vision – suggests that one-sided, individual subjectivity needs to be overcome. Corresponding with one another, vision and identity conjoin as I and eye.

For poets, the path of vision and identity reaches its destination in language. As the means to bringing language to life, spirit or being bridges the gulf between poet and reader. But the being of words depends upon the carefully attuned ear of an attentive reader as much as upon the poet’s resonant utterance; in the correspondence between mouth and ear, where the reckoning with actual difference occurs, being carries forth. The blinding light that propels individual subjectivity beyond its own range is the model for inspiration that Eliot seeks to demystify or at least manage. Demystifying how the wonder of verse carries forth, however, is no easy task:

> And glow more intense than blaze of branch, or brazier,  
> Stirs the dumb spirit; not wind, but pentecostal fire  
> In the dark time of the year. Between melting and freezing  
> The soul’s sap quivers. (191)

Summoning silent spirit to speech, glare animates the poet’s utterance. In an allusion to Eliot’s Anglican background, the light comes from the Holy Spirit’s flame shining upon Christ’s disciples after his ascension (Milward 181). According to the biblical account of
the Pentecost, the Holy Spirit’s flame appeared as a tongue of fire above the head of each disciple and gave the gift of speech:

> And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. (Holy Bible, Acts 2. 2-4)

The gift of speaking “with other tongues” with which the disciples were endowed is the gift of speech that is alive (Holy Bible, Acts 2. 2-4). The kind of spirited speech in question is allegory, whose Greek etymological roots in “allēgoriā” mean “to speak” (“agoreuein”) “other” (“allos”) (Chambers 41). Taken from out of the biblical context and into that of general reflection, the light from the fire of speech eclipses self-absorbed vision. The animated language of allegory is the result of the self that confronts one-sidedness with otherness. Hearing the being in the poet’s utterance “stirs the dumb spirit” to reckoning with another voice (Complete 191). According to his insight into the relationships among story, home, and spirit, Chamberlin reveals “stories give meaning and value to the places we call home” (Land 1). By the same token, the imagination contributes to the sense of strangeness through metaphor (Land 174). In connection with the familiarity of home, the wonder of speaking in another voice puts the sense of home to the test. In the process, however, the test of the uncanny animates consciousness in reflection. Straddling the line between home and away, “the storytelling imagination brings them [words and images] to life” (126). The friction that such a clash produces is represented at its fundamental level in Eliot’s image of the quiver of the soul’s sap (Complete 191).

Although easily diagrammed in dialectical form, identity transformation can be a threatening prospect: the recognition of the internal division that characterizes reflection is
counter-intuitive and startling. In fact, transformation can be downright painful. As a result, confronting authentic otherness within subjectivity bears the force of a violent assault upon consciousness. In Eliot’s bloodless account of reflection, the blinding flash of pain that illumination elicits suggests a kind of intellectual and existential violence. As the basic unit of measuring movement into the terrain of reflection, the quiver of the soul that Eliot describes represents the force that rends the veil of singular consciousness (191). The confrontation with the self is so alien that Eliot describes it as a scene of encountering a stranger with a strange voice:

Over the asphalt where no other sound was
Between three districts whence the smoke arose
I met one walking, loitering and hurried
As if blown towards me like the metal leaves
Before the urban dawn wind unresisting.
And as I fixed upon the down-turned face
That pointed scrutiny with which we challenge
The first-met stranger in the waning dusk
I caught the sudden look of some dead master
Whom I had known, forgotten, half recalled
Both one and many, in the brown baked features
The eyes of a familiar compound ghost
Both intimate and unidentifiable. (193)

Conveying the texture of Being, the wind brushing against the other figure walking in the city at dawn represents the process of coming up against the limit of Being and feeling its resistance. The edges of the metal leaves complement the “pointed scrutiny” of reflection, which cuts through consciousness (193). Although the “dead master” suggests divinity as

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10 In Einführung in die Metaphysik (Introduction to Metaphysics), Heidegger discusses how coming into being is a creative act that, in its emergence, amounts to an existential violence. Likewise, any authentic artistic expression carries with it this kind of violence: “Der Gewalt-tätige, der Schaffende, der in das Un-gesagte ausrückt, in das Un-gedachte einbricht, der das Ungeschehene erzwingt und das Ungesahnte erscheinen macht, dieser Gewalt-tätige steht jederzeit im Wagnis” (“The one who is violence-doing, the creative one, who sets out into the un-said, who breaks into the un-thought, who compels what has never happened and makes appear what is unseen, this violence-doing one stands at all times in daring”) (original italics; Metaphysik 170; Metaphysics 172).
the authoritative consciousness, taken from a secular perspective, he can also be taken as the critical, reflective part of the self that guides, corrects, and tests the complacencies of subjectivity (193). In a world seemingly unmoored from any set values, locating a viable sense of direction is a fundamental challenge. Chamberlin describes the struggle as “going about the world looking for home, for something to satisfy body and soul, and then singing songs and telling tales about it” (Living 10). Eliot’s finding sanctuary in the Church of England provided him with a direction for finding home. And yet, he still had to get lost. The growing awareness of his internal counterpart is registered in the uncanny description of the “intimate and unidentifiable” feeling that he has for his fellow loiterer (Complete 193).

As Chamberlin notes, some stories “make us feel lost so that we can have the pleasure of getting found” (Living 12). Eliot’s life in exile and career of restless wanderings over Western and Eastern literatures, philosophies, and theologies attest to getting lost in order to experience the pleasures of finding home.

Once the speaker recognizes that the other figure walking beside him is one half of his own divided self, he begins to engage it as a distinct entity. Gradually, he sketches and then paints a separate identity with which he holds a conversation:

So I assumed a double part, and cried
And heard another’s voice cry: ‘What! are you here?’
Although we were not. I was still the same,
Knowing myself yet being someone other –
And he a face still forming; yet the words sufficed
To compel the recognition they preceded.

(original italics; Complete 193-94)

Like a blind person seeing another person’s face by exploring bone, wrinkle, and hair by hand, Eliot discovers the previously unrecognized other half of his own identity; above all, dialogue is the form in which he comes to this recognition. Poetic language is therefore the
instrument for transforming the understanding of identity through difference. That words provide a medium for recognition indicates the cognitive process of interpreting words of genuine difference, which Eliot in turn registers and incorporates into his own identity; Eliot’s turn to recognizing divinity lends itself to viewing the cognitive mechanisms of transformation in self-understanding. Elaborating upon the structure of dialogue as a means of self-transformation in illumination in *The Poetry of Meditation*, Louis Marz offers the following insight:

A meditative poem is a work that creates an interior drama of the mind; this dramatic action is usually (though not always) created by some form of self-address, in which the mind grasps firmly a problem or situation deliberately evoked by the memory, brings it forward toward the full light of consciousness, and concludes with a moment of illumination, where, the speaker’s self has, for a time, found an answer to its conflicts. (Marz 330)

Grasped as the means to insight, the dialogue of self-address is crucial to the structure of recognition.

Although it has been coded variously in terms of masks, personae, voices, and tradition, the trope of dialogue has not been developed properly with regards to Eliot’s poetry. Much less has it been regarded in terms of the question of ownership. In his own discursive work, Eliot suggests the implications of ownership and appropriation in dialogue. His essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” for instance, poses the poet’s dilemma of balancing between literary forebears while developing an individual voice. The peculiar position of having to acknowledge tradition without merely replicating it involves speaking the spirit of tradition in the poet’s own voice. In another manifestation of the problem of ownership, Eliot is notorious for having written in one of his essays “Philip Massinger”: “Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal” (*Essays* 206). Eliot admits that any poet deserving of the title commits a form of creative plagiarism. He audaciously proclaims his
indebtedness to tradition by using quotations and adaptations throughout his verse. The inner dialogue that he describes in *Four Quartets* finds its correlative in his literary conversation: “‘We do not imitate, we are changed; and our work is the work of the changed man; we have not borrowed, we have been quickened, and we become bearers of a tradition’” (qtd. in Murray 11).

In his refutation of claims to literary theft, Eliot focuses the question upon dialogue as a creative means to self-transformation. The focus is not upon whether or not the poet has a right to literary borrowings but rather that the reader deserves the gift of literature. The poet’s task is to affect the reader in order to enable the reader to appropriate tradition. Viewed with an eye to the political implications of aesthetics, however, the values of originality do not so much concern genius as carry the ideology of private property. Contained within criticisms levelled against Eliot for his supposed literary thieving is the ideology of originality as the defense of private property. Summing up his method succinctly, Eliot argues: “poetic originality is largely an original way of assembling the most disparate and unlikely material to make a new whole” (*Poetry* 108). Originality is therefore primarily a question of form rather than content; as far as Eliot is concerned, content is more important in its unique placement, rather than deciding who owns it. Eliot’s comments on originality, therefore, provide insight into his appropriation of quotations in his poetry. By prioritizing being “‘quickened’” in dialogue, Eliot thwarts attempts at constricting literary works to the boundaries of commodification (qtd. in Murray 11). The “intersection time” of *Four Quartets* is precisely the point at which the path of literary possession converges with the path of self-possession (*Complete* 194).
As a structuring principle, temporality characterizes Eliot’s form of recognition as a set of different moments, the interrelations of which tend to be elusive; according to Eliot’s philosophy of transformation, time plays the decisive role in the distinction between identity and difference. What was, is, and will be are inarguably distinct and therefore provide an undeniable measure of identity.

And so, compliant to the common wind,
Too strange to each other for misunderstanding,
In concord at this intersection time
Of meeting nowhere, no before and after,
We trod the pavement in a dead patrol.
I said: ‘The wonder that I feel is easy,
Yet ease is cause of wonder. Therefore speak:
I may not comprehend, may not remember,’
And he: ‘I am not eager to rehearse
My thoughts and theory which you have forgotten.
These things have served their purpose: let them be.
So with your own, and pray they be forgiven
By others, as I pray you to forgive
Both bad and good. (194)

The internal conversation that the speaker has with his other half registers the recognition of his split identity, but recognition on its own does not guarantee transformation. The crucial distinction lies in which voice prevails. Put otherwise, which voice owns the words that the mouth utters? Thus, the distinction rests between the origin and the medium of the utterance; when the speaker is simply a medium, the speaker does not own the words but simply mouths them. The other’s exasperation at his lack of willingness to reiterate the “thoughts and theory” that he has on the main speaker’s identity exemplifies the limits of recognition as such (194). The mention of forgiving and forgetting hints not only at the speaker’s errors in life, which have caused him anguish, but also at the need to move beyond them rather than dwell on the past. Moving forward highlights the temporal aspect of recognition and the transformation of identity. Rather than being sedentary, his other half
urges, the speaker ought to keep moving with the flow of time. The culminating point of such movement would be for the speaker to navigate the current rather than merely be carried away by it.

The temporal movement that the speaker’s other half encourages is uncannily registered in ever-stranger language. Continuing his speech, the speaker’s counterpart expands upon the importance of transformation within language.

For last year’s words belong to last year’s language
And next year’s words await another voice.
But, as the passage now presents no hindrance
To the spirit unappeased and peregrine
Between two worlds become much like each other,
So I find words I never thought I should revisit
When I left my body on a distant shore.
Since our concern was speech, and speech impelled us
To purify the dialect of the tribe
And urge the mind to aftersight and foresight,
Let me disclose the gifts reserved for age
To set a crown upon your lifetime’s effort. (194)

Just as different moments bear distinction, so voice resonates with varying timbres. In the primary concern with language, the poet-speaker searches for the point in time where his various gropings toward language intersect in an expression that is grounded in Being. Getting at the language of Being is what resonates in Eliot’s echo of Stéphane Mallarmé’s “[d]onner un sens plus pur aux mots de la tribu” (“Give a purer sense to the words of the tribe”) from “Le Tombeau d’Edgar Poe” (“The Tomb of Edgar Poe”) (Mallarmé 70; 51). Looking forward and backward are the means by which Eliot considers reaching the purity of the “intersection time” in language (194). As a moment of success, reaching the desired destination in language amounts to a crowning achievement for which he is rewarded: the elimination of self-alienation characteristic of reflection. Paradoxically, surpassing the alienation of reflection happens by way of reflection.
As the poem of maturity in which Eliot gathers his life’s wisdom, *Four Quartets* serves the function of accessing time by transcending time. Since “[t]ime past and time future / Allow but a little consciousness,” negotiating temporality as an obstacle of existence demands strategies for overcoming it (173). His temporal structure is the means for bringing simultaneity to various moments in time.

It seems, as one becomes older,
That the past has another pattern, and ceases to be a mere sequence –
Or even development: the latter a partial fallacy
Encouraged by superficial notions of evolution,
Which becomes, in the popular mind, a means of disowning the past. (186)

With the past eluding the grasp of understanding and presence in the evolutionary model of temporality, Eliot indicates that the forgotten past amounts to a buried treasure without a map for locating it. As Jewel Spears Brooker indicates in “From The Waste Land to *Four Quartets*: Evolution of a Method,” Eliot’s own style evolved from James Frazer’s adaptation of Darwin’s method of evolution in *The Waste Land* to the repetitive relations and “gaps opened by intersection and difference” in *Four Quartets* (“Evolution” 90). The pattern of repetition is the key to grasping the past. Possessing the past suggests a firmer hold on time than a mere formalism does:

The moments of happiness – not the sense of well-being,
Fruition, fulfilment, security or affection,
Or even a very good dinner, but the sudden illumination –
We had the experience but missed the meaning.
And approach to the meaning restores the experience
In a different form, beyond any meaning
We can assign to happiness. (Complete 186)

Experience without insight is the impediment to happiness. Eliot suggests that the life of contemplation surpasses happiness in its Christian culminating point: “The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is Incarnation” (190). What is so elusive about the past is
not so much the experience itself in its factual details, but rather its significance. Like a poem that remains mute if it does not bear understanding, experience remains alive only if it retains significance. The restoration of meaning in memory as compensation for ignorant experience alludes to the means of investment in experience. Derived from the impediments of ignorance before experience, pathos pervades *Four Quartets*. As a solution to the problem, returning to past experience from the vantage point of acquired wisdom forms the redemption that Eliot ponders at the outset of “Burnt Norton”. As the analogue to Incarnation, self-possession becomes possible through reflection in time. With regards to the form of the meaning, the example of the dinner that Eliot describes indicates that any given experience – even the most seemingly insignificant – can bear meaning that alters the shape of personal history by inflecting it in ever-new ways. The dinner not only changes the poet’s view of what food can be but also changes his general view of aesthetics, philosophy, and even his own life.

In his essay “The Metaphysical Poets,” Eliot outlines perhaps the primary clue to his poetics during his discussion of the “dissociation of sensibility” between intellect and emotion that he dates back to the seventeenth century English poets, John Milton and John Dryden (*Essays* 288). According to Eliot, the archetypal poet who maintained a unified sensibility is John Donne:

> Tennyson and Browning are poets, and they think; but they do not feel their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose. A thought to Donne was an experience; it modified his sensibility. When a poet’s mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man’s experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary. The latter falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes. (287)
When Eliot mentions the true poet’s tendency to absorb quotidian experience into poetry, he does not simply mean bringing new ideas into a poem but rather the fundamental insights that such quotidian experience affords: the “meat” of the matter. The poet digests daily experience in a poetic way. By absorbing and appropriating experiences and ideas into sensibility, Eliot suggests a kind of self-possession; by making experiences and ideas his own, his sensibility converges with the world. The poetic way forms the pattern of convergences where past experience meets present insight, present experience meets past insight, and even both simultaneously pass through expectation for the future.

Given such a multi-dimensional structure of time, consciousness risks becoming rather convoluted. As with the many characters occupying *The Waste Land*, consciousness becomes a crowded chorus of voices past, present, and future. Nevertheless, the many voices are contained within a single consciousness. Making them fit into at least some kind of form – if not a unity – is the task that Eliot sets for himself in *Four Quartets*:

As we grow older
The world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated
Of dead and living. Not the intense moment
Isolated, with no before and after,
But a lifetime burning in every moment
And not the lifetime of one man only
But of old stones that cannot be deciphered. (Complete 182)

In the course of gathering ever-increasing amounts of experience, Eliot suggests, every single moment of life bears the mark of a number of other moments. Experience reaches the point where it is no longer simply innocent; with the insight gained in reflection comes the responsibility of action. But the pattern is even more complicated by the history of the collective, which also impresses its mark upon consciousness.
By invoking something resembling collective memory, Eliot extends his theory of temporality to a theory of history. Not only does individual experience from the past bear upon the present, but entire eras also give meaning to individual and collective experience. Letting the reader peer over his shoulder, Eliot reveals part of his poetic practice in discussing the nature of verse in “The Music of Poetry”. His source for inspiration seems rather peculiar at first: “I know that a poem, or a passage of a poem, may tend to realize itself first as a particular rhythm before it reaches expression in words, and that this rhythm may bring to birth the idea and the image” (Poets 38). While it may seem rather abstract to find material for a poem simply in rhythm rather than in an insightful idea of a vivid image, Eliot’s creative starting point shows otherwise and demands a serious inquiry into the expressive power of rhythm. Eliot’s “intersection time” conjoins the philosophy of temporality, poetic rhythm, and historical reference (Complete 194). Taken for granted, rhythm bears the propulsion and stasis of historical time. At its purest level, history is suggested not only in images of temporality, but also in rhythms and even in images that suggest process. Long before Four Quartets, Eliot had been meditating upon rhythm as a repository of history in his poetry. Some of the images in “Preludes” for instance, provide phenomenological experiences of historical moments. “The winter evening settles down / With smell of steaks in passageways. / Six o’clock” (22). Not only does “settling down” literally suggest movement, the idiom’s figurative sense as a subsiding of activity also gains added temporal texture in the emptying out of the evening passageways (22). The movement not only manifests the feel of the event but also captures the process of temporality unfolding. Likewise, the temporal structure of the unwinding street contrasts
sharply with the subsequent account of clock time, “[s]ix o’clock”, which registers the structure and experience of calculated time (22).

Eliot further suggests historical rhythms with an existential awareness of time in “Preludes”. In the second section of the poem, he writes:

With the other masquerades
That time resumes,
One thinks of all the hands
That are raising dingy shades
In a thousand furnished rooms. (22)

The temporality of inauthentic existence is captured in the image of the masquerade as that of the average city-goer who wakes up in the morning to toil at a stultifying job. The dinginess of the blinds indicates not only their poor quality but also their being worn out from daily use. The thinking of the multitude of modern city-dwellers leading their drab, repetitive lives opens a view into their interiors and therefore, the history of the citizens of Boston, Paris, and London who inspired Eliot to write “Preludes” (Southam 61). The drudgery is captured poignantly in the female character who “clasped the yellow soles of feet / In the palms of both hands” (Complete 23). The supposed free existence of modernity that Eliot describes amounts to a masquerade procession, the rhythms of which he registers in verse.

Expanding his view onto a vaster panorama of time, Eliot transcribes the notation of historical time in the lives of city-dwellers over generations. In the process, he brings attention to otherwise historically anonymous people. “Wipe your hands across your mouth, and laugh; / The worlds revolve like ancient women / Gathering fuel in vacant lots” suggests being brought to the edge of insanity at contemplating the divestment of self-importance when viewed from the backdrop of human history (23). In Eliot’s reference to “ancient
women,” individual time stretches out to mythical proportions. Yet the mythopoeic quality does not romanticize the urban-dwellers as gods; instead, they are given their proper stature as historical beings. Therefore, the image of “all the hands / That are raising dingy shades” (22) does not merely record a gesture or a simple movement but captures rather the temporality of history that underpins the existential drudgery of the “masquerades / That time resumes” (22). In other words, the images of movement, rhythm, time, gesture, and process record historical time (22). Even immobile objects and body parts, such as the shades, the yellowed soles, and the soiled hands are bathed in historical time; paradoxically, historical time can be registered in poetry in stasis, since time does not require movement itself. While the images themselves do not describe movement per se, they nevertheless bear the passage of time and history. Poetry, therefore, renders visible the animation of objects with historical and existential time. By the same token that the many moderns are reduced to anonymity in the course of human time, they are also accorded the significance of mythical grandeur.

In addition to investing the images of static objects with temporality, Eliot also conveys the dynamic of time with the recurrent motif of torsion. Throughout his collection Prufrock and Other Observations, for instance, images of turning, twisting, and curling abound. Much like the contortions of Pablo Picasso’s portraits or Rodin’s sculptures, which record the subjects’ inner lives, Eliot’s torsion motif renders visible the most basic component of the animating principle of movement in existential temporality, the stretching or span that Heidegger describes in Sein und Zeit (Being and Time) and the sway in Einführung in die Metaphysik (Introduction to Metaphysics). According to Heidegger, the
Erstrecktheit or Erstreckung (stretching along) of Being in temporality amounts to the span of care:


The “lasting” is articulated in the understanding of the “during” that awaits and makes present. This duration is again the time revealed in the self-interpretation of temporality, a time that is thus actually, but unthematically, understood in taking care as a “span”. The making present that awaits and retains interprets a “during” with a “span,” only because in so doing it is disclosed to itself as being ecstatically stretched along in historical temporality, even though it does not know itself as this. But here a further peculiarity of the time “given” shows itself. Not only does the “during” have a span, but every “now,” “then,” and “on that former occasion” is always spanned with the structure of datability, with a changing span: “now” in the intermission, at dinner, in the evening, in summer; “then” at breakfast, while climbing, and so on. (original italics; Sein 541; Being 376)

Drawing a complex picture of time, Heidegger’s structure of temporality provides an indication of Eliot’s “intersection time” (Complete 194). In the superimposed view of time that Heidegger provides, a given moment holds duration despite having already passed. Such a duration amounts to the kind of stretching along that he has in mind. The specific kind of time that he has in mind, however, is strictly existential in terms of a phenomenon unfolding its presence over a duration of time. The trope of emergence describes the existential unfolding of the phenomenon in its presence as such. In his description of what the Greeks called “phusis,” Heidegger gives an account of emergence:
Was sagt nun das Wort φύσις? Es sagt das von sich aus Aufgehende (z. B. das Aufgehen einer Rose), das sich eröffnende Entfalten, das in solcher Entfaltung in die Erscheinung-Treten und ihr sich Halten und Verbleiben, kurz, das aufgehend-verweilende Walten…. Die φύσις ist das Sein selbst, kraft dessen das Seiende erst beobachtbar wird und bleibt.

Now what does the word *phusis* say? It says what emerges from itself (for example, the emergence, the blossoming, of a rose), the unfolding that opens itself up, the coming-into-appearance in such unfolding, and holding itself and persisting in appearance – in short, the emerging-abiding sway…. Phusis is Being itself, by virtue of which beings first become and remain observable. (original italics, my ellipsis; *Einführung* 16-17; *Introduction* 15)

The barest sense of movement in incipient setting-into-motion the Greeks rendered in pure form as the mere coming-forth or standing of the sway. In a discussion on the philosophy of Being underwriting Greek grammar, Heidegger describes the image of “zum Stand kommen und im Stand bleiben” (“taking and maintaining a stand”) (original italics; 64; 63) as “verstehen die Griechen als Sein” (“what the Greeks understood as Being”) (64; 63). As the basis of Being in *Einführung in die Metaphysik* (*Introduction to Metaphysics*), taking a stand corresponds to self-possession in a limited sense: Heidegger’s vision of Being remains purely philosophical, while self-possession involves a historical understanding of existence from a materialist perspective.

In the stand of Being that Heidegger describes, the movement of emergence is a crucial element. Heidegger adds that the movement of the stand is a confrontation with a limit: “Was dergestalt zum Stand kommt, in sich ständig wird, schlägt sich dabei von sich her frei in die Notwendigkeit seiner Grenze, πέρας” (“Whatever takes such a stand becomes *constant* in itself and thereby freely and on its own runs up against the necessity of its limit, *peras*”) (original italics; 64; 63). In the movement itself, Being is as if constantly crossing a threshold, ever freeing itself by always confronting its limits. Crossing the limit conveys the sense of standing that Heidegger describes; for, the stand is not so much holding a
comfortable static position as the movement of coming-to-stand. He recalls how significant
the dual aspect of the stand emerging and reaching its limit is to the Greeks: “Das in seine
Grenze, sie ergrenzend, sich Stellende und so Stehende hat Gestalt, μορφή. Die griechisch
verstandene Gestalt hat ihr Wesen aus dem aufgehenden Sich-in-die-Grenze-her-stellen”
(“Whatever places itself into and thereby enacts its limit, and thus stands, has form, morphē.
The essence of form, as understood by the Greeks, comes from the emergent placing-in-
itself-forth-into-the-limit”) (65; 63). Taking a stand involves passing through limits. While
taking a stand can be seen in the form of action, its significance is not necessarily visible as
such. Therefore, as the fundamental concern of phenomenology of rendering the invisible
visible, the discussion of the stand of Being is also a matter of appearance: “Das Aussehen
einer Sache nennen die Griechen εἴδος oder ιδέα. Im εἴδος schwingt anfänglich mit, was
auch wir meinen, wenn wir sagen: Die Sache hat ein Gesicht, sie kann sich sehen lassen, sie
steht. Die Sache »sitzt«. Sie ruht im Erscheinen, d. h. Hervorkommen ihres Wesens”)
(“The Greeks call the look of a thing its eidos or idea. Initially, eidos resonates with what
we mean when we say that a thing has a face, a visage, that it has the right look, that it
stands. The thing ‘fits.’ It rests in its appearing, that is, in the coming-forth of its essence”)
(original italics; 65; 63-64). Viewed from a historical perspective, Being is visible in the
countenance of self-possession.

The way in which Heidegger approaches the unleashing of time occurs in his many
images of Being as the stretch, the stand, and the sway. Likewise, Eliot’s images of torsion
capture the entrance into the open of Being. Recognizing the dynamic aspect of these
images for entering the territory of Being is possible with the interpretive aid of the
hermeneutical circle. As a model for reading, the hermeneutical circle conveys the sense of
entering an opening in the track of meaning that circulates around the literary text. As the text unfolds, the reader either gets pulled into the text or charts a course into it. The practice of reading relates precisely to the question of ownership insofar as the text engages the reader or vice versa. The torsion of Being that Heidegger and Eliot describe relates to the crucial moment of emergence upon which the reader is possessed by the text or takes possession of it. Such a movement is not simply the decoding of the text, but is much more existential in the sense of entering into a relation of Being with the text by way of either inhabiting it or being inhabited by it; such is the difference between semiotics, and Heidegger’s hermeneutics and Eliot’s poetics:

winter evening settles down….
a gusty shower wraps
The grimy scraps
Of withered leaves about your feet
And newspapers from vacant lots. (my ellipsis; Complete 22)

The wind enveloping the character captures the sense of nature as a force with a will possibly more powerful than the human ability to redirect it. As a fundamental trope for the struggle over Being, torsion applies to the fine line upon which self-possession is fought in language, literature, and history. The constricting sense of the “gusty shower” (22) represents a threat to freedom, which is captured more grotesquely in the image of the fog as an insouciant cat curling around the house in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”:

    The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes,
The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes,
Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,
Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains,
Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimneys,
Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap,
And seeing that it was a soft October night,
Curled once about the house, and fell asleep. (13)
The indifferent fog wrapping itself around the house also suggests a potential menace to, and disempowerment of, the dwelling that it surrounds. The loss of power is suggested by the closure of the fog-cat’s curling itself entirely around the house as though constraining it. The threatening fog is a constraint on the freedom of Being.

Constriction, however, does not dominate “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” “Preludes,” or even the rest of Prufrock as an image of threat. The torsion motif can even be found in a wistful gesture in “La Figlia Che Piange”:

Stand on the highest pavement of the stair –
Lean on a garden urn –
Weave, weave the sunlight in your hair –
Clasp your flowers to you with a pained surprise –
Fling them to the ground and turn
With a fugitive resentment in your eyes:
But weave, weave the sunlight in your hair. (34)

In contrast to the image of the fog-cat’s enclosing gesture, the stretching in “Preludes” signals the temporal and existential inflections of the twisting movement. In contrast to the cat’s constraint, the male character of “Preludes” unfolds himself: “His soul stretched tight across the skies / That fade behind a city block” (23). Like the clouds in the sky, the soul is at the mercy of the movements of the same wind that stirs the dirty leaves and newspapers around the listener’s feet at the beginning of the poem. More concretely, the soul unfurling from its constricting envelope to the point of tautness along the horizon suggests the polar tension in the poem of the quotidian bearing mythical significance; although constrained by social forces, the average urbanite nevertheless longs for stretching out the spirit and broadening the horizon: “The conscience of a blackened street / Impatient to assume the world” (23). The image is an archetypal modernist image of ambiguity and tension, whereby the soul stretched tautly out to the horizon suggests both agony and relief.
The investiture of time in the images of Prufrock leads to questioning their significance to historical consciousness. Yet such a questioning will not provide direct results of clearly-calculated data as the indirect images suggest; rather, the images open the way to questioning quotidian scenes in the poem. Although the images are spare, they nevertheless – or therefore – invite speculation as to their significance. Yet their significance does not lie merely in semantic interpretation, but rather in existential meaning. While not in any way essences of the things described, the meanings surround the objects as though curling about them. Such curling is the poetic dimension that Eliot is trying to capture in portraying the quotidian before the backdrop of vast historical movements of mythical proportions. All the ongoing, yet seemingly static, agony of the moderns’ go-nowhere world is captured under a microscope and magnified infinitesimally. The temporal pathos of quotidian stasis curling about the images is the prelude to the poem’s gesture of stretching out historical time:

I am moved by fancies that are curled
Around these images, and cling:
The notion of some infinitely gentle
Infinitely suffering thing. (23)

By the time Eliot reaches maturity with Four Quartets, he drifts away from the urban grittiness that characterized his earlier verse towards a purer and more rarified existential commonality:

I have said before
That the past experience revived in the meaning
Is not the experience of one life only
But of many generations – not forgetting
Something that is probably quite ineffable:
The backward look behind the assurance
Of recorded history, the backward half-look
Over the shoulder towards the primitive terror. (186-87)
More fundamental than historical accounts or even language in general, the primordial experience shared by all is the eventuality of death. What is most striking about how the past bears on the present is not so much that the past is inherited from generations but rather that reviving the past in the present is an act of remembering imminent mortality. Memory itself is the *memento mori*.

As an alternative structure to linearity and development, Eliot drafts what at first seems rather mysterious, if not platitudinous, but gradually unfolds in stark incongruent lines:

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Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable. (171)
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Initially, Eliot invokes the problem of the unredeemable aspect of time in Book 11 of St. Augustine’s *Confessions* (Milward 17-18). Although he begins with the allusion to unredeemable time, Eliot eventually develops a notion of time that is redeemable. The redemption of time involves overcoming ignorant experience and memory with wisdom when the “approach to the meaning restores the experience / In a different form” (*Complete* 186). As a meditation on time, Eliot’s theology of redemption offers a philosophical solution to the problem of time in much the same way that Heidegger extracts phenomenology out of theology. As a form of self-possession, the redemption that Eliot describes occurs in drawing patterns from a network of moments; also like Heidegger, he restricts his field of inquiry to the realm of Idealism. As part of the religious inflection that he gives to redemption in time, Eliot seeks a fundamental geometry of language as well as of
Being within it. Putting together experience from disparate moments is the way to trace such a temporal geometry in poetry and philosophy.

Men’s curiosity searches past and future  
And clings to that dimension. But to apprehend  
The point of the intersection of the timeless  
With time, is an occupation for the saint. (Complete 189-190)

The structure of time that Eliot proposes functions on two separate levels of significance. Firstly, the attempt to make sense of individual experience involves weighing experience, knowledge, and insight from all moments of time; secondly, the eternal moment involves looking at the layers of primordial existence that lie beneath individual existence. Both impulses bear the task of drawing geometries of Being.

Although his universalism is a metaphysical residue of Anglican theology, Eliot’s model for memory and projection offers a phenomenological model.

These are only hints and guesses,  
Hints followed by guesses; and the rest  
Is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action.  
The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is Incarnation.  
Here the impossible union  
Of spheres of existence is actual,  
Here the past and future  
Are conquered, and reconciled. (190)

Making sense of the opaque fragments that make up the incomplete picture of existence and that only become coherent through return upon them from the vantage point of new experience, insight, and expectation gives the phenomenological model of time that Eliot develops in Four Quartets. However, the mention of Incarnation marks the shift to Christian dogma of joining not simply moments of earthly existence but also the earthly and celestial spheres. As if it recorded the struggle between theology and philosophy, the poem marks a commitment at this moment to theology. However, what can be extrapolated from Eliot’s
theological doctrine for phenomenological insight? The phenomenological model is precisely the grain that can be taken from the husk of theology sloughed off. From such a perspective, Incarnation is no longer a mystical union, but rather the moment of insight into the past that acts upon the present with implications for the future – the existential correlative of the “point of intersection of the timeless” (189). In the phenomenology of incarnation, the “spirit” of the past is animated and embodied in the present. In a striking conception of the term “spirit” as it relates to language, Chamberlin provides a sense of direction for recuperating a secular understanding of it. As far as the written word is concerned, marks on a page are as mute as stone. The letter of the word needs the spirit to bring language to life. What is the life of the tone in which the words of a poem are uttered, for instance? What is the historical life out of which the words are uttered? Chamberlin answers: “We need the letter – that’s how we find our way, after all – but now we can only get at it through the spirit” (Living 33).

The rewards that Eliot’s speaker suggests are the result of the process of bringing together past, present, and future in a single point, which promises illumination. The return upon such investment includes the greater insight that present experience and concern for the future shed upon obscure moments. Such a temporal structure offers the opportunity of redemption. The redemption in question is that of the speaker’s reconciliation with his experience by way of insight. Being able to understand past experience properly is even just the prelude to being able to understand experience as it happens, which is the intersection at the “point of intersection of the timeless” (Complete 189). The eternal moment in Four Quartets, therefore, is not simply a theological abstraction, but rather a fundamental phenomenological model for making sense of existence. Grasping for the eternal moment
suggests Eliot’s attempt at self-possession. Even where the more explicit theological symbols populate Eliot’s language, their underlying ontological structures contain fundamental philosophical models:

The dove descending breaks the air  
With flame of incandescent terror  
Of which the tongues declare  
The one discharge from sin and error.  
The only hope, or else despair  
    Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre –  
To be redeemed from fire by fire. (196)

Within the Anglican sphere, the dove represents the Pentecostal holy spirit and the flame corresponds to the fire of divine love that has the power to purify the fire of self-love. The purifying aspect that Eliot suggests functions within phenomenology as the care that is devoted to taking the kind of stand that Heidegger discusses. According to Heidegger, “Das Dasein ist Seiendes, dem es in seinem Sein um dieses selbst geht” (“Da-sein is a being which is concerned in its being about that being”) (Sein 254; Being 179). Unlike animals, human Dasein is the kind of being that takes a stand on its existence. The disposition to taking a stand is care. In Eliot’s case, the fire that needs to be purified by another fire therefore corresponds to a problem or error resulting from passions that evade Being; in turn, such passion needs to be abandoned and replaced with care devoted to Being. In the process, one passion redeems another. “‘From wrong to wrong the exasperated spirit / Proceeds, unless restored by that refining fire / Where you must move in measure, like a dancer’” (Complete 195). As part of the form of temporality that is ever being shaped, the new fire amounts to the “spirit” that animates understanding and experience in Being. The redemption of time that Eliot describes is the basis of self-possession that he pursues in Four Quartets.
Depending on how exactly he draws the semantic borders around the word “love,” Eliot abstracts it from temporality, redemption, and desire in his ontology. Within the Christian tradition, divine love is not only the basis for creation but also the point of origin for reaching union with divinity. Distinct from its common romantic form, the love that Eliot discusses is even more fundamental than its theological sense. Just as Heidegger extrapolated “care” from Christian “love,” the same can be done with Eliot’s version of it. Abstracting the theological features from love indicates basic devotion to any given existential path taken in life; rather than devotion to a god, secular love maintains the investment in a field of concern minus the theological content. By looking at love in Four Quartets in a properly ontological manner, we reach care in its purest form:

The detail of the pattern is movement,  
As in the figure of the ten stairs.  
Desire itself is movement  
Not in itself desirable;  
Love is itself unmoving,  
Only the cause and end of movement,  
Timeless, and undesiring  
Except in the aspect of time  
Caught in the form of limitation  
Between un-being and being. (175)

Taking dynamism as a given in human existence, Eliot distinguishes movement as a more fundamental aspect of existence than love. However, love on its own does not do anything; that is the task of desire. Love gives the sense of commitment, devotion, and resolve for following any given existential path. Drawing upon Christian theological texts of St. John of the Cross, Julian of Norwich, and Lancelot Andrewes, as well as the seventeenth century Metaphysical poets, Eliot recognized in religious verse the art of meditation as an expression of devotion. In T. S. Eliot and Mysticism, Paul Murray discusses the intellectual process involved in meditative poetry as a path to love: “The discursus of the intellect and the
engagement of the senses and the imagination are merely a kind of preparatory drama necessary for the attainment of concentration and for the arousal of love” (original italics; Murray 43). As the end point of meditative verse, love is the form of Being that the poet must elicit in the reader. Conceived as a path to love, poetry gives direction along the passage into “our first world” (Complete 171). As the space of Being, the domain of love is a refuge within himself.

Eliot also makes another crucial distinction with regards to love: although it lies outside time, love straddles the threshold of temporality in human existence. The threshold of time is the determining factor in the distinction “[b]etween un-being and being” (175). Since “[o]nly through time time is conquered,” love acts as the only aspect outside of time that maintains any thread of continuity through the fragments of understanding, memory, and desire (173). Just what Eliot means by “un-being” refers precisely to the memories, experiences, and motives lost in time. “Love is most nearly itself / Where here and now cease to matter” (182). Rather than dismissing experience, Eliot suggests that the given experiences themselves do not matter on their own but rather only inasmuch as love animates them. By extension, love has the power to re-animate mistaken insights, forgotten memories, and tattered desires with its devotion. As the basis of desire, however, love is responsible for the unhappiness that results from so many unsatisfied hungers.

Who then devised the torment? Love.
Love is the unfamiliar Name
Behind the hands that wove
The intolerable shirt of flame
Which human power cannot remove.
We only live, only suspiare
Consumed by either fire or fire. (196)
As the symbol of desire, fire in Eliot’s poem captures the passion that not only heats existence but also consumes it. As a fundamental example of theological paradox, the two kinds of fire refer to that of earthly desire and purgative devotion. Eliot proposes two options for existence. In an echo of Dante’s *Divina Commedia* (*The Divine Comedy*), Eliot combines the images of the divine fire and rose conjoining in the path that he sets for himself:

A condition of complete simplicity  
(Costing not less than everything)  
And all shall be well and  
All manner of thing shall be well  
When the tongues of flame are in-folded  
Into the crowned knot of fire  
And the fire and the rose are one. (197-98)

As the culminating symbol for redemption in divine love, the rose of heaven conjoins with the fire of divine devotion in the kingdom of God. In chapter 47 of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Julian of Norwich writes of the “ghostly knot of burning love betwixt thee and thy God, in ghostly onehead and accordance of will” (Norwich 112). Although devotion to the fire costs everything, the return of communion that it promises is priceless.

The direction that the fire of love provides is the focus for devotion to a given course in life. Like Heidegger, who draws upon the tradition of home, dwelling, and building, Eliot figures the devotion of love in the same familiar images. The importance of such images is so central to *Four Quartets* that he writes: “Home is where one starts from” (Complete 182). As a symbol for origins, the home acts as a spatial symbol for the existential sphere. Home and dwelling are synonymous with Being.

In my beginning is my end. In succession  
Houses rise and fall, crumble, are extended,  
Are removed, destroyed, restored, or in their place  
Is an open field, or a factory, or a by-pass.
Old stone to new buildings, old timber to new fires,  
Old fires to ashes, and ashes to the earth  
Which is already flesh, fur and faeces,  
Bone of man and beast, cornstalk and leaf.  
Houses live and die: there is time for building  
And a time for living and for generation  
And a time for the wind to break the loosened pane  
And to shake the wainscot where the field-mouse trots  
And to shake the tattered arras woven with a silent motto. (177)

As alternatives to the home, Eliot gives images of other structures that reflect spaces of Being but that are less than comfortable. The open field, bustling factory, and highway bypass are not the kinds of places that suggest peaceful dwelling. Likewise, Eliot also puts the space of the house of Being within the context of temporality: houses of being, like everything else, fall into disrepair with time. Recognizing the passage of time, Eliot suggests, demands letting go of the past when necessary. Holding on requires letting go; investment requires divestment. However, the passage of time does not mean utter destruction of all that has been, but rather the transformation of the past. “Old stone to new buildings” indicates the use of integrating the past for present purposes (177). Building is itself another image in the structure of Being that includes home and dwelling. The love that is contained in dwelling is what is needed to build the dwelling in the first place. Reflection has the task of being able to recognize when to let the wind “break the loosened pane” and redirect care to building a new dwelling (177).

Within the images surrounding dwelling, Eliot emphasizes even more than building the task of divestment. Coming from his Anglican background, divestment is the foundation block for Eliot’s philosophy of dwelling.

Descend lower, descend only  
Into the world of perpetual solitude,  
World not world, but that which is not world,  
Internal darkness, deprivation
And destitution of all property,
Dessication of the world of sense,
Evacuation of the world of fancy,
Inoperancy of the world of spirit;
This is the one way, and the other
Is the same, not in movement
But abstention from movement; while the world moves
In appetency, on its metalled ways
Of time past and time future. (174)

Reminiscent of the most stringent Anglican demands upon forsaking earthly attachments, the descent into utter destitution is an existential challenge. Not only is the house of Being divested, but so is the entire structure of the world of human existence. Even the light of reflection is forsaken for absolute divine devotion. Echoing the intersection of the second Greek epigraph from Heraclitus at the beginning of “Burnt Norton” and St. John of the Cross’ The Dark Night of the Soul where the way up is the way down, Eliot registers the double movement of the via affirmativa and the via negativa of illumination (O’Connor 34-5). In an essay on Samuel Johnson, Eliot clarifies his paradoxical logic: “We do not take kindly to the thought that, in order to gain one thing, we may have to give up something else of value” (Poets 165). Underlying this double-movement is the question of investment. In a letter to Bonamy Dobrée in 1936, Eliot indicated just how serious he was about self-divestment:

The doctrine that in order to arrive at the love of God one must divest oneself of the love of created beings was expressed by St. John of the Cross... merely to kill one’s human affections will get one nowhere, it would be only to become rather more a completely living corpse than most people are. But the doctrine is fundamentally true, I believe. (original ellipsis; qtd. in O’Connor 52-3)

Starkly put, Eliot could not invest himself in other people. His turn from people to the divine raises questions as to what exactly drove him in such a direction. In a pronounced turn later in his life, Eliot had not found love until his second marriage. Although it does not
provide a very intellectually satisfying answer, psychology seems to have played a significant part in Eliot’s religious and poetic positions. Not until marrying Valerie Fletcher in 1957 did Eliot come to understand redemption as a re-valuation of a different order.

By urging for divestment, Eliot pushes further to embrace self-abandon. Calling upon another part of Catholic doctrine, Eliot considers the paradox of obtaining self-possession through dispossession. By adopting St. John of the Cross’ discipline of surrender, Eliot exemplified what Chamberlin refers to as “the way in which we are possessed by stories and songs even as they belong to us” (Land 120). Eliot’s release is linked to his attachment to the Catholic theology of dispossession:

Do not let me hear
Of the wisdom of old men, but rather of their folly,
Their fear of fear and frenzy, their fear of possession,
Of belonging to another, or to others, or to God.
The only wisdom we can hope to acquire
Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless. (Complete 179)

Pushing aside the values attached to intellectual life, Eliot does not reject intelligence, but rather vainglorious pedantry. Abstracting the spiritual from the intellectual, Eliot goes beyond the surface of appearance of pure intellectualism that his poetry – nevertheless rife with cultural references – suggests. The vanity of believing in having control over fate, Eliot suggests, is due to the illusion of self-reliance. In an outright contradiction to his earlier rejection of self-divestment of others, Eliot makes an about-face here by suggesting the need to accept being at the mercy of others or even of God. Being humble enough to surrender to outside forces, Eliot suggests, is the means to self-possession: “In order to possess what you do not possess / You must go by the way of dispossession” (181). Eliot’s paradoxical search for self-possession in theological dispossession, however, marks the renunciation of his historical subjectivity.
Eliot had already explored the paradox of self-possession in his early poem “Portrait of a Lady,” in which he presents a speaker struggling to maintain his composure in the face of a sentimental, older woman who hosts the kind of salon nights that Eliot attended while at Harvard in his youth (Hands 8). While he is the intellectual superior, he reasons that perhaps the intellect is not the redeeming factor with which he has invested his youth, which captures the moment of departure from his own naivety into greater understanding. Tried by the socialite’s over-dramatized investments in her pseudo-friendship and inflated sense of self-importance, the speaker describes his internal struggle:

I take my hat: how can I make a cowardly amends  
For what she has said to me?…  
I keep my countenance,  
I remain self-possessed.  (my ellipsis; Complete 20)

Eventually however, he becomes exasperated at her obtuseness in thinking that they could ever be kindred spirits. When she comments “‘I have been wondering frequently of late…. / Why we have not developed into friends’” (my ellipsis; 21), he adheres to decorum but crumbles: “My self-possession gutters; we are really in the dark” (21). He finds that he cannot reciprocate her interest. While he feels superior to her in terms of intellect, youth, and authenticity, his arrogance nevertheless elicits his shame and the recognition of equality. In this case, his lack of humility makes him lose his own sense of self-possession.

By the time of Four Quartets, Eliot has shifted from social concerns to theological and philosophical ones in the paradox of self-possession. When Virginia Woolf – incredulous of Eliot’s conversion – asked him with semi-seriousness and semi-mockery just what he experienced in prayer, Eliot “‘leaned forward, bowing his head in that attitude which was itself one of prayer… and described the attempt to concentrate, to forget self, to attain union with God’” (original ellipsis; qtd. in Murray 41). The paradoxical nature of
self-possession through self-abandon can be considered at a more fundamental existential level.

There are three conditions which often look alike
Yet differ completely, flourish in the same hedgerow:
Attachment to self and to things and to persons, detachment
From self and from things and from persons; and, growing between them, indifference
Which resembles the others as death resembles life,
Being between two lives – unflowering, between
The live and the dead nettle. (Complete 195)

In addition to enumerating attachment and detachment, Eliot lists indifference as a barren space between the two opposite positions. Indifference is no positive way of living. Yet it may be the most common of the three ways of being that Eliot enumerates. As the implications for earthly existence indicate, self-possession is fundamental to many approaches to explaining existence.

In the course of describing the process of self-abandon, Eliot distinguishes among the different intensities required for reading philosophy, poetry, and theology. Rather than a mere question of intelligence, the three kinds of works demand different levels of self-abnegation and self-possession. In terms of self-possession, Eliot recognizes that it is a matter of self-emptying and self-filling with external matter.

Philosophy is difficult, unless we discipline our minds for it; the full appreciation of poetry is difficult for those who have not trained their sensibility by years of attentive reading. But devotional reading is the most difficult of all, because it requires an application, not only of mind, not only of the sensibility, but of the whole being. (qtd. in Murray 41)

Elaborating upon theology as the kind of literature that requires the most stamina, he describes an internalizing process:

I myself should not choose to read very much at a time. To read two or three passages… to attend closely to every word, to ponder on the quotations read for a little while and try to fix them in my mind, so that they may continue to
affect me while my attention is engrossed with the affairs of the day: that is enough for me in twenty-four hours, and enough, I imagine, even for those more practised in meditation than I. (42)

Characteristic of Eliot’s fatigue with reading, Eliot laments his low stamina; however, what he lacks in quantity, he makes up for in quality. More importantly, Eliot reveals how he incorporates what he reads by breaking it down into a process of attention and recognition. Holding the passages that he reads in his mind and going over them repeatedly indicates not simply reading for cognition, but for re-cognition. Taken in its other sense as a path, the passage in the text is passed over repeatedly as a way of appropriation. Such appropriation is the kind of affect that Eliot has in mind as the means for internalizing something genuinely other and transforming himself. Being affected, according to Eliot’s reading process, is a way of self-transformation. By extension, appropriation is literary self-possession. The intensity that he describes is crucial to his notion of tradition: “Tradition cannot be inherited; and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour” (Essays 14).

While so much attention can be devoted to the theological and philosophical dimensions of Eliot’s poetry, his work culminates in the consideration of the political sphere. Exposing the fissures in the foundation of Eliot’s logic of self-abnegation reveals the shaky political ground upon which it is built; in fact, it reveals how Church and State are interrelated institutions in his ideal view of society. Both institutions depend upon surrender from their members. Constantly seeking to direct love – in its broadest sense of the term – away from earthly existence, St. John of the Cross, for instance, serves as an Idealist guide for Eliot. Examined in the political realm, the will to self-divestment is a limiting and unfulfilling form of agency. Is the theological paradox of self-possession, therefore, a model for, or an alternative to, political dispossessio
peaceful intentions, the neutrality of dispossession does not answer for the other half of the equation of self-possession. Self-possession through dispossession is an illusion if it is predicated upon the religious rejection of the social order rather than a political recognition of it.

Just as he extends his theory of temporality to a theory of history, Eliot also develops the historical implications of his theory of redemption. While theological redemption amounts to the return of Christ, the secular resonance of redemption translates Christian love into philosophical care extended to the social sphere.

Whatever we inherit from the fortunate
We have taken from the defeated
What they had to leave us – a symbol:
A symbol perfected in death.
And all shall be well and
All manner of thing shall be well
By the purification of the motive
In the ground of our beseeching. (Complete 196)

Purification alludes to the fire of care that is directed to whatever given stand is at hand. That the care or the motive remains so general is no accident, since they are to be taken in as broad a manner as possible. As a result, Eliot’s poem goes beyond the “identity” of Christian theology. As well-read as he was across the philosophy, theology, and anthropology of cultures East and West, Eliot recognized fundamental patterns across different systems of thought. The fundamental act of beseeching, Eliot suggests, is the basis of gathering the disparate dimensions of time into the “point of intersection of the timeless” where not only is individual time redeemed but so is historical time (189). In his concern with tradition, Eliot understood the importance of keeping the past alive: “A people without history / Is not redeemed from time, for history is a pattern / Of timeless moments” (197).
Although Eliot steeps his spiritual meditation in theology, he does situate it in the political sphere. In so doing, he develops a theory of history that binds the elements of temporality, love, memory, freedom, and nationalism.

This is the use of memory:
For liberation – not less of love but expanding
Of love beyond desire, and so liberation
From the future as well as the past. Thus, love of a country
Begins as attachment to our own field of action
And comes to find that action of little importance
Though never indifferent. History may be servitude,
History may be freedom. See, now they vanish,
The faces and places, with the self which, as it could, loved them,
To become renewed, transfigured, in another pattern. (195)

As the interface for the structure of temporality that Eliot develops, memory is crucial to bringing past, present, and future together in order to reach the “point of intersection of the timeless” (189). The association of limited boundaries with desire suggests the kind of one-sided, narcissistic consciousness that Eliot repudiates in *Four Quartets*. By surpassing desire, Eliot suggests, the individual foregoes self-interest for the sake of something greater. The greater space or “field of action” that he has in mind consists of the nation of England and the Anglican Church. The incantation “the intersection of the timeless moment / Is England and nowhere” is telling of Eliot’s particular attachment to the British state and his disdain for democracy (192). Devotion to the state, Eliot argues, that such love embodies keeps others who share the same devotion alive; in effect, the love that he describes is the nationalism that upholds the state. In passing through divine love and even suggesting a phenomenological model of care in the process, Eliot manages to defend a devotion to the state. Presumably, the state is the guarantor of freedom that Eliot claims for it. Yet, memory on its own does not explain social relations; it may be a function of social relations, but it does not serve as the foundation for society. Eliot’s claim to memory as the basis of
liberation is therefore another in a long list of Idealist conclusions that only serve to obfuscate realities both spiritual and political. In the course of proliferating the Catholic doctrine of self-deprivation, Eliot continues the long tradition of obscuring the basis of self-possession in the fog of Idealism. While prayer may provide a certain amount of psychological comfort, fundamental liberation does not come about through deferred waiting for a promised, yet imaginary, heaven but through unshackling humanity from the chains of exploitation. Despite being supported on the pillars of theology, however, Eliot’s poem nevertheless contains a more fundamental foundation for self-possession. Voiced with the breath of science and materialism, *Four Quartets* resonates with the spirit of historical redemption:

With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
Through the unknown, remembered gate
When the last of earth left to discover
Is that which was the beginning;
At the source of the longest river
The voice of the hidden waterfall
And the children in the apple-tree
Not known, because not looked for
But heard, half-heard, in the stillness
Between two waves of the sea.
Quick now, here, now, always –
A condition of complete simplicity
(Costing not less than everything)
And all shall be well and
All manner of thing shall be well
When the tongues of flame are in-folded
Into the crowned knot of fire
And the fire and the rose are one. (197-98)
Chapter Two: “Pour atteindre et saisir ce Soi”

(“To reach and grasp this Self”)

After a brief stay in Paris where he joined the cénacle of poets surrounding Mallarmé, Valéry returned to the more peaceful life of Montpellier in 1891. While strolling in the streets one day, he came across a widowed baroness, Madame de Rovira, for whom he developed a strong attraction. But he would admire her only from afar. Despite having a number of opportunities to approach the baroness, Valéry always lost his nerve. According to his biographer Michel Jarrety, Valéry kept the baroness at a distance as “une idole inaccessible” (“an inaccessible idol”) (Valéry 97). Marked by a Catholic sense of purity that was reinforced in his mentor Mallarmé’s aesthetics, Valéry rationalized his distance as a means of protecting himself from the risk of acting upon his desire. He referred to her as an “objet d’art dont la possession me hante” (“art object, the possession of which haunts me”) (95). In the gulf between inaction and gratification, Valéry found himself afflicted with a sense of dispossession. His neurotic impasse worked its nefarious ways on his psyche. Insomnia, anxiety, and a generalized contempt for other people gnawed at his spirit. Losing himself in his obsession, Valéry eventually suffered an existential breakdown from which he turned away from other people and redirected all his energy to matching the artistic feats of his heroes Mallarmé, Wagner, Poe, and Rimbaud.

Valéry’s conversion occurred one early October night in 1892 in a setting worthy of a classic Gothic novel. As a storm raged outside, the lightning that flashed through his small bedroom window coincided with an anxiety attack over the course of a long sleepless night. He would emerge from the night feeling transformed in the morning: “Je me sens AUTRE

11 Michel Jarrety, Paul Valéry (Paris: Fayard, 2008). All translations from this edition are mine.
ce matin” (“I feel like an OTHER this morning”) (115). Forsaking the self-abandon that he felt in idolizing Madame de Rovira, he took control of his mental and emotional faculties by redirecting them towards his intellectual pursuits. The “Nuit de Gênes” (“Night of Genoa”), as it is commonly called, marked the decisive moment in Valéry’s life at which he began taking control of himself.

The method by which Valéry would take control of himself involved developing a strict devotion to self-reflection. In French, the word for “mind” (“esprit”) also refers to “spirit”. Held together, the two meanings of “esprit” reflect the philosophical equation between being and thinking. From now on, he would observe his states of being as if a spectator watching a drama: “J’essayai, sans grand succès immédiat, d’opposer la conscience de mon état à cet état lui-même, et l’observateur au patient. / Je devins alors un drame singulier” (“I tried, without immediate success, to oppose the awareness of my state to the state itself, the observer to the patient. / I thus became a singular kind of drama”) (118). He would not dare to be a passive observer. Instead, he became the stage-director to the drama that unfolded in his mind. Disillusioned by all other idols, Valéry decided to make of the intellect the only idol worthy of his worship. His stringent devotion to his new idol would even lead him to forsake the publication of poetry for twenty years. Shortly before World War I, however, he would return to writing verse and compose his long masterpiece La Jeune Parque (1913-1917). In turn, he would reconcile himself with the emotional side that he had forsaken in early adulthood. Rather than reject his fears and therefore remain at their mercy, he would face them and gain a greater sense of control.

Already before his crisis, Valéry was exploring his limits in his poetry. By way of Narcissus, one of the primary representative figures of his poetry and general thinking in his
essays and the Cahiers (Notebooks), Valéry develops his view of the world of the mind and the life that inhabits it. Two of his most fully developed instances of the Narcissus figure include “Narcisse parle” (“Narcissus Speaks”) and its later expanded version, the long-poem “Fragments du Narcisse” (“Fragments of the Narcissus”). Set in the lush world of ancient mythology, “Narcisse parle” (“Narcissus Speaks”) establishes the delicate, idyllic backdrop that exemplifies Valéry’s signature preciosity. Spoken in the voice of Narcissus, the poem inverts the self-absorption that afflicts classical accounts of the figure. In Valéry’s version, Narcissus is capable of recognizing his own self-image despite investing so much in self-love.

Immediately tearing away from his most important attachment, Narcissus reveals the value to which he attaches himself in self-love, namely beauty. As one of the problems associated with reflection, beauty has a long history of enthralling the souls and minds of artists, lovers, and art-lovers alike. From the classical figure Pygmalion who brought his ivory sculpture of Galatea to life to E. T. A. Hoffmann who created automata that also bore human traits, the obsession with capturing and owning beauty speaks not only of the values of possession but also of the power to fend off death. For Narcissus and Pygmalion, being held in thrall to beauty comes with the desire to make aesthetic dispossession last for eternity. However, the ravages of time are undeniable; the foe that all must face is a powerful force disguised with the mask of beauty. Speaking through the mask of Narcissus, Valéry’s figure laments: “O FRÈRES! tristes lys, je languis de beauté” (“O brothers, mournful lilies, I am dying of beauty!”) (Oeuvres 1: 82; Poems 29). As the verb “languir” refers both to “withering” and “desiring,” Narcissus’ own beauty holds him in thrall to the point of feeling that he is dying from his obsession. In the face of the beauty that he longs to
possess, Narcissus loses control of himself. As if attentively listening for cosmic messages from nature like his poetic counterpart Orpheus, whose songs tamed beasts, Narcissus consoles himself with the hope that the night silence brings:

Un grand calme m’écoute, où j’écoute l’espoir.
La voix des sources change et me parle du soir;  
J’entends l’herbe d’argent grandir dans l’ombre sainte,  
Et la lune perfide élève son miroir  
Jusque dans les secrets de la fontaine éteinte.

A great calm listens to me, where I listen to hope.  
The voice of the springs changes, and speaks to me of evening;  
I hear the silvery grass growing in the holy shade,  
And the traitorous moon lifts up her mirror  
Even into the secrets of the exhausted fountain.  

As with the poet seeking inspiration in silence, Narcissus suggests the visionary’s disposition for detecting signs in nature’s happenings. Repeating his opening lament, Narcissus confirms the link between death and beauty as the source of his agony: “De tout mon coeur dans ces roseaux jeté, / Je languis, ô saphir, par ma triste beauté” (“Flinging me down bodily in these reeds, / I am dying, O sapphire, of my own beauty!”) (1: 82; 29). Becoming disenchanted with the image of beauty that he saw as the primary source of comfort, Narcissus recognizes that, as an idol, his image of beauty pays short shrift to existence: “Hélas! L’image est vaine et les pleurs éternels!” (Ah, the image is vain, and tears are eternal!”) (1: 82; 29). Vain reflection is only ever doomed to disappoint and disempower.

Despite the mention of the “grand calme” (“great calm”) at the beginning of “Narcisse parle” (“Narcissus Speaks”), a significant shift to an even fuller emotional atmosphere in the idyllic setting occurs (1: 82; 29). As opposed to a philosopher relying on unfolding an argument logically, Valéry creates a narcotic lull as a poetic charm:
Adieu, reflet perdu sur l’onde calme et close,
Narcisse… ce nom même est un tendre parfum
Au coeur suave. Effeuille aux manes du défunt
Sur ce vide tombeau la funérale rose.

Farewell, lost image on the enclosed, calm pool,
Narcissus… the very name is a tender perfume
To the soothed heart. To the shades of the departed,
Shed on this empty tomb the funereal rose. (original ellipses; 1: 83; 31)

By filling the reader’s mind with the sweet wafting fragrance of Narcissus blossoms, Valéry pulls the reader entirely into Narcissus’ world with textured sensations and emotions rather than ideas: the perfume is tender and the heart, smooth. Despite bidding adieu to his own beloved image – a form of funerary leave-taking at the tomb of self-attachment – Narcissus continues to recognize the seduction that his image holds in his own name; not only is beauty affiliated with a pleasurable death-drive, but remembering it after forsaking it also stirs temptation. Abandoning an indulgence is indeed bittersweet.

In the course of dissociating himself from his beloved self-image, Narcissus describes the process of constantly distinguishing himself from his reflection floating in the water over which he hovers. Lip, breath, and light interfere with any flawless, static self-reflection in the water:

Adieu, Narcisse… Meurs! Voici le crépuscule.
Au soupir de mon coeur mon apparence ondule,
La flûte, par l’azur enseveli module
Des regrets de troupeaux sonores qui s’en vont.
Mais sur le froid mortel où l’étoile s’allume,
Avant qu’un lent tombeau ne se forme de brume,
Tiens ce baiser qui brise un calme d’eau fatal!
L’espoir seul peut suffire à rompre ce crystal.
La ride me ravisse au soufflé qui m’exile
Et que mon souffle anime une flûte gracie
Dont le joueur léger me serait indulgent.

Farewell, Narcissus…. Die! Twilight is here,
At the heart’s sighing my image undulates.
The flute, against the entombed azure, warbles
Longings of the sounding herds as they go their way.
But on the mortal chill where a star is lit,
Before the mist forms a gradual tomb,
Accept this kiss breaking the water’s fatal calm!
Hope alone can avail to cleave this crystal.
Let the ripple ravish me on the breath that banishes
And may my breath inspire some slender flute-song
Whose carefree player thinks of me kindly! (original ellipses; 1: 83; 31-33)

Drawing his lips to the water, Narcissus recognizes that upon contact with his image, his kiss breaks the surface. Described as fatal, the calm that the untouched reflection inspires is associated again with death. The calm stillness of the image being covered over like a tomb in a creeping fog characterizes frozen reflection as a desire for eternal comfort. In the ancient Narcissus myth, however, the source of comfort is an illusion that shields him from reality. Narcissus must therefore accept death, the great ravager of beauty. Disabusing himself of illusions of immortality forces a form of dispossession in him. What is the ravaging of beauty if not the signal of life’s decay? Consequently, he comes to realize the paradox of dispossession and self-possession that Heidegger identifies at the core of existence in *Being and Time*: “Der Tod ist eigenste Möglichkeit des Daseins” (“Death is the ownmost possibility of Da-sein”) (original italics; *Sein* 349; *Being* 243). According to Heidegger, death is the sole possession of Dasein since it is the only inalienable property of existence; however, death is also the ultimate dispossession. Like the ripples in the watery reflection before Narcissus, the passage of time ruins the image of beauty in the form of wrinkles. By recognizing the folly of freezing his image for eternity, however, Narcissus flips the valence upon which facing death turns. Such a valence is the one that Heidegger identifies: “Der Tod ‘gehört’ nicht indifferent nur dem eigenen Dasein zu, sondern er beansprucht dieses als einzelnes” (“Death does not just ‘belong’ in an undifferentiated way
to one’s own Da-sein, but it laid claim on it as something individual”) (original italics; Sein 349; Being 243). As the fundamental claim upon existence, death demands a reckoning. In the situation that Narcissus faces, death poses two possibilities for living: either recognizing it or ignoring it. By confronting the passage of time, Narcissus acknowledges his mortality and therefore beholds the option of living either empowered in his identity or subjugated to his reflection. According to Heidegger, acknowledging death requires the fortitude of the resolve to live in Being, while denying mortality involves living an inauthentic existence. Once Narcissus reaches that threshold of consciousness, he has the opportunity to regain self-possession and face death rather than remain in thrall to his frozen reflection. Valéry’s Narcissus is radically different from the traditional figure of tragic myth.

The difference between the ancient figure of Narcissus and Valéry’s adaptation bears upon the existential component of reflection. What distinguishes the two figures is most starkly illustrated by the ignorance of the ancient figure and the redemption of Valéry’s Narcissus. Rather than dying without being able to tear himself away from his own image, Valéry’s Narcissus is not only fully conscious of the split between his identity and his reflection but is also able to maintain the dissociation. Through his resolve to forego indulging in self-regard, Valéry’s Narcissus performs an act of agency that testifies to his existence. The manner in which Narcissus testifies to his existence is witnessed in the dialogue that he undertakes with himself. The title “Narcisse parle” (“Narcissus Speaks”) points to the fundamental importance of speech with regards to the concerns of self-reflection. In the traditional myth, Narcissus speaks to his reflection in the water, as if it were another being. With Echo’s identical, confusing replies, he mistakenly attributes Echo’s words to his reflection, thus hampering his inability to separate his reflective
consciousness from himself; rather than entering into dialogue with the world, Narcissus merely holds a monologue. Valéry’s figure, however, is different in that he doggedly asserts and re-asserts the need to forego indulging in the comforts of static self-regard and dares to allow himself to be tossed upon the waves of life. By abandoning self-regard, he opens himself to self-possession in the engagement with the vicissitudes of life. The closing stanza confirms the play of identities that render visible the dissociations that he is performing in his act of agency: “Évanouissez-vous, divinité troublée! / Et, toi, verse à la lune, humble flûte gracile, / Une diversité de nos larmes d’argent” (“Faint away, vanish, troubled divinity! / And pour out to the moon, humble and lonely flute, / Our silvery tears in your diversity”) (1: 83; 33). Banishing the troubled divinity that refers to his Idealist, static self – the sky and its gods representing Idealism – Narcissus’ use of the respectful pronoun ‘vous’ distinguishes himself from his Idealism. Subsequently, he uses the informal “tu” to refer to himself in his resolve to face reality and his position within it. The call to make song with his flute is a more productive alternative to wasting his breath on a reflection in the water even if his songs are elegies that draw tears from his eyes.

Covering familiar ground, Valéry returns to the Narcissus figure 35 years later in “Fragments du Narcisse” (“Fragments of the Narcissus”). Foregoing a primary thematic of death in relation to reflection, Valéry explores the more traditional view of Narcissus by going down the path of self-regard in its most pejorative sense. In the process, he conveys the values of self-investment that are associated with reflection. In fact, ‘self-investment’ is too generous a word for what amounts to downright self-absorption.

J’y trouve un tel trésor d’impuissance et d’orgueil,  
Que nulle vierge enfant échappée au satyre,  
Nulle! aux fuites habiles, aux chutes sans émoi,  
Nulle des nymphes, nulle amie, ne m’attire
Comme tu fais sur l’onde, inépuisable Moi!...

There I find such a store of powerlessness and pride,
That no child virgin escaped from the satyr,
Not one! cunning in flight, unflurried in her falls,
Not one of the nymphs, no friendly one, draws me
As you do on the water, my inexhaustible Self!

(original ellipsis; 1: 126; 151)

As a treasure, Narcissus’ reflection is coded in terms of value. Curiously, the treasure that Narcissus qualifies is his powerlessness before his reflection – a powerlessness that is not a degraded form of weakness but rather the pleasure of self-abandonment. The pleasant powerlessness that Narcissus feels evades containment as the inexhaustible aspect of his self suggests. The pleasure of evading all external claims upon existence is the ideal that is associated with a self-indulgent type of reflection. Poetry, as Valéry’s verse constantly reiterates, is the sacred refuge of reflection. Taken from within a conception of language detached from reality, poetry promises a utopian space to reflective consciousness. Although the indulgence in beauty of such a utopian impulse is blissful and feels liberating, as the example of Narcissus indicates, it is on the contrary a form of historical dispossession. Indulging in the luxury of aesthetics comes at the expense of historical subjectivity.

The indulgence of self-love is so intense for Narcissus that he not only forsakes all others around him but also imagines his reflected double embodied as another independent being with whom he interacts. Imagining his reflection embodied, Narcissus dramatizes his inner life as the action and setting of a world unto himself.

Puis-je espérer de toi que de vaines alarmes?
Qu’ils sont doux les perils que nous pourrions choisir!
Se surprendre soi-même et soi-même saisir,
Nos mains s’entremêler, nos maux s’entre-détruire,
Nos silences longtemps de leurs songes s’instruire,
La même nuit en pleurs confondre nos yeux clos,
Et nos bras refermés sur les mêmes sanglots
Étreindre un même coeur, d’amour prêt à se fondre.

What can I hope from you but shadows of fright?
How sweet the risks are, could we but choose!
To take unawares and seize on one’s very self,
With intermingling hands soothing each other’s ills,
Our long silences learning each other’s dreams,
The same night of tears confounding our closed eyes,
And our locked arms over the same griefs
Pressing the same heart, ready to melt with love. (1: 128-29; 157)

Narcissus’ self-embodied world is so convincing and holds such power over him that he even goes so far as to suggest romantic surrender to his reflection: “Ce corps si pur, sait-il qu’il me puisse séduire?” (“A body thus pure, can it know it charms me?”) (1: 129; 159). He pushes further yet by going on to question rhetorically: “Et qui donc peut aimer autre chose / Que soi-même” (“And who can love any other / Than himself?”) (1: 129; 159). As if loving anyone but oneself were a preposterous prospect, he questions incredulously: what could be more pleasurable than being slave and master simultaneously? By surrendering to himself rather than to anyone else, Narcissus still manages to retain power over himself, because he safely controls the degree and quality of his own surrender.

Although Narcissus revels in reflection, he does eventually recognize the negative aspects of proud self-love. Declaring the importance that he attaches to reflection, he starkly confesses self-love: “Toi seul, ô mon corps, mon cher corps, / Je t’aime, unique objet qui me défends des morts” (“You only, body mine, my dear body / I love, the one alone who shields me from the dead!”) (1: 129; 159). The sight of his own beauty keeps Narcissus in such thrall that it performs a talismanic function against death. Elaborating upon the tie between reflection and death, Narcissus describes his reflection as a well so deep as to take on abyssal proportions: “De quelle profondeur songes-tu de m’instruire, / Habitant de l’abîme, hôte si spécieux / D’un ciel sombre ici-bas précipité des cieux?” (“Out of what deeps do you
think to teach me, / Abyss-hunter, specious denizen / Of a dark heaven flung down here from the heavens?”) (1: 129; 159). The abyss that he describes is the possibility of a disintegrated identity. Reflection threatens comfortable subjectivity with the potential for a different, disturbing identity – or none at all. Likening his semblance to a specious host conveys the kind of displacement that reflection causes; while he feels that he is in contact with another being, he knows that he is simply speaking to himself. Furthermore, by characterizing his reflected host as an inhabitant of the abyss of identity, Narcissus introduces the philosophy of dwelling into the philosophy of reflection. Far from concerns with anyone else, Narcissus displaces the private realm to the natural setting of the forest:

Adieu…Sens-tu frémir mille flottants adieux?  
Bientôt va frissonner le désordre des ombres!  
L’arbre aveugle vers l’arbre étend ses membres sombres,  
Et cherche affreusement l’arbre qui disparaît…  
Mon âme ainsi se perd dans sa propre forêt,  
Où la puissance échappe à ses formes suprêmes…  
L’âme, l’âme aux yeux noirs, touche aux ténèbres mêmes,  
Elle se fait immense et ne rencontre rien…  
Entre la mort et soi, quel regard est le sien!

Farewell…You hear a thousand floating farewells?  
Soon the confusion of shades will begin to shiver,  
Blind tree stretches to tree its somber limbs,  
Fearfully groping for the vanishing tree.  
My soul alike dislimns in its own forest,  
Where power now eludes its ultimate shapes….  
The soul, the dark-eyed soul, touches on pure gloom.  
Larger and larger it grows, and encounters nothing….  
Between death and the self, what a look is there! (original ellipses; 1: 130; 161).

Echoing Baudelaire’s “forêts de symboles” (“forests of symbols”) (Baudelaire 11), Valéry’s “propre forêt” (“own forest”) corresponds to his inner sanctum set apart from the social

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12 “Habitant de l’abîme” (Œuvres 1:129) does not translate literally as “Abyss-hunter” (Poèmes 159) but rather as “Abyss dweller”. The distinction is crucial and Valéry’s original French formulation expresses that reflection and being are matters of dwelling rather than of hunting.
realm (Oeuvres 1: 130; 161). That he stakes a claim to his own inner forest not only raises the debate regarding how boundaries are drawn between the inner and outer worlds but also opens discussion on what constitutes self-possession. However, Valéry only describes reflection in terms of obscure depths that are philosophical and psychological. The problem is not so much with examining self-possession from such perspectives; the problem lies rather in ignoring the social realm when exploring self-possession. Narcissus’ soul getting lost in his own inner forest of reflection is indicative of his detachment from reality. In Valéry’s terms, self-possession is to be found in Idealist flight from the social realm to the inner world.

Despite Valéry’s Idealism, the manner in which he layers his various perspectives is no small feat. In La métaphore dans l’oeuvre de Paul Valéry, Pascal Michelucci calls attention precisely to the multi-dimensional aspect of Valéry’s work. Posed with the variety of writings ranging from poems, dialogues, and criticism to the famed Cahiers, Valéry’s critics face an enormous unruly task. Such complexity should not suffer the abstractions of reductionism; rather, the interrelations among rhetoric, semantics, and hermeneutics need to be respected (Michelucci 14-15). Merely looking at one of the aspects does not do justice to the intersections among the many dimensions of Valéry’s works. According to Michelucci,

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13 In Habiter en poète (Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 1995), Claude Pinson describes a new conception of dwelling in French poetry since the 1970s that revises the two strains dominant until then: 1) the Heideggerian language of being; 2) the unrestrained textualism of semiotics (19). While not rejecting these two strains entirely, contemporary French poets seek a way of dwelling that acknowledges the reality of the world without being metaphysical and a language that does not sacrifice metaphor for mimesis. However, the sense of dwelling for which Pinson argues on behalf of contemporary French poets is still Idealist: “Car habiter (exister) n’est pas simplement vivre. Il nous faut des livres et des lettres pour nous arracher à l’enfermement dans le cycle répétitif des processus vitaux, pour inscrire notre habitation dans un monde commun plus durable que la simple vie” (“For dwelling (existing) is not simply living. We need books and literature to tear us from the confinement of the repetitive cycle of vital processes in order to inscribe our dwelling in a common world that is more durable than simple life”) (16; my translation). The solution for dwelling is not to provide better poems for coping with reality but rather to provide better living conditions for enjoying poetry.
the mechanical cognitive aspects of linguistics reflect, and are reflected in, the rhetorically
stylized images of the poems, cross through the semantic field, address the manner in which
the sensual and literal inform the figurative, and even cross through the philosophical: “On
apercevra par ce biais l’existence d’un réseau de métaphorisation réciproque qui, une fois
encore, brouille les cartes de la distinction un peu facile entre le littéral et le figuré, l’abstrait
et le concret, le corps et l’esprit, en une des réussites les plus achevées de l’anti-dualisme
valéryen” (“One will notice in this way the existence of a network of reciprocal
metaphorization that, once again, shuffles the deck of the facile distinction between the
literal and the figurative, the abstract and the concrete, the body and the spirit, into one of
the most fully realized successes of the Valeryan anti-dualism”) (262)\(^\text{14}\). At the most
fundamental level, these interrelations articulate Valéry’s sustained contemplation of the
relationship between the concrete and the abstract. Since metaphor requires both the
empirical powers of perception at the literal level and the transformative powers of the
imagination at the figurative level, poetry amounts to the nexus point where rhetoric,
semantics, and hermeneutics conjoin with the senses. Michelucci extrapolates from
Valéry’s reckoning with the concrete and abstract the following culminating observation:
“partout le travail du sens est «poétique»” (“the work of making sense is everywhere
‘poetic’”) (304). To the extent that Valéry was indeed absorbed throughout his career with
the manner in which the mind turns the sense data of perception into ideas, his
understanding of materialism is restricted to more empirical concerns per se. Leaning upon
the hermeneutic pillar that supports Michelucci’s interpretive structure opens an

\(^{14}\) Pascal Michelucci, La métaphore dans l’oeuvre de Paul Valéry (Bern: Peter Lang, 2003). All
translations from this work are mine.
examination of the connection between materialism in its philosophical sense and social underpinnings. Detached from any social understanding, Valéry’s considerations of reflection ignore the very constructed aspect of self-possession and how it is in play in social struggle.

In contrast to the intensifying self-indulgence that he develops throughout “Fragments du Narcisse” (“Fragments of the Narcissus”), Valéry adds a twist at the end of the poem when Narcissus breaks his reflection in the water by kissing it. While Narcissus’ gesture suggests conclusive self-delusion, Narcissus considers his gesture as an act of transformation; by merging with his identity, he does not submerge himself in illusion but rather fuses surface and depth to produce an entirely new self in an act of freedom:

Hélas! corps misérable, il est temps de s’unir…
Penche-toi…Baise-toi. Tremble de tout ton être!
L’insaisissable amour que tu me vins promettre
Passe, et dans un frisson, brise Narcisse, et fuit…

Ah, miserable body, be one without delay…
Lean, lean….And kiss. Quiver with all your being!
The unseizable love you came promising me
Passes, and in a shudder breaks Narcissus, and flees….

(Oeuvres 1: 130; Poems 161)

While the flight that Narcissus urges for himself suggests taking wing in freedom, Valéry also suggests that it may be an evasive flight inward. Rather than acting upon the world, he may be proposing withdrawing from it. That the poem breaks off with the image of flight leaves open whether Valéry found the inconclusiveness a meaningful ending or a puzzling
The notion of poetry as a charm associated with the characteristics of riddle, puzzle, enticement, and magic all fit Valéry’s poetics, as he explores them in his most famous collection of poems *Charmes* (Charms).
Leur toile spirituelle,
Je la brise, et vais cherchant
Dans ma forêt sensuelle
Les oracles de mon chant.
Être! Universelle oreille!
Toute l’âme s’appareille
A l’extrême du désir…
Elle s’écoute qui tremble
Et parfois ma lèvre semble
Son frémissement saisir.

These spiritual toils of theirs
I break, and set out seeking
Within my sensuous forest
For the oracles of my song.
Being! Universal Ear!
The soul becomes a fit compeer
For the extremes of desire….
She listens to her own tremors
And at times my lip seems
To seize upon her shudderings. (original ellipsis; 1: 112; 111, 113)

Rendering the experience of spirit in bodily terms, Valéry describes the shudder of Being
that poetry produces. Yet he is uncertain about whether or not he succeeds in capturing it.
That he chooses the image of captivity – as if Being were a prey to pounce upon – also
indicates the elusiveness of Being. Valéry goes on to further develop the prey image by
feminizing Being with a figure of ravishment:

Je ne crains pas les épines!
L’éveil est bon, même dur!
Ces idéales rapines
Ne veulent pas qu’on soit sûr:
Il n’est pour raver un monde
De blessure si profonde
Qui ne soit au ravisseur
Une féconde blessure,
Et son propre sang l’assure
D’être le vrai possesseur.

I do not shrink from the thorns!
Awaking is good, even if hard.
Such ideal depredations
Insist that one be none too sure:
For ravishing a world there is
No wound however profound
That is not to the ravisher
A fecund wound,
And his own body approves him
To be the true possessor. (1: 113; 113)

He acknowledges that the world of the spirit is a balm for the harshness of the social world and makes no illusions about awakening from the seductions of the spirit. His sang-froid is remarkable. As a cipher for the material world, the body is undeniable to the vision of inner optics, demonstrating the ready vigilance of physical sight. Valéry is at least still connected to the world of empirical material objects. Physical wounds assure possession over the body; however, the truth of self-possession within the social realm eludes the body of Valéry’s verse.

In “Poésie” (“Poesy”), Valéry develops anew the aggressive pursuit of poetry. Instead of resorting to a classical, mythological muse, he imagines his relationship to poetry by way of the archetypal figure of the mother. Depicting the mother as a caring figure who generously feeds her child, Valéry describes the limits of her maternal benevolence: “Si fort vous m’avez mordue / Que mon coeur s’est arrêté” (“You have bitten me so deep / That my heart came to a stop”) (1: 120; 133). Chiding him for his excessive appetite, the poet’s muse reveals again the limits not only on the poet’s creativity but also on his Being. The rapaciousness with which Valéry describes the poet’s relation to poetry in “Aurore” (“Dawn”) and “Poésie” (“Poesy”) demonstrates the violence involved in the desperate poetic process. Creativity itself is a violent act in the course of bringing an object into Being. In his Einführung in die Metaphysik (Introduction to Metaphysics), Heidegger describes how the creative act is a form of violence: “Der Gewalt-tätige, der Schaffende, der in das Un-
gesagte ausrückt, in das Un-gedachte einbricht, der das Ungeschehene erzwingt und das Ungeschaute erscheinen macht, dieser Gewalt-tätige steht jederzeit im Wagnis” (“The one who is violence-doing, the creative one, who sets out into the un-said, who breaks into the un-thought, who compels what has never happened and makes appear what is unseen, this violence-doing one stands at all times in daring”) (original italics; Metaphysik 170; Metaphysics 172). In contrast to the boldness with which Heidegger describes creativity, the hunger that Valéry portrays does not get satisfied. Dispossessing the poet of his inspiration, the muse confronts the poet with the error of not being able to wrest poetry forcefully.

No matter how much the poet tries to be open to creativity, the process nevertheless remains a struggle, because it is still so mysterious. Valéry’s struggle with his muse in “Poésie” (“Poesy”) is indicative of his reflection upon creativity. In “L’Insinuant” (“The Sly One”), he explores the issue further. He develops the figure of a serpent reminiscent of the Biblical one come to tempt Eve in the Garden of Eden; however, the serpent in Valéry’s poetry is not simply Judeo-Christian. He develops the serpent as a trope for the meanderings of poetic creativity:

O Courbes, méandre,
Secrets du menteur,
Est-il art plus tendre
Que cette languueur?

O Windings, meanders,
Wiles of the deceiver,
What are more tender
Than this in its slowness? (Oeuvres 1: 137; Poems 181)

As the art of lying, poetry is seductive in its indirect, twisting movements. In addition to considering the violent aspect of the creative process, Valéry supplements it with the
practice of “l’attente” (“waiting” and “anticipating”). Whereas the romantic notion of intuitive genius is based in nature as the source of inspiration, Valéry describes an inspired practice that involves anticipation tempered with consciousness.

In *Literary Polemics*, her exposé of the French Tel Quel group’s reception of Valéry’s work in the 1960s, Suzanne Guerlac argues that these theoreticians came to misrepresent his poetics (95-96). Rather than the cold rationalist that the group depicted, Valéry was drawn to the vitalism of Henri Bergson. Although Valéry eschewed pure calculation, he also rejected the sheer automatism of the surrealists. Instead, Guerlac argues, Valéry brought consciousness together with spontaneity in his creative theory of “volontarisme” (“voluntarism”):

> Valéry’s voluntarist poetics opposes perfectionist labor to a naïve poetics of inspiration, on the one hand, and to natural poetic fact on the other. This reflects the situation of symbolist modernism, which marks a transition between a lingering romanticism and an emerging avant-gardism. Effort stands against both these tendencies. It stands for spontaneity, or freedom directed from within, against the presumed exteriority of the *daimon*, on the one hand, and of chance on the other. (original italics; 112)

According to his theory of ‘volontarisme’ or ‘effort’, Valéry sought a kind of willed spontaneity. In seeking a compromise with the ancient figure of the daimon that was attributed with taking possession of the poet, Valéry answers in a voice of poetic self-possession. By waiting for poetry to strike, however, the pay-off is language at its purest:

> O Courbes, méandre,
Secrets du menteur,
Je veux faire attendre
Le mot le plus tendre.

> O Windings, meanders,
Wiles of the deceiver,
I must hold in suspense
The word the most tender. (*Oeuvres* 1: 137; *Poems* 181)
Rather than a mere image for Original Sin, the sinuousness of the serpent represents the movement of insinuation into the opening that the poet makes for writing and reading. The repeated rhymes in the opening and closing quatrains reflect the insinuation in the title, which suggests the open passage in which words and ideas enter as if undetected despite the artist’s control. Even the pejorative aspect of ‘insinuation’ – not to mention the general negative associations of the serpent as a symbol – contains the trace of the violence with which poetry emerges. Yet the experience of poetic violence is ambiguous, as its seductiveness and elusiveness make it pleasurable. At this point, confusion arises between poet and poetry as to which is hunter and which is prey. As Valéry himself observed with regards to the creative process in his essay “Première leçon du cours de poétique” (“The Opening Lecture of the Course of Poetics”): “nous nous sentons possesseurs pour être magnifiquement possédés” (“‘we feel we are possessors, whereas we are magnificently possessed’”) (Oeuvres 1: 1355; qtd. in Guerlac 105).

In contrast to reworking the well-known traditional figure of Narcissus, Valéry develops an even more elaborate poem on reflection from the perspective of the Young Fate. As with the Narcissus poems, Valéry writes La Jeune Parque (The Young Fate) from the perspective of his self-reflecting protagonist. In fact, the Young Fate’s ruminations are focused primarily on the pressure that reflection exerts upon her. Having just been rudely awoken from a dream by the sting of a snake-bite, she experiences a transformation: “J’y suivais un serpent qui venait de me mordre” (“I was tracking a snake there that had just stung me”) (Oeuvres 1: 97; Poems 71). The transformation is not simply one of insight but rather a dramatic shift in existence from demigod to mortal.

MAIS je tremblais de perdre une douleur divine!
Je baisais sur ma main cette morsure fine,
Et je ne savais plus de mon antique corps
Insensible, qu’un feu qui brûlait sur mes bords:

Adieu, pensai-je, MOI, mortelle soeur, mensonge…

But I shuddered at the loss of a divine sorrow!
On my hand I would kiss that tiny sting,
And I knew no more of my former insensible
Body, than a fire that burned along its rims:

Farewell, thought I, mortal ME, sister, falsehood….

(original ellipses; 1: 99; 75)

Opting for mortal existence, she sheds her celestial skin and adopts her own identity – with all its freedom and strife, the mark of subjectivity and mortality. In light of the conflict that she welcomes with becoming mortal, the Fate nevertheless wavers in her commitment to the self-reflection that is incumbent upon having her own identity: “Dieux! Dans ma lourde plaie une secrète soeur / Brûle, qui se préfère à l’extrême attentive” (“Gods! In my loaded wound a secret sister burns / Who loves herself more than her watchful opposite”) (1: 97; 71). Still longing for the comforts of her former celestial existence, she laments the painful striving involved in reflection as a feature of mortal existence. However, she soon regains her resolve and girds her commitment to herself: “Non, regards, tendresses… mes convives, / Peuple altéré de moi suppliant que tu vives, / Non, vous ne tiendrez pas de moi la vie!” (“No no, breaths, sighs, tender gazes… my fellows, / Race all athirst for me, begging you may live, / No, from me you will not have life”) (original ellipsis; 1: 104; 87). The Young Fate boldly announces her commitment to the new blood coursing in her veins.

In the course of questioning her resolve to maintain her identity, the Fate betrays the sting that accompanies reflection. Typical of the impasse that arises from coming upon an obstacle in the path of intellectual inquiry, the Fate questions the origins of reflection. What is reflection if not an investigation of origins?
Tu procèdes de l’âme, orgueil du labyrinthe.
Tu me portes du Coeur cette goutte contrainte,
Cette distraction de mon suc précieux
Qui vient sacrifier mes ombres sur mes yeux,
Tendre libation de l’arrière-pensée!

You come from the soul, pride of the labyrinth.
You bring me from the heart this extracted drop,
This extrusion of my own precious essence
Rising to immolate my phantoms on my eyes,
A fond libation of my thought’s reserve! (1: 104; 89)

The Fate’s inquiry into the origins of reflection bears out in the relationship between heart and mind. Rather than the mere game of intellectual puzzle-making, her self-reflection is motivated by pride in the soul or the heart. Reflection therefore, finds its basis in the emotions as much as in the intellect. Reflection on its own is analogous to a machine without fuel; desire powers the engine of self-reflection. Yet the very same passion that comes from the heart is also constraining; the image of the intoxicating nectar alludes to the dangers associated with indulgence and addiction and parallels the poet-child at the breast of his muse-mother in “Poésie” (“Poesy”). Both heart and mind reinforce one another in complicit self-reflection; when the heart calls, the mind answers.

As Valéry’s Narcissus poems indicate, reflection itself is a form of dependence, which throws into question the rational basis of self-examination. Consequently, Valéry suggests that self-invested emotion in La Jeune Parque (The Young Fate) is the basis of mortal existence. Guerlac reinforces the points of Valéry’s poetics of willed spontaneity as a form of narcissism:

the poetics of a “defense against automatism,” or of resistance to the facile, implies a resistance to all outside determinations. This is the thrust of Valéry’s conceit: where Kant saw the moral law, Mallarmé saw poetry – a Poetics! The poetics of effort, and the rigor of refusal, coincide with the law of genius, that is, with a refusal of any rule other than the law one gives oneself. (Guerlac 112)
In response to the risk of becoming possessed by the reactionary determinations of ideology, Valéry insists upon the merits of critical judgement. The conscious reflection by which he abides promises a measure of subjective assertion; however, the political implication of the Kantian “resistance to all outside determinations” amounts to mere Idealism by not accounting for objective historical conditions (112). Dialogue with the outside world is rejected in favour of interior monologue.

By rejecting the social realm for intellectual autonomy, Valéry substitutes being possessed aesthetically for being possessed ideologically. Artworks, he asserts unhesitatingly: “nous contraindient à les désirer d’autant plus que nous les possédons davantage” (“‘force us to desire them all the more’”) (1: 1350; qtd. in Guerlac 124). While the spell of reactionary ideology is to be resisted at all costs, somehow the charms of pure poetry are acceptable. Questioned socially, the Fate’s self-investment poses a problem for continuity and social connectedness. “Hélas! de mes pieds nus qui trouvera la trace / Cessera-t-il longtemps de ne songer qu’à soi?” (“Ah, whoever finds the print of my bare feet, / Will he cease for long to think only of himself?”) (Oeuvres 1: 105; Poems 91). In attempting to seize herself through reflection, the Fate loses herself. With the view that individuals are fundamentally self-concerned, the Fate worries that anyone coming after her will not notice her mark on the world, because they will devote too much time upon their own self-reflection, rather than on contemplating her or anyone else.

In contrast to the Fate’s prior celestial self-satisfaction, mortal existence gives her the contradictory struggle for fulfillment that she desires. In the divine realm of the sun, she remarks upon the existence of immediate gratification:

Je regrette à demi cette vaine puissance…
Une avec le désir, je fus l’obéissance
Imminente, attachée à ces genoux polis;
De mouvements si prompts mes voeux étaient remplis
Que je sentais ma cause à peine plus agile!

I half regret that vain potency….
At one with desire, I was the imminent
Obedience implicit in these smooth knees;
My wishes answered by such instant movements
I felt my cause itself scarcely more agile. (original ellipsis; 1: 100; 77)

Able to satisfy her desires effortlessly in the divine world, she is ready to pounce on her prey. Desire and purpose were simultaneous with action and satisfaction in her former existence. Despite such a paradisiacal way of being, the Young Fate nevertheless laments feeling imprisoned by such a comfortable life and echoes the ennui of such an existence: “Puis dans le dieu brillant, captive vagabonde, / Je m’ébranlais brûlante et foulais le sol plein” (“Then in the god’s splendor, a straying prisoner, / Burning I moved, pressed the solid ground”) (1: 99; 77). Opposed to the philosophical tradition of homeliness in the divine sphere, the Young Fate instead describes existence in the realm of the heavens as a condition of homelessness. The elimination of the space between desire and satisfaction is ironically too boring for her.

Alternatively, the Fate takes pleasure in pursuing desire. Fulfillment is only truly satisfying if it requires struggle, the Fate suggests. Furthermore, she records no illusions about the suffering with which frustration would irritate her:

Je n’attendais pas moins de mes riches déserts
Qu’un tel enfantement de fureur et de tresse:
Leurs fonds passionnés brillent de sécheresse
Si loin que je m’avance et m’altère pour voir
De mes enfers pensifs les confins sans espoir.

I expected no less from my rich deserts
Than such a pregnancy of fire and tresses;
Their passionate distances glitter with barrenness
The further I press, dry with the thirst to see
The hopeless confines of my thought’s infernos. (1: 98; 73)

Described as a desert in contrast to the empire of the sun, the Young Fate’s mortal existence of want nevertheless contains the wealth of the abundance of want. As a landscape of being, the rich or fertile deserts compose such an existential wasteland as to warrant the hopelessness of being imprisoned. The Fate is so self-absorbed that she fetishizes her sense of confinement and the misery stemming from her mortal longing. Her fetishism is even more prevalent in her discussing the Idealist sphere of the sun and in developing the sense of being alienated from it.

Oh! Combien peut grandir dans ma nuit curieuse
De mon Coeur séparé la part mystérieuse,
Et de sombres essais s’approfondir mon art!…
Loin des purs environs, je suis captive.
Ah! how much may it grow in my questing night,
That secret half of my divided heart,
And my skill grow deeper from obscure probings!…
Far from pure atmospheres, I am a captive. (original ellipsis; 1: 100; 79)

Despite giving her satisfaction in striving after that for which she longed, the Fate feels imprisoned by that very same struggling in her mortal existence. What was once a clearly illuminated space now becomes the obscure territory of the heart, which requires fumbling blindly in order to gain ever more the slightest glimpses of it. Again, the heart is the repository of mystery, which Valéry more clearly codes as the Idealist realm, as reflected in the image of the azure sky, Mallarmé’s Symbolist cipher for the Idealist realm to which symbols correspond: “Mon coeur bat! mon coeur bat! mon sein brûle et m’entraîne! / Ah! qu’il s’enfle, se gonfle et se tende, ce dur / Très doux témoin captif de mes réseaux d’azur” (“My heart beats! It beats! My burning breast impels me! / Ah let it swell, dilate and stretch, that hard, / Too soft witness imprisoned in my nets of azure”) (1: 103; 87). Marked with the
memory of the heavenly realm of the sun, the Fate’s heart dwells in its pure light; her heart beats and swells with Idealism. As the seat of authenticity, the heart gives Idealism the aura of being natural; in contrast to the intellect as the source of reason, the heart gives Idealism greater legitimacy. This kind of authenticity is equated with the Kantian autonomy that Guerlac identifies in Valéry’s poetics. Valéry vouches for the language of pure poetry as belonging to Kant’s transcendental realm: “Une parole intime, où il n’y a point d’effets ni de stratagèmes, étant notre propriété la plus proche et la plus certaine, quoiqu’elle nous appartienne si étroitement, ne peut pas ne pas être universelle” (“‘an intimate speech where there are no effects or stratagems; as our most intimate and most sure possession [propriété]…[it] can only be universal’”) (original brackets, italics, and ellipsis; Oeuvres 1: 789-90; qtd. in Guerlac 108). Imagining a language free of external manipulation and contamination, Valéry makes of pure poetry the means of self-possession as a form of resistance to the demands of the outside world. The open space that he clears is the property that he claims as his own and that each poet must likewise claim. In the Fate’s ambivalent relation to both the Idealist and earthly modes of existence, Valéry forwards his own Idealist longings; he tries to reconcile the inability of satisfying earthly needs with the idealized struggle for satisfying those needs. As part of having inhabited the divine and mortal spheres, the Fate holds a privileged view of the world: “Mais je sais ce que voit mon regard disparu; / Mon oeil noir est le seuil d’infernales demeures” (“But I know what my vanished look can see; / My darkened eye is the door to infernal abodes!”) (Oeuvres 1: 100; Poems 79). The dark eye that the Fate describes corresponds to the ability for negative vision that arises from existing in the mortal world and confronting death as the ultimate form of negativity. Demarcating the limits of such vision, her black eye enables her to see the
darkness of mortal existence; overturning the view of the perfect world of divine existence, she still beholds the boredom of immortality in memory.

Upon his return to verse after the twenty year caesura in his career as a poet, Valéry managed to reconcile himself to his emotional side. While Valéry had turned away from affect after the “Nuit de Gênes” (“Night of Genoa”), La Jeune Parque (The Young Fate) records his attempt to view heart and mind in relation to one another rather than to keep them at odds with one another. As her reflections develop, the Fate emphasizes the psychological aspect of her transformation over the divine/mortal dichotomy. In a familiar theme of authenticity, she complains of having become another being unrecognizable to herself:

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Au milieu de mes bras, je me suis faite une autre…
Qui s’aliène?…Qui s’envole?…Qui se vautre?…
A quel détour caché, mon Coeur s’est-il fondu?
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Amid my own arms, I became another…. Who is estranged?…Who is vanishing?…Wallowing?…

In what blind turning did my heart melt away? (original ellipses; 1: 109; 99)

According to the Fate’s own estimation, the loss that she laments is particularly one of the heart rather than of the mind. As she continues, however, she elaborates upon a productive relationship between heart and mind rather than simply pitting the two against each other. In recognition of the detour that she previously took in her life, she tries to summon the lost part of herself.

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Viens, mon sang, viens rougir la pâle circonstance
Qu’ennoblissait l’azur de la sainte distance,
Et l’insensible iris du temps que j’adorai!… [my ellipsis]
Et de mon sein glacé rejaillisse la voix
Que j’ignorais si rauque et d’amour si voilée… [original ellipsis]
Le col charmant cherchant la chasseresse ailée
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Come, blood, redden the circumstantial pallor
Made noble once by the blue of holy distance,
And the infinite slow iris of the time I loved!…. [my ellipsis]
And from my icy breast let there break the voice
I did not know was so hoarse, so veiled with love…. [original ellipsis]
The charming neck seeking the winged huntress. (1: 101-102; 83)

Linked to voice, her blood and heart form the seat not only of the passions but also of her authentic identity. From out of what had become a cold heart, she tries to summon the lost voice of life that she had silenced. The emotional repression that she describes is crucial, since her heart is what she considers to be the basis of her authentic identity. While her heart contracted previously, she is now ready to relax. Presumably, she feared not being able to control her emotions, as was the case with Valéry in his youth. However, now she is confident to give the voice of her heart the ability to speak, because she is now in better control of it. But what has changed? “Il faut céder aux voeux des mortes couronnées / Et prendre pour visage un souffle…” (“The pleas of dead crowned women, give way to them, / Let the face become a breathing”) (1: 109; 101). Associated with death, reflection demands recognition of the passage of time. Consequently, existence requires surrender to the shifts within the self that occur over time. “Abandonnne-toi vive aux serpents, aux trésors… / Dors toujours! Descends, dors toujours! Descends, dors, dors!” (“Give yourself up alive to the dragons, treasures…. / Sleep still! Down, sleep still! Down sleep, sleep!”) (1: 109; 101). The serpents and treasures to which she is referring belong not only to the realm of death but also to the trials of life. Paradoxically, such self-abandonment is the way to self-possession.

The paradox of self-possession is particularly evident in the cognitive relation between heart and mind. In her final musings, the Young Fate maintains devotion to the sun, the element from her former divine existence that represents reason and reflection. However, she does not decide to forsake mortal existence with longings for a return to her
divine life. In doing so, she is still able to maintain a commitment to the passions and desires of her mortal side:

Et sur toute ma peau que morde l’âpre éveil,
Alors, malgré moi-même, il le faut, ô soleil,
Que j’adore mon Coeur où tu te viens connaître,
Doux et puissant retour du délire de naître,

Feu vers qui se soulève une vierge de sang
Sous les espèces d’or d’un sein reconnaissant!

All my skin, stung away by the harsh shock,
Then, even against my will, I must, oh Sun,
Worship this heart where you seek to know yourself,
Strong, sweet renewal of birth’s own ecstasy,

Fire to which a virgin of blood uplifts herself
Beneath the gold coinage of a grateful breast! (1: 110; 105)

Like the snake-bite, the sun gives the sting of consciousness that raises self-awareness; through the efforts of the mind, reflection painfully awakens the Fate from self-delusion. Yet, the mind is not in a vacuum, as Valéry had perhaps previously thought in such works as the archetypal Monsieur Teste and ultimately in his twenty-year turn to non-poetic forms of inquiry. Rather than repressing the heart, the mind finds its material for reflection in the heart. In Keith Oatley’s recent cognitive research into the emotions, in fact, the heart acts as a kind of alarm to signal changes in behaviour or invite the mind to reflection (Schemes 51). Such a melding of heart and mind is the way in which the Fate argues that being reborn is possible. Instead of remaining imprisoned by the self-investments of the heart or mind that harden and lead to the iciness that she laments, reflection enables constant transformation. According to the Fate, self-possession is attained in the reflective heart.

What Valéry offers with his Idealism is one half of the problem of self-possession, because it is primarily a formal exploration of Being. Of course the reflective heart is
necessary, but to what extent does ruminating upon its relations and transformations provide substantial change? In other words, how can heart and mind gain control if they do not get a foothold in the world? In a telling admission, Valéry confesses to where his interest lies: “Ce n’est ni le nouveau ni le génie qui me séduisent, – mais la possession de soi. – Et elle revient à se douer du plus grand nombre de moyens d’expression, pour atteindre et saisir ce Soi et n’en pas laisser perdre les puissances natives, faute d’organes pour les servir” (“It is not the new or genius which attracts me, – but self-possession. – And it comes down to equipping oneself with the greatest number of expressions, to reach and grasp this Self and not let its native powers escape for lack of organs with which to grasp them”’) (Oeuvres 2: 646; qtd. in Gifford and Stimpson 69). Clearly, Valéry’s concern with self-possession is restricted to the realm of language. Because the mind and the heart are both susceptible to the voicings of the world, Valéry’s alternative of an autonomous voice speaking in its own realm amounts to plugging his ears and holding the kind of soliloquy that his many Narcissus figures only ever achieve. The challenge that Valéry’s characters fail to confront is to take possession of themselves not by fleeing from the world but by engaging with it.
Chapter Three: “Einklänge ins Allgemeine”

(“To be in harmony with the prevailing voice”)

Rilke was not an avid reader. Despite feeling inadequate over his lack of scholarly training, he did not feel compelled to undertake any extensive research projects. Rather than looking for inspiration in books, Rilke sought direction from people, experiences, and other art objects, such as the paintings, sculptures, and buildings that he encountered over the course of his many travels. After having left Prague for Paris in his youth for instance, he worked as Rodin’s secretary and learned not only about art objects but also about the need to work assiduously. Rilke adopted the master sculptor’s strict work ethic, which Rodin had encapsulated in the mantra: “‘Il faut toujours travailler’” (Andreas-Salomé/Rilke 115; 158). In constant struggle with himself to write, Rilke would draw from Rodin’s mantra the way to get control over his creative self. In fact, Rodin’s influence on Rilke was so great as to draw the curve in the trajectory of his creative self-possession.

When Rilke did supplement his apprenticeship under Rodin with books, he would be able to draw a wealth of insight and speculation from them with his finely tuned poetic intuition. In a letter from May 12, 1904 to his other spiritual beacon Lou Andreas-Salomé, Rilke addresses one of the primary problems that he associated with the ephemerality of words: “jene, Gothik, die, bildend, so unvergeßliches und weites zu geben hatte, sollte sie nicht auch eine plastische Sprache gehabt und geschaffen haben, Worte wie Statuen und Zeilen wie Säulenreihen? Ich weiß nichts, nichts davon. Nichts, so fühle ich, von allem was ich wissen möchte” (“doesn’t it seem that the Gothic period, with its myriad and unforgettable accomplishments in architecture and the visual arts, must have also possessed

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16 Rodin’s mantra translates roughly as “one must always work”.
and created a sculptural *language*, in which words were like statues and lines like rows of pillars? I know nothing of it, nothing whatsoever. Nothing, I feel, of all I would like to know”) (original italics; Andreas-Salomé/Rilke 161; 117). Rilke’s speculation on Gothic aesthetics derives precisely from his work with Rodin. While the sculptor produced tangible objects out of stone, Rilke struggled with the invisible matter of breath as his own medium. His attempt to bring to words the same tangibility that Rodin brought to his materials therefore corresponds to his speculation upon the lapidary qualities of Gothic literature. Rilke’s speculation upon Gothic literature raises one of the most fundamental mysteries of poetry, namely how the poet sculpts breath.

In his mind, Rilke would not successfully sculpt breath until completing the _Duino Elegies_ and _Sonnets to Orpheus_ towards the end of his life. The work would take a tremendous amount of time. In fact, time plays a significant role in his verse; not only is Rilke sculpting breath, he is also trying to sculpt “Zwischenräume der Zeit” (“time’s interstices”) (Sämtliche 752; _Elegies/Sonnets_ 143). In the effort to do so, he had to overcome the markers of time and identity. More specifically, he had to acknowledge the passing aspects of his identity by uniting different moments together, cancelling their value, and subsequently re-investing them with new meaning. Throughout most of his life, Rilke demonstrated a restless wanderlust and an insatiable promiscuity that reveal his striving after such personal transformations. After leading the life of a wanderer for most of his years, Rilke finally withdrew from the world to devote his attention exclusively to his writing. On July 4, 1921, he and his companion, the painter, Baladine “Merline” Klossowska, went on an expedition to the Valais region of Switzerland where he would find the Château de Muzot in the town of Sierre (Engel 405).

It lies about twenty minutes quite steep above Sierre, in a less arid, happy rusticity with many springs tumbling through it,—with views into the valley, over to the mountain slopes and into most wonderful depths of sky…. this is the perfect type of the medieval manoir as it still survives everywhere here…. it has all kinds of promise and attraction for me, with its old chests, its oak table of 1600 and the old dark beam ceiling into which is carved the date MDCXVII; when I say attraction, that is nevertheless not accurate: for actually all of Muzot, while it somehow holds me, yet also drives a kind of worry and oppression into my spirit; as far as possible, I have familiarized myself with its oldest history. (my ellipses; Briefe 2: 166-67; Letters 2: 252-53)

Within a few weeks, he would move into the château on July 26 of that year. Subsequently, Merline would return to Berlin at the beginning of November, and Rilke would be alone except for the company of his housekeeper, Frida Baumgarten. While his new dwelling would push and pull on his spirit at first, he would eventually turn the tension into verse.

Upon Merline’s departure, Rilke began preparing himself for his new phase of creativity. On January 28, 1922 began the outpouring that would result in a staggering number of his most beloved poems. Besides a number of remarkable, uncollected poems, Rilke took up in this period his masterful late works. In a mere four days (February 2-5), he would compose twenty-five sonnets, nearly the entire first sequence of the Sonnets to

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Orpheus (Engel 405). Shortly thereafter, he would take up again the Duino Elegies, which he had begun in 1912 but left uncompleted until now. In just eight days (7-14 February), he finished the elegies. Later, he would continue the rest of the first part of the sonnets and complete the second series within nine days (15-23 February). In just under a month, Rilke had created his two most mature collections of poetry at the end of a career that spanned more than thirty years. By secluding himself at Muzot castle, Rilke finally reached the hard-won presence of mind that had eluded him for so many years.

His efforts would come to fruition in the unity between his divided self, which he describes in the Duino Elegies and the Sonnets to Orpheus, the collections that register his success at living in Being in his poetry.

EIN Gott vermags. Wie aber, sag mir, soll
ein Mann ihm folgen durch die schmale Leier?
Sein Sinn ist Zwiespalt. An der Kreuzung zweier
Herzwege steht kein Tempel für Apoll.

A god can do it. But tell me, will you, how
a man can trail him through the narrow lyre?
His mind is forked. Where two heart’s [sic] arteries
intersect, there stands no temple for Apollo.

(Sämtliche 732; Elegies/Sonnets 89)

Although he did not believe in gods from any organized religions, Rilke did believe in a kind of demi-god status accorded to the artist. According to W. L. Graff, one of his biographers, Rilke considered that no god exists per se, but rather the artist is the maker of god (Graff 325). God is the artist’s own creation. Rilke found his inspiration for his notion of divinity in the demi-god, Orpheus, who upon being torn apart by the maenads, would survive through his song, which emanated from all things (249). Rilke’s obsession with extracting the essences from the icons and religious places that he visited during his many travels throughout Europe, Russia, Egypt, and elsewhere suggests the way in which he
listened to things with an Orphic ear in the course of transforming himself into a poetic demi-god. The trajectory of Rilke’s career amounts to the struggle to become a modern-day Orphic figure. What he collected on his artistic and religious pilgrimages were experiences and images of Being from which he would educate himself in representing the invisible facets of existence in language. By considering himself a poetic demi-god, Rilke reveals the conscious recognition of his potential as an agent of his own fate. Although Rilke is primarily concerned with fate in terms of his poetic and existential development, he captures the key component of subjectivity in terms of agency. The subjective conception of agency provides an understanding of self-possession: the self in question is not the fixed substance of antiquity but rather the fluid potential of modernity.

At the mid-point of the nineteenth century, Marx addressed the question of subjectivity in the historical sense. In the “Thesen über Feuerbach” (“Theses on Feuerbach”), he describes historical subjectivity: “Der Hauptmangel alles bisherigen Materialismus (den Feuerbachschen mit eingerechnet) ist, daß der Gegenstand, die Wirklichkeit, Sinnlichkeit nur unter der Form des Objekts oder der Anschauung gefaßt wird; nicht aber als sinnlich menschliche Tätigkeit, Praxis; nicht subjektiv” (“The chief defect of all previous materialism (that of Feuerbach included) is that things [Gegenstand], reality, sensuousness, are conceived only in the form of the object or of contemplation, but not as sensuous human activity, practice, not subjectively”) (original brackets, italics, and parentheses; “Thesen” 5; “Theses” 3). Any attempt to shape the course of society and history is an act of historical subjectivity. Above all, Marx suggests how intervening in history can be done consciously. Such conscious subjective action is the response to given objective limits. As his various letters attest, Rilke sought throughout most of his career the
aesthetic and philosophical equivalent of subjectivity in the Duineser Elegien (Duino Elegies) and Die Sonette an Orpheus (The Sonnets to Orpheus). Even mid-career though, particularly with the Neue Gedichte (New Poems), Rilke saw the object simply as a thing from which an essence ought to be extracted in the manner that Marx describes the limited view of objectivity. However, his struggle to develop the Orphic transformation is precisely the means by which he came to recognize the manner in which the object is constituted as the result of human endeavour. Despite also critiquing modern alienation, Rilke nevertheless restricted his subjectivity to the existential and poetic realms rather than providing a proper historical understanding of it in the Marxist sense. His strategy for coping with the effects of modern alienation trespassing upon the territory of Being meant securing the boundaries of his poetic dwelling.

By mimicking Orpheus, Rilke raises the problem of effectively capturing the traces of distant, long-past existences. In the seventh elegy, he indicates the need to rouse from history the traces of spiritual places and to be affected by them:

Ja, wo noch eins übersteht,
ein einst gebetetes Ding, ein gedientes, geknietes –,
hält es sich, so wie es ist, schon ins Unsichtbare hin.
Viele gewahrens nicht mehr, doch ohne den Vorteil,
daß sie’s nun innerlich baun, mit Pfeilern und Statuen, größer!

Yes, even where
one single thing that was prayed to, served, and knelt to
once, survives, it endures just as it is, in the invisible.
Many don’t see it anymore and miss the chance to build it again,
complete with pillars and statues, greater than ever, within.

(original italics; Sämtliche 711; Elegies/Sonnets 51)

According to Graff, Rilke uses images of gods and angels as secularized metaphors for human ideals, foils for human imperfection, experiences of Being. As an image for achieving creativity in Being, passing through the lyre in Sonnet 1.3 expresses the kind of
existential experience that Rilke sought to conjure and render visible from the spiritual relics and lands that he visited. However, the passage of time and the waning of care split heart and mind, which impedes the poet from reaching the kind of existential flow necessary to authentic creativity. Reflection, rather than being an empowering tool in creative hands, is instead an alienating impediment in this case. Just as Rilke’s image of the forked mind in Sonnet 1.3 captures the English expression “being of two minds,” so can the two intersecting arteries translate conceptually as “being of two hearts” (32; 89).

The division that affected Rilke throughout his career until his stay at Muzot took shape in the images of Earth and Angel in the Duineser Elegien (Duino Elegies). Despite the traces of divinity in his Idealism, Rilke insisted upon staying grounded in earthly concerns. However, he was not very successful in practice. Shortly after marrying sculptor Clara Westhoff with whom he had his daughter Ruth, Rilke abandoned both in order to devote himself to his art. He was so opposed to family life that he even registers his bitterness at his friend Paula Modersohn-Becker for having renounced her career as a painter to return to her husband after a period of estrangement (Graff 237). She eventually died in childbirth at the age of thirty-one. In addition to his unrelenting devotion to poetry, Rilke’s renunciation of his family amounted to a convenient excuse to avoid his own quotidian responsibilities. In turn, the Angel functioned as a figure around which he could gather all his anxieties about his life, as well as the ideals that he felt exceeded his grasp. At the beginning of the Duineser Elegien (Duino Elegies), he announces immediately the Angel’s harrowing power:

WER, wenn ich schriee, hörte mich denn aus der Engel Ordnungen? und gesetzt selbst, es nähme einer mich plötzlich ans Herz: ich verginge von seinem stärkeren Dasein. Denn das Schöne ist nichts
als des Schrecklichen Anfang, den wir noch grade ertragen,
und wir bewundern es so, weil es gelassen verschmäht,
uns zu zerstören. Ein jeder Engel ist schrecklich.

And if I cried, who’d listen to me in those angelic
orders? Even if one of them suddenly held me
to his heart, I’d vanish in his overwhelming
presence. Because beauty’s nothing
but the start of terror we can hardly bear,
and we adore it because of the serene scorn
it could kill us with. Every angel’s terrifying.

(Sämtliche 685; Elegies/Sonnets 5)

Rilke’s every aspiration existed not as a beacon towards which he could direct himself, but
as a fear that weighed him down on his path. For lack of a better coping strategy for his
anxieties, Rilke deploys the Angel as a force from which he can distance himself from his
fears and weaknesses.

Besides serving as a cipher for his problems, the Angel also represents the invisible,
existential, or “spiritual” character of earthly things. According to Rilke, the task of the poet
involves extrapolating the invisible spirit of things and rendering them visible in language:

Der >Engel< der Elegien hat nichts mit dem Engel des christlichen Himmels
zu tun (eher mit den Engelgestalten des Islam)…Der Engel der Elegien ist
dasjenige Geschöpf, in dem die Verwandlung des Sichtbaren in Unsichtbares,
die wir leisten, schon vollzogen erscheint. Für den Engel der Elegien sind
alle vergangenen erscheint. Für den Engel der Elegien sind alle vergangenen
Türme und Paläste existent, weil längst unsichtbar, und die noch bestehenden
Türme und Brücken unseres Daseins schon unsichtbar, obwohl noch (für uns)
körperhaft dauernd. Der Engel der Elegien ist dasjenige Wesen, das dafür
einsteht, im Unsichtbaren einen höheren Rang der Realität zu erkennen.

The “angel” of the elegies has nothing to do with the angel of the Christian
heaven (rather with the angel figures of Islam)…The angel of the Elegies is
that creature in whom the transformation of the visible into the invisible,
which we are accomplishing, appears already consummated. For the angel of
the Elegies all past towers and palaces are existent, because long invisible,
and the still standing towers and bridges of our existence already invisible,
although (for us) still persisting physically. The angel of the Elegies is that
being who vouches for the recognition in the invisible of a higher order of
reality.—Hence “terrible” to us, because we, its lovers and transformers, do
still cling to the visible. (original ellipsis and italics; Briefe 2: 377-78; Letters 2: 375-76)

Hovering in a realm that contains the invisible essences of the past, the Angel represents the secular analogue to figures in a divine realm. Raised to the top of Rilke’s hierarchy, the Angel’s realm of essences is foreboding due to its elusiveness. Yet the Angel performs two functions. By gathering all the greater forces into the figure of the Angel, Rilke remains beholden to them in his weakness. The border separating the two realms therefore implies the alienation between his inner and outer worlds; however, Rilke cannot remain internally paralysed by external demands. Alienation invites recognition of the distant, frightening realm. Reckoning with the invisible essences of the visible earthly things opens up the opportunity for transforming them into new forms. Conflict provides opportunities for resourcefulness.

Necessary to poetic creativity is reconciliation between the contradictions of heart and mind, invisible and visible. Such contradictions form impasses along the path of

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18 In The Symbolist Movement in Literature, rev. ed. (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1919), Arthur Symons describes the nineteenth-century transformation of the theological, metaphysical invisible into the literary realm: “Here, then, in this revolt against exteriority, against rhetoric, against a materialistic tradition; in this endeavour to disengage the ultimate essence, the soul, of whatever exists and can be realized by the consciousness; in this dutiful waiting upon every symbol by which the soul of things can be made visible; literature, bowed down by so many burdens, may at last attain liberty, and its authentic speech. In attaining this liberty, it accepts a heavier burden; for in speaking to us so intimately, so solemnly, as only religion had hitherto spoken to us, it becomes itself a kind of religion, with all the duties and responsibilities of the sacred ritual” (Symons 9). The sublimation of the theological into the aesthetic marks the continued need to reckon with manifesting the invisible elements of existence in visible forms; replacing the symbols of religion with those of art served the purpose. However, the extent to which such essences remain conceptualized in metaphysical terms requires further materialist critique. Symons himself wavers between Idealism and materialism by still speaking of essences and the soul while aptly suggesting the process by which the voice of consciousness replaces that of God in the dialogue with invisible realities. The incomplete task that the nineteenth-century undertook and that still remains is to understand the invisible in a scientific and secular manner. Once having turned away from his initial theological studies, Heidegger developed a phenomenology that provides a secularized understanding of existence. The secularizing element of Heidegger’s phenomenology defines his existentialism; he is concerned with the logic of existence rather than the logic of divinity. Rilke’s Angel is his own poetic analogue to Heidegger’s phenomenological impulse and the Symbolist push to rendering the invisible visible in word and image.
creativity. The impasses are the result of dwelling, in the pejorative sense of the term. Achieving dwelling in the existential sense, however, requires removing the petty investments that form obstacles.

Gesang, wie du ihn lehrst, ist nicht Begeh,
nicht Werbung um ein endlich noch Erreichtes;
Gesang ist Dasein. Für den Gott ein Leichtes.
Wann aber *sind* wir? Und wann wendet *er*

an unser Sein die Erde und die Sterne?
Dies *ists* nicht, Jüngling, daß du liebst, wenn auch
die Stimme dann den Mund dir aufstößt, – lerne

vergessen, daß du aufsangst. Das verrinnt.

Singing as you teach us, isn’t desiring,
nor luring something conquered in the end.
Singing is Being. For a god, it’s almost nothing.
But when do we exist? And when does he spend

the earth and stars on our being? Young man,
your loving isn’t it, even if your mouth
is pried open by your voice – learn

... to forget your impulsive song. Soon it will end.

(Rilke’s message to his addressee indicates that poetry depends upon not investing value in anything other than pure Being. Free from the preoccupation of desire, the poet must recognize the distinction between Being and having. Written into Rilke’s poetics is a philosophy of value that eschews ownership. The kind of ownership that he describes comes from the heart that invests itself in experience. Such investments are divided not only according to conflicting desires themselves but also conflicting desires at odds in time. Rilke reminds his addressee that the song will end soon, which suggests the proximity of death and makes clear that his poetics is equally an existential philosophy. In turn, Rilke is literal in his rejection of values that are not strictly existential.)
Towards the beginning of his career, Rilke had owned a house, which he had initially found comforting. Gradually however, the responsibility of home-ownership became nothing but a burden. In a common refrain from his letters of 1903, he complains how owning a home had actually impinged upon maintaining the freedom of spirit that he so cherished:

Und ich glaube, Lou, so muß es sein; dieses ist ein Leben und das andere ein anderes, und wir sind nicht gemacht zwei Leben zu haben; als ich mich immer nach einer Wirklichkeit sehnte, nach einem Haus, nach Menschen, die weithinsichtbar zu mir gehörten, nach dem Täglichen -: wie irrt ich da. Seit ich es habe, fällt es von mir ab, eins nach dem anderen. Was war mir mein Haus anderes, als eine Fremde, für die ich arbeiten sollte, und was sind mir die nahen Menschen mehr als ein Besuch, der nicht gehen will. Wie verliere ich mich jedesmal, wenn ich ihnen etwas sein will; wie gehe ich von mir fort und kann zu ihnen nicht kommen und bin zwischen ihnen und mir unterwegs und so auf der Reise, daß ich nicht weiß wo ich bin und wie viel Meines mit mir und erreichbar ist. (original italics; Andreas-Salomé/Rilke 87-8; 72)

And I believe, Lou, that it must be so; this is one life and the other is a different one, and we are not made to have two lives; back when I was always pining for a reality, for a house, for people who visibly belonged to me, for the everyday world -: how wrong I was then. For now that it is mine it keeps falling away from me, piece by piece. What was my house other than a stranger for whom I was expected to work, and what are those close to me other than a guest who doesn’t want to leave? How I lose myself every time I try to be something for them; I depart so far from myself and yet I cannot arrive at them and remain in transit between them and myself and so lost in journeying that I don’t know where I am nor how much of mine is with me and reachable. (original italics; Andreas-Salomé/Rilke 87-8; 72)

Upon entering the life of domesticity, Rilke soon found that it was not the kind of existence that he wanted. Once he rejected the life of house and family, he devoted himself fully to poetry. The split in identity that he indicates derives from home-ownership. While private property ought to provide the security of dwelling, it in fact amounts to a burden for Rilke. By referring to his house as “ein Fremde” (“a stranger”), he captures the sense of alienation that private property produces (87-8; 72). The dwelling that he pursues turns out not to be a
house, but the existential dwelling of poetry as encapsulated in Heidegger’s formulation: “Die Sprache ist das Haus des Seins” (“Language is the house of being”) (“Brief” 313; “Letter” 239). Although Rilke’s choice is an Idealist one, he nevertheless holds no attachment to private property. In fact, he eventually led a nomadic life as he showed a great appreciation for the many places to which he travelled. Travel destinations included not only a number of European countries, such as Germany, France, and Sweden but also Russia, Algeria, and Egypt. Without a stable income, Rilke relied upon the many friends and admirers for accommodations when he travelled; his general means of subsistence, as indicated by his crucial stays at the castles of Duino and Muzot, came from the support of patrons.

In questioning where to find Being, Rilke points to the difficulty of finding it. Although hovering within the realm of Being is possible, sustaining it without interruption is elusive. The approach must be won ever anew. While Rilke attaches special value to Being by insistently searching for it, he simultaneously suspends its value: “In Wahrheit singen, ist ein andrer Hauch. / Ein Hauch um nichts. Ein Wehn im Gott. Ein Wind” (“True singing is a different kind of breath. / A breath about nothing. A gust in the god. A wind”) (Sämtliche 732; Elegies/Sonnets 89). Rather than investing value in a given subject or form, Rilke’s poetic call to Being does not necessarily deny the importance of form and content but rather puts the emphasis upon the liveliness aroused in the moment of composition. The poem may very well be “about something,” but that is not what most concerns Rilke. Reflection in the sense of contemplating an idea or even oneself, as it is for Valéry, is not the basis of Rilke’s poetics. As the standard by which he measures poetry, Being in the moment is his existential index of choice. Without heaven as the measure of existence, Rilke turns to
poetry as its proxy. That Rilke locates Being in poetry indicates how its roots are buried in other areas of life. In contrast to the religious space of Being, the poetic space serves as a secular alternative; however, it risks being an Idealist space detached from the material conditions of existence. As the basis of reflection, negativity renders void the balance sheet of emotional investment. As opposed to the intellectual, identity-oriented dialectic that Hegel developed, Rilke explores an existential dialectic in states of Being rather than in meaning proper. Nevertheless, the negativity with which Rilke describes poetry characterizes the purity of Idealism. Whether or not such purity is tenable as a guide for existence forms the basis of debate in Rilke’s poetics.

Incorporating negativity into his existential dialectic, Rilke polarizes Being with death, which gives life and poetry meaning.

NUR wer die Leier schon hob
auch unter Schatten,
darf das unendliche Lob
ahnend erstatten.

Only one who’s also raised
the lyre among shades
may return unending
praise with warning. (736; 101)

Given the task of praise, which is a form of ascribing value, the poet must acknowledge that poetry is also a means of confronting conflict. Mixed with praise, the warning of poetry refers most explicitly to death, as the reference to Orpheus as the figure that had experience of the underworld indicates. At a more fundamental level, Rilke contemplates death as an image for negativity, which counters the investment of love as it appears in the form of poetic praise. All things must pass and reckoning with that eventuality is crucial to living an existence in Being. Rilke’s dialectic of reflection involves a process of valuing and de-
valuing. Living involves making emotional and existential investments that lose their value over time; recognizing their lost value is necessary to continuing with the course of existence. A cipher for the end of the various existential attachments, death represents the de-valuing of existential investment in all its forms. Keeping death in view as the image for existential de-valuing sustains vigilance to leading life in Being. Living with such a double perspective reaches Rilke’s version of reflection: “Mag auch die Spiegelung im Teich / oft uns verschwimmen: / Wisse das Bild” (“Although the pool’s reflection / blurs before us often / know the image”) (original italics; 736; 101). Remaining vigilant to de-valuing requires maintaining it within view. Imaging death therefore provides the reflection of investments in life. While losing resolve in the negative view of existence is susceptible to pitfalls, Rilke urges steadfastness. Poetry performs the crucial function of giving image to death and maintaining resolve in Being.

Erst in dem Doppelreich
werden die Stimmen
ewig und mild.

Only in the double-world
do voices become
eternal and mild. (736; 101)

With his mention of the eternal, Rilke argues that double-vision even bears a universal recognition that transfers throughout history.

By taking time into consideration, Rilke projects temporality into his economy of valuing and de-valuing existential investments. Reflecting upon ever-shifting interests, he remains vigilant to the interrelatedness of valuing and de-valuing.

SEI allem Abschied voran, als wäre er hinter
dir, wie der Winter, der eben geht.
Denn unter Wintern ist einer so endlos Winter,
daß, überwinternd, dein Herz überhaupt übersteht.
Be ahead of all Departure, as if it were
behind you like the winter that’s just passed.
For among winters there’s one so endlessly winter
that, wintering out, your heart will really last. (759; 163)

In the call to be ahead of oneself, Rilke suggests a readiness to de-value existential interests
even as they are being given value. Such a conception of value is characteristic of keeping
death in view as the ultimate devaluing. Referencing death in the form of Orpheus’ wife
Eurydice, Rilke provides a dialectical perspective that reconciles death with life:

Sei immer tot in Eurydike –, singender steige,
preisender steige zurück in den reinen Bezug.
Hier, unter Schwimmenden, sei, im Reiche der Neige,
sei ein klingendes Glas, das sich im Klang schon zerschlug.
Be dead forever in Eurydice – rise again, singing
more, praising more, rise into the pure harmony.
Be here among the vanishing in the realm of entropy,
be a ringing glass that shatters as it rings. (759; 163)

Rilke’s shattered ringing glass captures the simultaneous unfolding process of existence and
non-existence, life and death, speech and silence: “Sei – und wisse zugleich des Nicht-Seins
Bedingung, / den unendlichen Grund deiner innigen Schwingung, / daß du sie völlig
vollziehst dieses einzige Mal” (“Be – and at the same time know the implication / of non-
being, the endless ground of your inner vibration, / so you can fulfill it fully just this once”)
(759; 163). The inner vibration is the phenomenon of the tension between the intensities of
valuing and de-valuing; they constantly occur at the same time and constitute the experience
of temporality, which is the experience of Being itself. As in the chapter on rhythm, the
experience of the flow of temporality at its most basic level as mere vibration is the
experience of Being: “Zu dem gebrauchten sowohl, wie zum dumpfen und stummen / Vorrat
der vollen Natur, den unsäglichen Summen, / zähle dich jubelnd hinzu und vernichte die
Zahl” (“To nature’s whole supply of speechless, dumb / and also used up things, the
unspeakable sums, / rejoicing, add yourself and nullify the count” (759-60; 163). Extending his philosophy of life, Rilke adds that death ought to be celebrated as a liberating non-value. Rilke’s philosophy of life, therefore, constitutes an existential economy.

Filling out his temporal view of Being, Rilke more explicitly considers reflection within the context of time.

SPIEGEL: noch nie hat man wissend beschrieben, was ihr in euerem Wesen seid. Ihr, wie mit lauter Löchern von Sieben erfüllten Zwischenräume der Zeit.

Mirrors: no one’s ever yet described you, knowing what you really are. Time’s interstices, you seem filled with nothing but the holes of filters. (752; 143)

As the gridwork of holes in filters, reflection is the material that passes through the understanding; being in motion, reflections do not sustain substantive values. Rilke’s existential model therefore reflects a temporal view of value; but he treats death in a much broader sense than the literal one. As a cipher for the negativity of all that remains silent, inanimate, and distant, death motivates Rilke to bring objects and phenomena to life.

In the earlier period of his protracted writer’s block, Rilke sought in purging his identity a relief from the impasse between his anxiety about interacting with other people and about not being able to write in the neutral space of negating his identity:

Und dazwischen, zwischen dieser ununterbrochen Hinaussüchtigkeit und jenem mir selbst kaum mehr erreichbaren inneren Dasein, sind die eigentlichen Wohnungen des gesunden Gefühls, leer, verlassen, ausgeräumt, eine unwirtliche Mittelzone, deren Neutralität auch erklärlich macht, warum alles Wohlthun von Menschen und Natur an mich vergeudet bleibt.

And in between, between this uninterrupted outward-addiction and that interior existence I can barely reach any longer, are the true dwelling-places of healthful feeling; empty, abandoned, cleared out, and inhospitable middle zone whose neutrality also explains why all the kindnesses of people and
nature are wasted on me. (original brackets; Andreas-Salomé/Rilke 350; 249)

Weighed down by his depression over the impasse in his writing, Rilke puts his life in limbo; however, the pause only makes for a temporary solution. While Rilke succeeded in harmonizing his own voice with that of his learning and experience in the *Duino Elegies* and the *Sonnets to Orpheus*, arriving at that point was a long struggle. Excavating the way in which he submerged himself in Rodin’s way of being at the beginning of his career and how he managed to re-emerge helps understand the foundations of his later work. While he was not yet at first in ownership of his own artistic dwelling, he eventually shut it down temporarily before being able to host guests properly in it.

When Rilke moved to Paris in 1902, he went there with the conscious aim of adopting Rodin as his mentor. Rodin received him warm-heartedly in the midst of working at his studio on the rue de l’Université. Rilke felt as though he was “renewing a friendship of long standing” (Prater 90). Their kindred bond would eventually become evident in Rilke’s book on Rodin in which the sculptor saw a deep understanding of his work. Rilke recounts to his wife Clara Westhoff Rodin’s response to the book: “Er hat mir über mein Buch… das Größte gesagt, was man sagen kann: hat es neben seine Dinge gestellt” (“About my book… he said the greatest things one can say: placed it beside his things”) (*Briefe 1902-1906* 258; *Letters* 1: 191). With Rodin’s high esteem secured, Rilke became responsible for assisting the sculptor with his correspondence and art in 1905 (Prater 124). Provided with lodgings at Rodin’s house and a salary of 200 francs per month, Rilke achieved some long-sought financial and professional stability. With only a few hours of

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19 The original letter is found in Rainer Maria Rilke, *Briefe aus den Jahren 1902 bis 1906*, ed. Ruth Sieber-Rilke and Carl Sieber (Leipzig: Insel, 1929) 258.
Rodin’s correspondence to oversee per day, Rilke was otherwise free to apprentice with his mentor and focus on his own work.

In the course of his study, Rilke identifies as the first sculpture of Rodin’s maturity, “Homme au nez cassé” (“The Man with the Broken Nose”), a bust easily imagined by picturing any boxer’s nose crooked from being broken many times. What strikes Rilke about the sculpture is the manner in which it emerges as if had been formed by nature. His descriptions are startling and visceral:

There were no symmetrical planes in this face at all, nothing repeated itself, no spot remained empty, dumb or indifferent. This face had not been touched by life, it had been permeated through and through with it as though an inexorable hand had thrust it into fate and held it there as in the whirlpool of a washing, gnawing torrent….one recognizes sharp lines that must have been cut in one night, as though picked by a bird in the worn forehead of a sleepless man. (my ellipsis; Auguste Rodin 23-24; Rodin 16-17)\(^\text{20}\)

The bust carries within it the image of heroic steadfastness before great adversity. “It does not plead to the world; it seems to carry justice within itself, to hold the reconciliation of all its contradictions and to possess a forbearance great enough for all its

burden") (24; 18). What the body of Rodin’s sculpture represents for Rilke is not a weak lament but a self-possessed equanimity that stands firmly in the current of existence. At this early stage of his career, however, Rilke is thinking about existence in the sense of standing steadfastly in its current. But he is not yet thinking about redirecting it.

Upon receiving Rilke’s book on Rodin, Lou Andreas-Salomé registers the breathless awe with which she recognized his efforts at internalizing the sculptor’s way of being. She herself felt such a kinship with Rilke as to remark how the book threaded itself (“in die gegenwärtigsten persönlichkeitsten Wesenszusammenhänge” (“into the most intimate weave of my being”) (Andreas-Salomé/Rilke 77; 65). On August 7, 1903, she reassures Rilke with the recognition:


During the Rodin period you felt “somewhat protected in the shelter of an overwhelming impression” to which you sacrificed yourself creatively in order to give further, reflective form to what someone else had shaped. When you then emerged from that shelter, you were still under the influence of the sensibility you had taken in and transposed and in so doing made a part of yourself. Everything you looked at you saw with incredible Rodin-eyes, saw with a view toward the corporeal-psychic detail, became a sounding board for whatever spoke of bodily existence, even though in your tools, the tools of the poet, the bodily does not find adequate means for its expression….as it was, your work stood on the borderline between what was yours and what was someone else’s, held something passionately suppressed and also something of your own under infinite arousal, something that could
not completely ring out in you and now kept echoing into an emptiness, because it was external to your work and yet under its spell. (my ellipsis; Andreas-Salomé/Rilke 78-9; 65-66)

As a young impressionable poet who knew that his instincts needed to be forged with the hammer of conscious intention, Rilke held himself in thrall to the older, already-formed artist, Rodin. He considered the surrender to Rodin’s influence the crucial step to becoming his own artist. The problem, however, that Andreas-Salomé points out is the difficulty of stepping firmly onto the path of art with both feet. At such an early stage in his career, Rilke was letting himself be led on Rodin’s path. As a poet, Rilke did not yet speak with his own voice. What Rilke and Andreas-Salomé describe is the process by which the poet is no longer “spoken through” by a voice that belongs to someone else, but begins to speak with his own voice. The task that Rilke would have to undertake involved engaging Rodin’s voice in dialogue with his own. To the extent that he felt the necessity of looking fully through Rodin’s eyes while also speaking in his own voice, Rilke suggests that creativity and identity are not formed in isolation; rather, identity is formed precisely in a structure of dialogue. The project of consciously forming this dialogue would involve nothing less than bringing to life the voice of the past by addressing it with his own voice.

In a letter that she wrote to Rilke on November 6, 1910, Andreas-Salomé testifies to the new success with which Rilke made his voice resonate truthfully in dialogue. Having focused upon capturing the simple essences of things, Rilke had by now developed his aesthetics of the Neue Sachlichkeit (New Objectivity), which involved creating poems as objects. His task of capturing the essence of things, however, also required his own voice. In her letter, Andreas-Salomé writes:

Lieber Rainer, das war fast wie eine Stimme aus eignen Urzeiten herauf!  
Und doch so sehr Deine Stimme, die das sagte, und Deine Augen die das
Dear Rainer, it was almost like a voice out of my own very earliest times! and yet so much your voice that said it and your eyes that saw it – in cases like this I always feel that the whole of lyric poetry with its capacity for meaning and expression is but a small sector of that realm in which it is your task to make things come to life. But then I also know of no other “art form” that has so wide a scope, and perhaps therein lies its magic. (original italics; 244; 173-74)

That Andreas-Salomé could recognize her voice in Rilke’s own reveals the extent of her influence on him; like Rodin, Andreas-Salomé is the other person who held the most sway over Rilke’s artistic and personal development. From the beginning of their relationship, Andreas-Salomé played a decisive role in helping Rilke come into his own in poetic voice and vision. Crediting Rilke with possessing his own voice and vision emphasizes the proprietary aspect of language and Being. Being is related to language in possessing the existence of things in the currency of words; bringing things to life is capturing their existence in the poet’s own voice. This possession of Being is poetry’s magic.

In developing the process of giving life to dormant or even dead culture and history, Rilke points to the way in which he considers writing poetry an act. In a letter to Rilke from August 8, 1903, Andreas-Salomé describes the manner in which the poetics that he outlines in his book on Rodin amounts more to activity than mere expression:

Der künstlerische und sachliche Werth, den das Rodinbuch durch Deine schöpferische Hingabe empfing, ist sehr groß und durch nichts zu theuer erkauft; dennoch ist er nicht der einzige daran und vielleicht nicht der größte: es ist, als habe es seinen geheimnißvollsten Werth und Reiz erst dadurch empfangen, daß diese Hingebung selber nicht nur sachlicher und künstlicher Art war, sondern begründet gewesen sein muß im Menschlich-Intimen. Daß Du Dich an Deinen Gegensatz, Deine Ergänzung, an einen ersehnten Inbegriff, hingabst, – Dich so gabst, wie man sich vermählt –. Ich weiß es nicht anders auszudrücken, – etwas von Vermählung liegt für mich in dem
The mystery that works its magic behind the curtain of Rilke’s words comprises the process of transformation in which the foreign becomes familiar in the truest sense possible. This is no easy task. But the task is crucial to the cognitive processes of learning, phenomenology, historical consciousness, and figuration. It involves the process in which the inheritance of history is taken and animated with the breath of its inheritors. In the same letter, Andreas-Salomé raises another important feature of the transformative process that Rilke dramatizes in his poetry. She attests that “in solchen Erlebnissen tastet man an die Grenzen des Menschenmögen, man erbringt sich den Beweis wer man ist” (“in such experiences one touches the very limits of human possibility, one provides oneself evidence of who one is”) (original italics; 80; 67). Only by going beyond one’s own boundaries into the territory of the Other, Andreas-Salomé suggests, does one experience one’s own Being. The test of self-limits testifies to identity. In the course of incorporating Rodin’s influence with his own

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21 The epigraph at the beginning of Rilke’s book on Rodin is from Ralph Waldo Emerson: “‘The hero is he who is immovably centred’” (qtd. in Auguste Rodin 8). The first epigraph is from Pomponius Gauricus, De sculptura from around 1504: “‘Die Schriftsteller wirken durch Worte...die Bildhauer aber durch Taten’” (“‘Writers work through words—Sculptors through matter’” (qtd. in Auguste Rodin 8; Rodin 1).
identity, Rilke reveals how his words take on the sculpted quality of Rodin’s art. In a letter to Andreas-Salomé from August 10, 1903 Rilke likens his poetic practice to that of the sculptor: “das Werkzeug meiner Kunst zu finden, den Hammer, meinen Hammer, daß er Herr werde und wachse über alle Geräsche. Es muß ein Handwerk stehen auch unter dieser Kunst” (“it is so frightfully necessary for me to find the tool of my art, the hammer, my hammer, so that it might become master and grow beyond all noise. There must be a handcraft in this art also”) (Andreas-Salomé/Rilke 97; 78). Like the sculptor who chisels stone into form, Rilke forges language into verse.

What Rilke had in mind with the task of internalizing Rodin’s ways of creating is a question not simply of aesthetics but rather of Being. In a summation of Rodin’s primary focus on the existential dimension in art, Rilke writes in a letter from August 8, 1903 to Andreas-Salomé:

Was ihn beunruhigte war gerade der Schein dessen, was er für unentbehrlich hielt, für nothwendig und gut: der Schein der Schönheit. Er wollte daß sie sei und sah seine Aufgabe darin, Dinge (denn Dinge dauerten) in die weniger bedrohte, ruhigere und ewigere Welt des Raumes zu passen; und er wandte an sein Werk unbewußt alle Gesetze der Anpassung an, sodaß es organisch sich entfaltete und lebensfähig wurde. Schon ganz frühe versuchte er nichts «auf das Aussehen hin» zu machen; es gab kein Zurücktreten bei ihm, sondern ein immerwährendes Nahesein und Gebeugtsein über das Werdende. Und heute ist diese Eigenart in ihm so stark geworden, daß man fast sagen könnte, das Aussehen seiner Dinge sei ihm gleichgültig: so sehr erlebt er ihr Sein, ihre Wirklichkeit, ihre allseitige Loslösung vom Ungewissen, ihr Vollendet- und Gutsein, ihre Unabhängigkeit; sie stehen nicht auf der Erde, sie kreisen um sie.

What troubled him was precisely the appearance of that which he considered indispensable, necessary, and good: the appearance of beauty. He wanted it to be, and he saw his task as fitting things (for things endured) into the less threatened, more peaceful, more eternal world of space, and he instinctively applied to his work all the laws of adaptation, so that it might evolve organically and grow capable of life. From early on he had tried to make nothing by reference to “how it would look”: there was no stepping back for him, only a perpetual leaning over and remaining close to what was about to
come into being. And today this characteristic has become so strong in him that one could almost say that the way his things look is a matter of indifference to him: so intensely does he experience their being, their reality, their release on all sides from the vague and uncertain, their completedness and goodness, their independence; they do not stand on the earth, they orbit it. (original italics; 85-6; 71)

At the stage at which Rodin found himself, beauty was either irrelevant or a given; either way, he did not need to strain his eyes looking for it. Likewise, instead of focusing on transmitting meaning, he conveyed ways of being. The existential component of art, therefore, opens onto the dimension of “solchen Worten, hinter denen Thaten warten” (“words such as have deeds waiting behind them”); his words are not simply signs to be interpreted, but phenomena to be experienced (79-80; 67). To the extent that Rilke’s words are vessels, they bear forth ways of relating to the world; in contrast, the limited use of the understanding that is directed simply to aesthetics, for instance, restricts itself to mere ideas, intellect, and logic. The difference lies between being and thinking. According to Prater, Rilke felt that he had reached a point at which he could fulfill Rodin’s artistic ideal: “to work, steadily and without impatience, at fashioning experience into things which could have an existence of their own, and to turn his back on the mere expression of subjective mood or vague longing at the caprice of his imagination” (Prater 126). His poems are not simply assemblages of codes and allusions, which came to be referred to as “texts” in the course of the second half of the twentieth-century. Only as works of Being rather than

22 In “La mort de l’auteur,” ed. Éric Marty, vol. 3 of Oeuvres complètes, 5 vols. (Paris: Seuil, 2002) 40-45, Roland Barthes argues that the oppressive institutional authority attached to the author’s voice has reached its end in favour of the reader’s freedom. Criticizing the positivist basis of the authorial subject as the “résumé et aboutissement de l’idéologie capitaliste” (“epitome and culmination of capitalist ideology”) (“Mort” 40-41; “Death” 143), Barthes rejects the notion that the author’s voice has any anchor in subjectivity or history: “la voix perd son origine” (“the voice loses its origin”) (40; 142) and “n’a d’autre origine que le langage lui-même” (“no other origin than language itself”) (43; 146). Barthes’ conception of the author deals directly with the issue of self-possession: “la naissance du lecteur doit se payer de la mort de l’auteur” (“the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author”) (45; 148). Taking his cue from Mallarmé,
meaning, can they take flight and enjoy the shared beholding of their orbit around the earth.

Of Rodin’s works, Rilke concludes: “tief wie ein Knecht ist er seinen Weg gegangen und hat eine Erde gemacht, hundert Erden. Aber jede Erde, die lebt, strahlt ihren Himmel aus und

Barthes argues that the author no longer owns language but is simply a medium through which language passes, and is therefore owned by language: “En France, Mallarmé, sans doute le premier, a vu et prévu dans toute son ampleur la nécessité de substituer le langage lui-même à celui qui jusque-là était censé en être le propriétaire; pour lui, comme pour nous, c’est le langage qui parle, ce n’est pas l’auteur; écrire, c’est, à travers une impersonnalité préalable – que l’on ne saurait à aucun moment confondre avec l’objectivité castratrice du romancier réaliste –, atteindre ce point ou seul le langage agit, «performe», et non «moi»: toute la poétique de Mallarmé consiste à supprimer l’auteur au profit de l’écriture (ce qui est, on le verra, rendre sa place au lecteur). Valéry tout embarassé dans une psychologie du Moi, édulcora beaucoup la théorie mallarméenne, mais, se reportant par goût du classicisme aux leçons de la rhétorique, il ne cessa de tourner en doute et en dérision l’Auteur, accentua la nature linguistique et comme «harsardeuse» de son activité, et revendiqua tout au long de ses livres en prose en faveur de la condition essentiellement verbale de la littérature, en face de laquelle tout recours à l’intériorité de l’écrivain lui paraissait pure superstition” (“In France, Mallarmé was doubtless the first to see and foresee in its full extent the necessity of substituting language itself for the person who until then had been supposed to be its owner. For him Mallarmé, for us too, it is language which speaks, not the author; to write is, through a prerequisite impersonality — (not at all to be confused with the castrating objectivity of the realist novelist), to reach that point where only language alone acts, ‘performs’, and not ‘me’. Mallarmé’s entire poetics consists in suppressing the author in the interests of writing (which is, as will be seen, to restore the place of the reader). Valéry, encumbered by a psychology of the Ego, considerably diluted Mallarmé’s theory but, his taste for classicism leading him to turn to the lessons of rhetoric, he never stopped calling into question and deriding the Author; he stressed the linguistic and, as it were, ‘hazardous’ nature of his activity, and throughout his prose works he militated in favour of the essentially verbal condition of literature, in the face of which all recourse to the writer’s interiority seemed to him pure superstition”) (41; 143-44). By proposing a false anti-bourgeois way of reading, Barthes dispossesses the ideologically-subject individual that he claims to liberate. The problem, however, is not simply of subjectivity in the abstract but of bourgeois subjectivity. Instead of properly acknowledging the way in which the subject is at the mercy of the bourgeoisie, Barthes props up an Idealist argument on two fronts: 1) he falsely claims that the reader freed from the author in favour of language fully resolves the imbalance of power; 2) by doing so, he simply substitutes language for the author, which still keeps the reader dispossessed. Barthes’ solution is the worse situation of placing the reader at a further remove from the author (i.e. the bourgeoisie) in the obfuscating form of impersonal language. In other words, at the same time that he takes away the author’s subjectivity, Barthes also removes the reader’s subjectivity. But the reader remains at the mercy of language. Language is not a neutral agent but rather a medium through which social relations are contested. Although he claims that his approach “libère une activité que l’on pourrait appeler contre-théologique, proprement révolutionnaire” (“liberates what may be called an anti-theological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary”), it is the hermeneutical equivalent of pacifist politics. Barthes merely substitutes the tyranny of the author for the submission of the reader (44; 147). A properly dialectical understanding of the matter instead indicates that the relationship between the author and the reader is not one of an imposing author or of a neutralized reader but rather of a dialogue, as Mikhail Bakhtin formulated. Meaning is indeed constructed and for that very reason, it is historical. As progressive as Barthes’ suppressing the metaphysics of authorship was within the context of the political upheaval of May 1968, his gesture dismissed the historical basis of the sign. Without the historical recognition of the sign, culture is falsely misrepresented as meaning nothing. Precisely because the sign is arbitrary does its meaning have a basis in history. The economy of meaning that Rilke forwards more closely captures the way in which meaning is constructed and shared between author and reader, and history and consciousness. More on the matter will follow in the chapter on Celan’s understanding of dialogue in chapter 4. Citations from the English translation of Barthes’ essay are from Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” Image, Music, Text, ed. and trans. Stephen Heath, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977) 142-48.
wirft Sternennächte weit hinaus in die Ewigkeit” (“bowed deep, he went his way like a servant and made an earth, a hundred earths. Yet each of these living earths radiates its own heaven and casts star-filled nights into eternity”) (Andreas-Salomé/Rilke 86; 71). Just as Rodin created worlds out of stone, Rilke wanted to cross the threshold of his readers and become a part of their world for time to come.

As with many relationships between strong artistic figures, Rilke and Rodin would find themselves at odds with each other. After having worked as Rodin’s secretary and studied under him as an apprentice for approximately one year, Rilke was suddenly let go at the end of April 1906 (Prater 132). While at the Villa des Brillants, Rilke and Rodin were engulfed in the mayhem of numerous people vying for attention. Interviewers, visitors, and dealers were all clamouring to see Rodin. To make matters worse, Rodin was experiencing another bout of illness. Over the course of his stay, Rilke had managed to develop a certain level of professional familiarity with Rodin’s correspondents. However, Rilke crossed a line that infuriated Rodin. He had answered two letters on Rodin’s behalf without having first consulted him; one of which Rilke answered himself, because it had been addressed to him (132-133). Once Rodin realized what had happened, his response was swift and decisive. Rilke was out the door and relieved of his duties. In fact, he was glad to be free of the increasing constraints on his time and creativity, moved to Paris, and took a room at a hotel near the Jardin du Luxembourg where his friend Paula Modersohn-Becker was staying. Rilke’s transgression registers the extent to which he had begun his own course in his career: “‘for me too life begins’” (qtd. in Prater 133). No longer a mere secretary, Rilke was now writing for himself.
Gradually, in the course of his relationship with Andreas-Salomé, Rilke would discover how to overcome the kind of overpowering influence that Rodin would have over his creative process and sense of self. After having fully absorbed Rodin’s ways of being and creating, Rilke stepped onto his own path while keeping his mentor’s lessons in mind. Rilke very consciously traced the trajectory on which he would paradoxically find himself by losing himself.

Denn des Anschau’s, siehe, ist eine Grenze.  
Und die geschautere Welt  
will in der Liebe gedeihn.  

Werk des Gesichts ist gethan,  
thue nun Herz-Werk  
an den Bildern in dir, jenen gefangenen; denn du  
überwältigtest sie: aber nun kennst du sie nicht.  

For gazing, you see, has its limits.  
And the more gazed-upon world  
wants to prosper in love.  

Work of the eyes is done,  
begin heart-work now  
on those images in you, those captive ones;  
for you conquered them: but you still don’t know them.  

(Andreas-Salomé/Rilke 343-44; 244)

In the polarization that Rilke indicates, looking with the eyes involves distance, calculation, projection, and even reaction; looking with the heart, however, involves letting the world reveal itself and keeping it alive by transforming it. While the eye judges the world, the heart praises it. The process of shifting his vision from eye to heart is the turning that Rilke considers as the fundamental mechanism of Orphic transformation.

Andreas-Salomé was just as much conscious of Rilke’s aspiration to reach the turning and nurtured his development. In a letter from June 27, 1914, she would respond to
the poem “Wendung” (“Turning”) that Rilke had sent her beforehand on June 20 by describing what would ultimately become the Orphic transformation of his later verse:


There is something in it as of a newly conquered domain….on grounds where (in contrast to “mere” art) illumination and action are still as one; this domain can indeed only be made into poetry insofar and to the extent that one has conquered it and thus made it part of a new experience. Somewhere in this realm, deep down, all art begins again with renewed force, arises from its primordial origin, where it was magic formula, incantation, – a calling forth of life in its still concealed mysteriousness, – yes, where it was at once prayer and the most intense breaking-forth of power. (my ellipsis; original italics; 346-47; 246-47)

According to the terms in which Andreas-Salomé describes it, “Wendung” (“Turning”) registers the point at which Rilke is able to enter foreign territory and make it his own in poetry. By virtue of melding recent illuminations with “dem Erleben neu” (“a new experience”), Rilke performs the act of “turning” illuminations into art (347; 246). By removing given associations from objects and phenomena, he can transfer them into new settings. The lively turning of the poem is precisely the “höchster Machtausbruch” (“most intense breaking-forth of power”) that Andreas-Salomé describes as the origin of art (347; 247). While suggesting an alternative to objectified metaphysical representation, Andreas-Salomé still locates the origin of art in presence; however, the distinction lies in a presence that emerges in the interaction between different discoveries and experiences. In other terms, Rilke entered into dialogue with his sources in his own voice not by parroting, but by responding to, his interlocutor. With the etymology of poetry (“poiein”: “to make”) in mind,
presence is made as if carving stone into sculpture rather than seized as if catching prey in a trap. In the participation of presence lies the “höchster Machtausbruch” (“most intense breaking-forth of power”) (347; 247). The power that not only stands steadfast but also steps forth against the current of existence finds expression in the framing epigraph and closing lines of Die Sonette an Orpheus (The Sonnets to Orpheus): “Und wenn dich das Irdische vergaß, / zu der stillen Erde sag: Ich rinne. / Zu dem raschen Wasser sprich: Ich bin” (“And if the earthly has forgotten / you, say to the still earth: I flow. / To the rushing water speak: I am”) (Sämtliche 771; Elegies/Sonnets 195). Knowing that he has the choice to stand strong in the current or go against it is crucial to Rilke’s understanding of Orphic transformation.

The summer of 1914 would prove to be an important turning point for Rilke. As the world turned upside down with war, Rilke crossed the threshold of artistic and existential maturity. Shortly after her letter of June, Andreas-Salomé would continue discussing his progress with achieving Orphic transformation in a letter from July 2, 1914:


you, of all people, you know how, in earlier years, I would always exhort you to know the “Other”; but now it seems that your knowledge of him overreaches him, would become a knowledge of yourself rather than solely of this other one, so that you, in an exact reversal of that earlier time, now no longer notice, absorb, emphasize yourself at all, simply overlook yourself and know only him; but just as back then this “Other” really did exist in spite of your not wanting to know him, so now YOU. This may not factually change anything, since one has nothing of that which eludes one’s feeling and
thoughts; yet proof that it *is* real and *is* present remains important. (original italics; Andreas-Salomé/Rilke 356-57; 253)

In a few lines, Andreas-Salomé summarizes the transition from Narcissus to Orpheus, the process by which Rilke overcame his own selfishness, saw and felt the world from the position of others, and finally merged his identity with others. In another letter that continued their discussion of transformation, Rilke included a few poems gathered under the title “Fünf Gesänge” (“Five Hymns”) that he would introduce in the following manner on September 9, 1914: “Beiliegend ein paar Blätter aus dem August: Einklänge ins Allgemeine” (“Enclosed a few pages from August: to be in harmony with the prevailing voice”) (368; 261). After describing an encounter with his doctor and friend, Wilhelm Schenk von Stauffenberg, who had just “entdeckte St<auffenberg> einen veralteten Lungenschaden” (“discovered an old pulmonary lesion, harmless and insignificant in itself”), Rilke recounts to Andreas-Salomé the pity that he feels for the doctor who confided in him unresolved issues from his childhood (original brackets; 368; 261). He recounts that it would be “furchtbar für einen, der nicht darauf angewiesen ist, ihr Unbewältigtes in sich aufzulösen, sondern ganz eigentlich dazu da, es in Erfundenem und Gefühltem verwandelt aufzubrauchen in Dingen, Thieren –, worin nicht? – wenn es sein muß in Ungeheuern” (“horrible for someone who is less concerned to resolve its unmastered aspects within himself than to expend it transmuted (and this as the very thing he does) on felt and imagined matter, on things, animals, and yes, even if need be, on monstrosities”) (original italics; 368; 261). Rilke notes that the doctor remains subject to his issues by acting them out repeatedly rather than mastering them. The task of mastering issues to which Rilke refers involves harmonizing the self with the world. Just as the forces of the world press upon the doctor, he nevertheless has a say in the matter. The forces of the world function
like a voice to which the doctor responds with his own voice in the form of his own agency. Harmonizing these two voices is the task of the “Einklänge ins Allgemeine” (“prevailing voice”) (368; 261).

Rilke’s “Fünf Gesänge” (“Five Hymns”), however, contains more than purely existential anticipation. Although Prater sees in “Fünf Gesänge” (“Five Hymns”) an anti-war poem, Rilke nevertheless encodes his existential turn with nationalist and imperialist language. “Zum ersten Mal seh ich dich aufstehn / hörengesagter fernster unglaublicher Kriegs-Gott” (“For the first time I see you rising, / faintly rumoured most distant incredible War God”) (261; 369). On July 29, 1914, the Austro-Hungarian Empire had just declared war upon Serbia, Russia, and Germany (Prater 251). Coming as a shock to Rilke’s generation, the international conflict aroused in Rilke the anticipation of a rift in history that would open a new existential awareness and freedom among different nations. As the various European states inspired their populations with war propaganda, Rilke was inflamed with the existential transformation that it promised.

Bräute gehen erwählter: als hätte nicht einer
sich zu ihnen entschlossen, sondern das ganze
Volk sie zu fühlen bestimmt. Mit langsam ermessendem Blick
umfangen die Knaben den Jüngling, der schon hineinreicht
in die gewagtere Zukunft: ihn, der noch eben
hundert Stimmen vernahm, unwissend, welche im Recht sei,
wie erleichtert ihn jetzt der einige Ruf; denn was
wäre nicht Willkür neben der frohen neben der sicheren Noth?
Endlich ein Gott. Da wir den friedlichen oft
nicht mehr begriffen, ergreift uns plötzlich der Schlacht-Gott,
schleudert den Brand: und über dem Herzen voll Heimath
schreit, den er donnernd bewohnt, sein röthlicher Himmel.

Brides walk more auspiciously chosen: as if not some one
had joined lots with them, but the whole nation
had ordained them to feel. With slowly measuring gaze
boys surround the youth who already extends
into the more hazarded future: he who moments ago
was prey to a hundred voices, not knowing which was right, 
now that single call has lightened him; for what 
would not be caprice next to the joyous, the positive hour of need? 
At last a God. As here the peaceable one so often 
eluded our grasp, suddenly the God of Battles grips us, 
hurling his bolt: while over the heart full of home 
there screams his thunderious dwelling, his blood-red sky. 

(original italics; Andreas-Salomé/Rilke 370; 262)

Responding to Hölderlin’s lament of the disappearing gods lying in wait to make their return, Rilke sees in the war the return of the gods treading upon the earth. In fact, Rilke had been re-reading Hölderlin’s last odes and novel, Hyperion, at the time (Prater 253). In the hope of the gods bringing back a new order of freedom with the war, Rilke could not but lament the conflict of the war as he convalesced in the foothills of the Bavarian Alps at the orders of Stauffenberg (253). During his stay there, Rilke would lament the homelessness he felt. Exiled from his adopted home, Paris, where all his possessions were held, Rilke was stuck in Germany with whom France was at war. What is peculiar about “Fünf Gesänge” (“Five Hymns”) remains Rilke’s unspecified nationalism. How could such an international citizen as Rilke identify with reactionary nationalism or even any single country? According to Prater, Rilke did not have in mind the nation as a political entity but as an existential one (Prater 252-54). In a letter to Ilse Erdmann on September 15, 1915, Rilke later expressed his conflicted feelings regarding the war in light of his attachment to countries from both sides of the trenches:

“Even though I cannot be strange to the German spirit, rooted as I am so firmly in the language, yet its manifestation today, its current aggressive conviction has brought me nothing but loathing and mortification; and still more the Austrian…that I should ever feel at home in that is quite unthinkable for me…How should I, whose heart has been formed by Russia, France, Italy, Spain, the desert, and the Bible, how should I be able to feel with those whose boastful words surround me here?” (qtd. in Prater 266)
Although Rilke abstracted the existential dimension of the war from the political one and politically opposed the war, he nevertheless describes national pride and border-crossings in terms that reiterate these political forms.

At the same time that nationalism invades the heart, the nationalist ideology of imperialism underwrites the trope of dwelling. The home is not a pure, philosophical space but rather the political fortification of the nation-state. Rilke calls for crossing the national boundaries in favour of foreign excursions.

Und nun
endiget, Freunde, das plötzlich
zugemuthete Herz, braucht das gewaltsame auf.
Rühmend: denn immer wars rühmlich
nicht in der Vorsicht einzelner Sorge zu sein, sondern in einem
wagenden Geiste, sondern in herrlich
gefühlter Gefahr, heilig gemeinsam.

And now
bring to a close, friends, this suddenly
reassigned heart, consume the violence left in it!
With praise: for it’s always been glorious
to live not in the caution of private cares, but in one
adventuring spirit, in those holiest sharings
of supremely felt danger. (Andreas-Salomé/Rilke 574; 264)

By praising the bold spirit willing to risk leaping from secure ground, Rilke suggests the adventurism characteristic of imperialism. In stark images, Rilke’s “Einklänge ins Allgemeine” (“prevailing voice”) is no longer merely a cognitive model for personal mastery but repeats the call to imperialist conquest if only in the philosophical register (368; 261). The hard-won transformative process of aesthetics and philosophy that he underwent under Rodin’s mentorship Rilke adapts to a nationalist homecoming:

Denn zu begreifen,
denn zu lernen und vieles in Ehren
innen zu halten, auch Fremdes, war euch gefühlter Beruf.
Nun seid ihr aufs Eigne wider beschränkt. Doch größer
For to comprehend,
to go on learning, and to honor inwardly
disparate things, even foreign things, was your heartfelt task.
Now you’re confined once more to what’s your own.
But it has grown greater. (376; 265)

Rilke’s description of Doctor Stauffenberg’s lack of resolve before mastering his psychological neuroses suggests a limit to Rilke’s kind of transformation into self-possession; “Fünf Gesänge” (“Five Hymns”), however, indicates a naïve faith in appropriating the foreign and returning to the national homeland. Rather than a happy existential exploration and hybridization of foreign cultures, the war amounted to nothing more than imperialist exploitation and destruction. While decrying the war, Rilke nevertheless coded existential abundance in the terms of imperialist plunder. The border crossing to wrest foreign resources and return home with the plunder forms the mirror between imperialist exploration and its reflection in the conception of the self that gathers resources for itself at the expense of the Other. The rallying cry of nationalism found its echo in Rilke’s hope of a new philosophical freedom:

Heil mir, daß ich Ergriffene sehe. Schon lange
war uns das Schauspiel nicht wahr
und das erfundene Bild sprach nicht entscheidend uns an.
Geliebte, nun redet wie ein Seher die Zeit
blind, aus dem ältesten Geist.
Hört. Noch hörtet ihrs nie. Jetzt seid ihr die Bäume,
die die gewaltige Luft lauter und lauter durchrauscht.

Hail, to see men in the grip of something! It’s been so long
since the spectacle seemed real to us
and the invented image cut through to our hearts.
Now, beloved, the time, like a prophet,
speaks to us blindly, possessed by age-old soul.
Listen. This you’ve never heard before. Now you are trees
in which a mighty wind grows louder and louder. (370-71; 262)
Just what the trees have to say puts into question once again whether or not the wind that inspires them belongs to the “Einklänge ins Allgemeine” (“prevailing voice”) of the empowered poet or to the siren call of nationalism (261; 368).

After passing through the maturing process of learning from his intellectual and artistic mentors, internalizing their ways of being, and engaging them with his own understanding, Rilke in turn developed tropes for expressing the whole process in its fundamental manner. In the ninth elegy, he asks “warum dann / Menschliches müssen – und, Schicksal vermeidend, / sich sehnen nach Schicksal?…” (“why / then, do we have to be human and, avoiding fate, / long for fate?”) (original ellipsis; Sämtliche 717; Elegies/Sonnets 61). Taken in a historical sense rather than a mythological one, fate devolves upon the manner in which Marx and Engels describe subjective agency “zunächst unmittelbar verflochten” (“directly interwoven”) with objective historical conditions (Ideologie 26; Ideology 36). A question of Being, Rilke wonders about the fundamental confrontation with the conditions of existence. He provides an answer that suggests how the question of confronting existence was one of the main paths of inquiry trod after the First World War:

weil Hiersein viel ist, und weil uns scheinbar alles das Hiesige braucht, dieses Schwindende, das seltsam uns angeht.

because being here means so much, and because all that’s here, vanishing so quickly, seems to need us and strangely concerns us. (Sämtliche 717; Elegies/Sonnets 61)

Drawn from the Christian tradition with which Rilke was familiar, care is the phenomenological correlative to theological love. Eventually, Heidegger would also discuss care as a constitutive part of Sein und Zeit (Being and Time). Heidegger illuminates his
understanding of care with a fable passed down from Hyginis by way of Goethe (Sein 262-63; Being 184). The fable provides an account of Care crossing a river and discovering some clay that she shaped into a figure. Meanwhile, Jupiter was passing by and Care asked him to give spirit to the clay figure upon which he gladly obliged. Once Jupiter gave the figure its spirit, Care wanted it to bear her name; however, Jupiter thought it should bear his name and an argument ensued. Over the course of the argument, Earth arose and likewise wanted her name attributed to the creature since the clay was also made from her body. In order to resolve the quarrel, they decided to consult Saturn as their judge. With great wisdom, Saturn decided that Jupiter should receive the spirit at death since he had given it to the creature; Earth would receive its body, since that was her contribution; and Care would possess the creature’s spirit as long as it lived, because she had first shaped it. As for naming the creature, Saturn decided that it should be called “homo” because it was made of humus (earth).

Hyginis’ fable highlights the shared attitude towards Being that Rilke and Heidegger held: care is existential investment in Being. Self-possession lies directly in the hands of Care shaping the matter of existence. The care that Rilke explores consists in the dual process of valuing and de-valuing. That the very fact of being invested in earthly existence is somehow strange to Rilke cannot be adequately answered if posed merely as a philosophical question. Like his war poem, the existential component of Rilke’s later work needs to be examined through material inquiry.

Und so drängen wir uns und wollen es leisten, wollens enthalten in unsern einfachen Händen, im überfüllteren Blick und im sprachlosen Herzen. Wollen es werden. – Wem es geben? Am liebsten alles behalten für immer…Ach, in den andern Bezug, wehe, was nimmt man hinüber? Nicht das Anschau, das hier
langsam erlernte, und kein hier Ereignetes. Keins.
Also die Schmerzen. Also vor allem das Schwersein,
also der Liebe lange Erfahrung, – also
lauter Unsägliches.

And so we keep on going and try to realize it,
try to hold it in our simple hands, in
our overcrowded eyes, and in our speechless heart.
Try to become it. To give it to whom? We’d rather
keep all of it forever…Ah, but what can we take across
into that other realm? Not the power to see we’ve learned
so slowly here, and nothing that’s happened here.
Nothing. And so, the pain; above all, the hard
work of living; the long experience of love –
those purely unspeakable things.

(original ellipsis; Sämtliche 717-18; Elegies/Sonnets 61)

Giving image to Being as an object that is not only held by hand and passed on but also
owned invites inquiry into the values that Rilke and his period attributed to Being. Even
Being – the supposedly purest concept devoid of any qualities – bears the trace of
possessiveness. The desire to hold onto all the cares of Being for eternity for oneself
confirms a difficult truth: we do not own our experiences and cannot keep them alive in
death, which leaves us exasperated. Although he does not say it, Rilke suggests that writing,
as a form of record-keeping, is his only consolation. Since Being can be glimpsed only
occasionally and remains beyond our reach, the primary strain in the lament of the (Duineser
Elegien) (Duino Elegies) is precisely the resulting lack of self-possession. Only the restless
striving for fulfillment remains. Not until Die Sonette an Orpheus (The Sonnets to Orpheus)
will Rilke be able to respond jubilantly to the lament of the Duineser Elegien (Duino
Elegies).

In Rilke’s economy of life and death, language is invested with Being in the
Duineser Elegien (Duino Elegies) and Die Sonette an Orpheus (The Sonnets to Orpheus).
As the medium for communicating Being, language is the currency in which existential investments circulate.

Sind wir vielleicht hier, um zu sagen: Haus, Brücke, Brunnen, Tor, Krug, Obstbaum, Fenster, – höchstens: Säule, Turm…..aber zu sagen, verstehs, oh zu sagen so, wie selber die Dinge niemals innig meinten zu sein. Ist nicht die heimliche List dieser verschwiegenen Erde, wenn sie die Liebenden drängt, daß sich in ihrem Gefühl jedes und jedes entzückt?

Maybe we're here only to say: house, bridge, well, gate, jug, olive tree, window – at most, pillar, tower… but to say them, remember, oh, to say them in a way that the things themselves never dreamed of existing so intensely. When this silent earth urges lovers on, isn’t it her secret reason to make everything shudder with ecstasy in them?

(Original italics and ellipses; 718; 63)

When Rilke mentions lovers, the word is not to be taken simply in the sense of romantic love, but of existential care. In Rilke’s own life, for instance, he devoted himself more fully to the muses of poetry rather than to his family. Notwithstanding Rilke’s abandonment of his family for poetry, words are not simply signs to be interpreted; they also bear existential relations of Being that circulate among people. The simple words that Rilke lists exemplify his concern with meanings not just as references to objects but also as evidence of existence and as metaphors for existential relations. The poetic naming process that Rilke performs, Heidegger likewise undertakes with the simplest poetic-philosophical words and images, such as “dwelling,” “bridge,” and “building” that span great lengths.

And yet, while Rilke laments the passing of such existential investment in life, he also praises such loss. In the wake of secularism, the longing for a spiritual equivalent to religion leaves its trace in philosophy and the arts. In response to the theological question of encountering Being within the inner world, Rilke answered with the poetic-philosophical
analogue that he called the “heiliger Einfall” (“sacred idea”) (720; 67). The “mourning and sorrow may find shelter and form in a thing, die into it and emerge as a song” (Graff 255). In contrast to his earlier empathetic approach to locating the essences of things, Rilke now also locates value within himself. What remains invisible within the things of the Earth survives their passing and risks dying as well if not for the poet keeping them alive in verse. In the seventh elegy, Rilke writes:

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das sichtbarste Glück uns
erst zu erkennen sich giebt, wenn wir es innen verwandeln.
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Nirgends, Geliebte, wird Welt sein, als innen. Unser Leben geht hin mit Verwandlung.
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the most visible joy reveals
itself to us only when we’ve transformed it, within.
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Love, the World exists nowhere but within.
Our life is lived in transformation. (Gesammelte 711; Elegies/Sonnets 51)
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The process of transforming the values that are invested in ephemeral things Rilke refers to as “der vertrauliche Tod” (“death, that intimate friend”) (720; 67), which is the Earth’s “heiliger Einfall” (“sacred idea”) (720; 67).

Through his translation of Jesuit theology into philosophy, Heidegger understands the problem of inner transformation that Rilke figures in verse. Rather than a mere abstraction, death bears historical relevance as a topic of contemplation tied to the two world wars in the twentieth century. Both Rilke and Heidegger recognize the modern evasion of death and seek reconciliation with it as a possible form of mourning. In his essay on Rilke “Wozu Dichter?” (“What Are Poets for?”), Heidegger answers that poets serve precisely the purpose of acknowledging death: “Noch sind die Sterblichen nicht im Eigentum ihres Wesens. Der Tod entzieht sich in das Rätselhafte” (“Mortals have not yet come into
ownership of their own nature. Death withdraws into the enigmatic”) (Holzwege 274; Poetry 94). The enormous challenge of confronting death is a venture that requires throwing into balance the cares of existence (281; 101). Only by forsaking the safe comforts of life is the confrontation with death achieved and life fully experienced. Such an act of bravery involves the double-movement of divesting previous values and adopting new ones. Taken in its proper temporal sense, the double movement enacts the turn from one value into another. The fundamental turn in the face of death, Heidegger names a “Umkehrung” (“reversal”), which translator Albert Hofstadter adapts with the theological term “conversion” (304; 123). The figure capable of enacting the conversion process in Rilke’s poetry, according to Heidegger, is the Angel (312; 131). The Angel who undertakes the conversion process is the poet, and the poet’s words are the naming of this conversion.

In the context of secularism, Rilke mourns the loss of existential values; his poetic alternative amounts to the re-investment of such values minus their religious content. The praise with which he invests death compensates for the lament that underscores the modern turn away from religion. In the secular age, a new language was necessary to naming the existential component of life. Rilke understands this process and identifies the urgency with which naming needs to be rescued from religion’s ruins:

Hier ist des Säglichen Zeit, hier seine Heimat.
Sprich und bekenn. Mehr als je
fallen die Dinge dahin, die erlebbaren, denn,
was sie verdrängend ersetzt, ist ein Tun ohne Bild.
Tun unter Krusten, die willig zerspringen, sobald
innen das Handeln entwächst und sich anders begrenzt.
Zwischen den Hämmern besteht
unser Herz, wie die Zunge
zwischen den Zähnen, die doch,
dennoch, die preisende bleibt.

This is the time for what can be said. Here
is its country. Speak and testify. The things we can live with are falling away more than ever, replaced by an act without symbol. An act under crusts that will easily rip as soon as the energy inside outgrows them and seeks new limits. Our heart survives between hammers, just as the tongue between the teeth is still able to praise.

(original italics; Sämtliche 718-19; Elegies/Sonnets 63-65)

With reference to the here and now, Rilke urges for the need to be present in Being. In place of religious content, the codification of Being is inscribed with the new forces that foster secularism. As the land of presence, Rilke circumscribes for Being its own proper territory as if it were private property that needs to be protected from the threat of external competition; private property relations and exchange-value colonize its most intimate territory. Heidegger himself describes the conversion process of Being “in sein Eigenes eigens einkehrt” (“entering into its own”) territory. (Holzwege 310; Poetry 129). What appears to be a contradiction amounts rather to the peculiar problem of modernity in which private property increasingly penetrates the most intimate spheres of existence and thereby colonizes the space of Being with the commodity structure. In his study Kafka’s Travels, John Zilcosky discusses “Kafka’s ambition to render internal spaces strange” (Travels 38). He argues that a number of writers, such as Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Arthur Schnitzler, Rilke, Thomas Mann, “like Kafka, turned the voyage inward, and discovered, contemporaneously with Freud, the exotic nature of ‘home’. But these writers, unlike Kafka, did not so clearly literalize the concept of travel in their internal journeys” (38). Zilcosky’s argument opens up the discussion of the displacement of colonialism to the inner realm. In Freudian and Marxist terms, the modern struggle for territories of resources and labour that culminated in World War I is reflected in the contestation for the land of the
subconscious. Lamenting the passing of personal interests in simply living through time and
the deflation in existential value during his historical moment, Rilke describes the moment
at which acts – as with words – lose their meaning, not merely in the semantic sense, but
also in the existential one. What Rilke witnesses is the period in which gestures in the form
of habits and rituals lose their existential meaning and simply become mere actions
according to the arbitrary structure of exchange-value. A historical moment passes.

Constitutive of the sense of value in Rilke’s poetics at the time of composing the
Duineser Elegien (Duino Elegies) and Die Sonette an Orpheus (The Sonnets to Orpheus),
the relationship between image and action is crucial. Although things themselves encounter
“der vertrauliche Tod” (“death, that intimate friend”), recuperating their essences in new
forms constitutes the kind of action that Rilke has in mind (Sämtliche 720; Elegies/Sonnets
67). Doing so requires an active role from the creator who makes things by imbuing them
with invisible, existential values: “Heil mir, daß ich Ergriffene sehe. Schon lange / war uns
das Schauspiel nicht wahr / und das erfundene Bild sprach nicht entscheidend uns an” (Hail,
to see men in the grip of something! It’s been so long / since the spectacle seemed real to us
/ and the invented image cut through to our hearts”) (Andreas-Salomé/Rilke 370-71; 262).
In the German original, “Bild” (Sämtliche 370) refers more broadly to “image,” rather than
merely to translator Poulin’s “symbol” (Elegies/Sonnets 262). Poulin’s English version,
however, conveys the sense of existential value that is ascribed to a given thing that is
produced; rather than a thing being made in a disinterested manner, the thing ought to be
created (i.e. acted upon) with Being instead of produced through alienated labour practices.
By trying to keep alive the memory of action and creativity imbued with existential value,
Rilke seeks a safe haven from the encroaching forces of exchange-value. His retreat to
Château Muzot is one example of his flight from alienation. Although he deploys terms similar to private property for the distinctive terrain of Being, Rilke seeks instead to preserve a shelter for Being from the encroachment of private property upon the existential realm.

The lament for the retreat of personally-invested production suggests how Rilke responds to the alienated industrialized relations of his time; modern industrialized production impinges upon Rilke’s own poetics of production. Himself an incurable procrastinator throughout his career, Rilke had great trouble in motivating himself to write. Between November 1915 and February 1922, for instance, Rilke was incapable of gathering his creative forces to complete the *Duineser Elegien* (*Duino Elegies*) (Graff 327). Despite forcing himself to perform poetic exercises, he nevertheless often felt that his poetic spirit lacked the inspiration that would make his poems authentic. The heart that “[z]wischen den Hämmern besteht” (“survives between / hammers”) captures the dichotomy in his poetic production: either the hammers of the heart beat out things with their cares or the hammers of alienated production pulverize the heart (*Sämtliche* 719; *Elegies/Sonnets* 65). Despite mourning the modern depreciation of the heart, Rilke nevertheless overcomes alienation to sing songs of praise. Responding to the lament of the *Duineser Elegien* (*Duino Elegies*), the voice of *Die Sonette an Orpheus* (*The Sonnets to Orpheus*) answers with praise. As Rilke’s Orphic song suggests, the heart’s survival depends upon understanding the distinction.

By forsaking exchange-value in favour of existential value, Rilke enacts the kind of contradictory relationship to value that Paul de Man explains in Idealist rhetorical terms as disfiguration. “The failure of figuration” (*Allegories* 54), de Man writes, “thus appears as the undoing of the unity it claimed to establish between the semantic function and formal structure” (54). With the arbitrariness of the sign in mind, de Man argues that Rilke’s
Poetics offers a promise of recuperating stable meaning while dissolving into a lie of figuration (56). In other words, the promise of presence is broken by the lie of literature. Underpinning his promise/lie distinction, however, is the deconstructive tactic of discrediting dialectics as a closed, totalizing form; instead of dialectics, de Man opts for paradox to describe the process by which dis-figuration opens onto new totalities. But de Man’s description is nothing other than the liberating form of dialectics itself. At key moments of his argument, de Man makes theoretical grafts and distortions. In his analysis of “Orpheus. Eurydike. Hermes” (“Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes”), for instance, he argues that Rilke denies the “desire for a possession within presence” (46). Furthermore, the lines that de Man comments and translates negate his own argument:

Die So-geliebte, daß aus einer Leier
mehr Klage kam als je aus Klagefrauen;
daß eine Welt aus Klage ward, in der
alles noch einmal da war.

Beloved, so beloved, that from one lyre
Came more woe than ever came from wailing women
and thus arose a world of woe in which
all things once more were present. (Sämtliche 544; Allegories 47)

Precisely through his song, does Orpheus animate his “Welt aus Klage” (“world of woe”) (544; 47). But he does not bring Eurydice back; he elicits sorrow at having lost her. In terms of presence, representation does not bring the referent back; rather, it raises the response to the thing. While Eurydice does not rise from the dead a second time, Orpheus’ “Welt aus Klage” “world of woe” (544; 47) came into being out of woe (“aus Klage ward”) (Sämtliche 47). In place of loss emerges response. Whereas de Man argues that all figuration disintegrates, Rilke does not address the problem in terms of preservation but
rather of accompaniment. Examining the roots of the Greek “metaphorā” reveals the sense of association that Rilke suggests: “to carry among, with, beside, after”.

In the Duineser Elegien (Duino Elegies), Rilke eventually maintains the distinction between preserving the presence of a given phenomenon and transforming it into a new one. Questioning the reality of existential phenomena, Rilke deepens his understanding of value by giving image to elusive things past and present. Figured in terms of the invisible, the experiences that he describes indicate that the visible is not the only valid form of experience. Metaphor is the linguistic means for providing appearance to the otherwise invisible existential component of experience.

Perishing, they turn to us, the most perishable, for help. They want us to change them completely in our invisible hearts, oh – forever – into us! Whoever we finally may be.

Earth, isn’t this what you want: to resurrect in us invisibly? Isn’t it your dream to be invisible one day? Earth! Invisible! What’s your urgent charge, if not transformation?

(translation by Margaret J. Donald and Harry C. Ellington; original italics; Sämtliche 719-20; Elegies/Sonnets 65)

The transformation from the visible phenomena surrounding “das Einfache, das, von Geschlecht zu Geschlechtern gestaltet / als ein Unsriges lebt, neben der Hand und im Blick” (“some simple thing shaped for generation after generation / until it lives in our hands and in our eyes, and it’s ours”) to their invisible essences formed through action bear meaning for
history passed on through language (719; 65). But the “desire for a possession within presence” that de Man denies Rilke does not involve a static transfer of substance; instead Rilke takes into account the active role of the living in keeping alive the perishing (Allegories 46). The living actively keep alive what perishes through the act of transforming it. The invisible Being of the perishing is given voice anew in the speech of the living. Such existential dialogue gives Rilke’s poetry its redemptive quality: “Uns soll / dies nicht verwirren; es stärke in uns die Bewahrung / der noch erkannten Gestalt…. / in deinem Anschau / steh es gerettet zuletzt” (“it should commit us to preserve / the form we can still recognize…. / finally redeemed in your eyes”) (my ellipsis; Sämtliche 712; Elegies/Sonnets 51, 53).

By way of voice and image, Rilke recognizes in poetic language a medium for rendering the invisible visible. Structured along the lines of physical materialism and Idealism, the images of earth transformed into breath represent the thematic of extracting Being from natural phenomena. In the description from Sonnet 1.13 of the apparently benign act of eating an apple, he shows exactly how language is a medium for the dialogue of Being. Setting aside the Adamic associations with eating an apple, Rilke urges describing phenomena without external attachments: “Wagt zu sagen, was ihr Apfel nennt” (“Dare to say what you call apple”) (739; 109). But where to begin? With a description of the apple’s flavour, colour, and size?

Diese Süße, die sich erst verdichtet, um, im Schmecken leise aufgerichtet, klar zu werden, wach und transparent, doppeldeutig, sonnig, erdig, hiesig – : O Erfahrung, Fühlung, Freude –, riesig!

This sweetness that condenses first
so in the taste that’s tenderly intense

it may become awake, transparent, double
meaning, bright, earthy, ours –
O knowledge, feeling, joy – immense! (739; 109)

Rather than giving a mere description of its physical characteristics, Rilke points to the existential components of the apple as a natural object. His description of the apple’s existential features should not be confused with any kind of metaphysical substance; rather, he suggests deriving from earthly phenomena the illuminations of human existence: “VOLLER Apfel, Birne und Banane, / Stachelbeere… Alles dieses spricht / Tod und Leben in den Mund” (“Banana and pear, plump apple, / gooseberry… All these reveal / life and death inside the mouth”) (original ellipsis; 739; 109). As living things that give sustenance, fruits, in their ripening, also represent the decay of dying; embracing that decay is the decisive element in Rilke’s existential philosophy. Quite literally, fruit tastes of life and death; consequently, the taste required for detecting that flavour is not simply aesthetic but existential.

Besides eating, the other correlation to death is that other function of the mouth, namely speaking: “Wird euch langsam namenlos im Munde? / Wo sonst Worte waren, fließen Funde, / aus dem Fruchtfleisch überrascht befreit” (“Is the unspeakable slowly growing in your mouth? / Released from the fruit’s pulp, astonished, / Discoveries flow where words usually were”) (739; 109). Exchanging the mouthful of fruit for the mouthful of language, Rilke’s addressee is brought to the limits of Being. On the way past dead metaphor, the speaker crosses the limits of expression on the threshold of silence and enters the realm of Being. In the examples with fruit, language mediates Being. “Wagt zu sagen, was ihr Apfel nennt” (“Dare to say what you call apple”) therefore takes on special meaning
for confronting the limits of language and entering the territory of Being in order to dwell in it (739; 109).

Most peculiar, however, is the description of eating the apple as an experience of possession: “klar zu werden, wach und transparent, / doppeldeutig, sonnig, erdig, hiesig” (“it may become awake, transparent, double / meaning, clear, bright, earthy, ours”) (739; 109).

Why the insistence on ownership in relation to Being? Ownership is crucial to the process of transformation in Rilke’s notion of Being. Trading apples for oranges, Rilke elides Being with possession precisely in the moment of transforming earthly experience into poetry.

Tanzt die Orange. Wer kann sie vergessen, wie sie, ertrinkend in sich, sich wehrt wider ihr Süßsein. Ihr habt sie besessen. Sie hat sich köstlich zu euch bekehrt.

Dance the orange. Who can forget it, how, drowning in itself, it refuses its own sweetness. You’ve possessed it. Exquisite, it’s been transmuted into you. (740; 113)

The experience of ownership is the core of Being. To be is to have. Existential transformation is the process in which Being becomes having. The same characterization of Being as a form of ownership also forms Heidegger’s philosophy. Despite his attempts at purity in creating an ontology of Being, Heidegger could not escape property relations. For both Rilke and Heidegger, possession is the defining feature of presence. The question is a philosophical one that has been historically ignored from a materialist perspective.

No matter Rilke’s calls to turn experience and thought into action, he circumscribes such action to the sphere of philosophy and language rather than of society. Continuing with fruit as the source of the encounter with Being, Rilke commands: “Mädchen, ihr warmen, Mädchen, ihr stummen, / tanzt den Geschmack der erfahrenen Frucht! // Tanzt die
Orange” (“Girls, you girls who are silent and warm, / dance the taste of the fruit you’ve been
tasting. // Dance the orange”) (739; 113). Rilke develops the encounter of Being by showing
that it can be turned into aesthetic form. Whereas the apple provided an opportunity for
coming into Being in language, the orange represents going further by transforming Being
into art. Not only do the transformations apply to Idealist philosophy, but they also take
shape in poetry. Rather than confront the force encroaching upon the territory of Being,
Rilke retreats into philosophical escapism. In his rejection of the society of the machine,
Rilke makes the case precisely for such a home apart from the world. Despite the invasion
of technology in so many spheres of existence, Rilke insists upon the resilience of Being to
set itself apart:

   Aber noch ist uns das Dasein verzaubert; an hundert
   Stellen ist es noch Ursprung. Ein Spielen von reinen
   Kräften, die keiner berührt, der nicht kniet und bewundert.

   Worte gehen noch zart am Unsäglichen aus…
   Und die Musik, immer neu, aus den bebendsten Steinen,
   baut im unbrauchbaren Raum ihr vergöttlichtes Haus.

   But for us existence is still enchanted. It’s still
   Beginning in a hundred places. A playing
   of pure powers no one can touch and not kneel to and marvel.

   Faced with the unutterable, words still disintegrate…
   And ever new, out of the most quivering
   stones, music builds her divine house in useless space. (757; 157)

Rilke argues that machine-oriented modernity is not entirely determining; instead, enchanted
spaces of Being remain available. As the power that is impervious to social control, the
spirit of Being is indomitable and always manages to build its own proper dwelling.
Alluding to the stones that Orpheus animated with his song, Rilke suggests that the house of
poetry is built with the stones of Being. Built “unbrauchbaren Raum” (“in useless space”),
the home carries no economic value (757; 157).

Upon completing the Duineser Elegien (Duino Elegies) and Die Sonette an Orpheus
(The Sonnets to Orpheus) at Muzot, Rilke sent some handwritten copies to Andreas-Salomé
while she was in Göttingen upon which he received some gratifying news for his efforts.
Having studied under Freud, Andreas-Salomé was practicing as a psychoanalyst with
patients at a sanatorium when she received Rilke’s manuscripts. On March 16, 1924, she
describes how she used Rilke’s poems in therapy with her patients:

Es handelt sich um Solche, denen, zufolge ihrer Neurose, alles tot geworden
war, und sie selber waren sich’s auch; nicht nur in tiefer Gleichgültigkeit
überhaupt, sondern in der Weise, daß Lebendiges – Mensch, Kreatur, Natur –
ihnen sofort dinghaft wurde, Sachwert, Unwert, letztlich Unrat, Abhub;
woraus schwere Angstzustände entstehn, bitterliches Entsetzen: tot unter
Totem, sich außerhalb seiner selbst, auslogiert aus sich, dem lebendig
Entsetzten, zu fühlen.

They were the sort of people for whom, as a result of their neurosis,
everything had become dead, and they felt no differently about their own
lives: they existed in a deep apathy, and it caused anything alive – human,
creature, nature – to turn immediately into a thing for them, into a material
object, a worthless non-thing, in the end garbage, a cast-off piece of filth.
This produces severe states of anxiety, bitter terror: dead among dead things,
to feel that one stands outside oneself, has been evicted from oneself, from
someone still vividly terrified. (Andreas-Salomé/Rilke 486; 345)

The psychology and existential homelessness that she describes captures much of the
modern sentiment of ennui that goes back to Baudelaire’s apathetic bourgeois. Rilke’s
poems, however, provided Andreas-Salomé’s patients with a new sense of home:

Andere aber horchten zum erstenmal auf an Deinem Ton als dem des Lebens:
und das war von unbeschreiblicher Erschütterung, daß sie ihn hörten und
verstanden, ehe sie noch das Verständlichste des sie umgebenden Tages
lebendig zu fassen vermochten oder gar etwas aus dem Bereich der
Kunst….so daß Dein Ton als derjenige der Heimat zuerst wahrnehmbar wird,
Heimat erst öffnet.
there were others who sat up and took notice for the first time when they heard your tone as that of Life: and it was indescribably moving that they heard and understood it before they were capable of grasping even the most readily understandable attributes of the day around them, much less any experience from the realm of art, as something alive…. (So that your tone as the sound of home is the first to become perceivable, is the one that serves to open home). (original italics and parentheses; 486-87; 346)\(^{23}\)

Rather than any semantic meaning in Rilke’s poetry, the tone that Andreas-Salomé describes corresponds to the spirit of care that animates his verse. That the tone of his spirit resonated with the patients for whom the world was otherwise mute indicates the paradoxical power of language to communicate Being silently. From out of the visible, physical world, Rilke’s poetry of praise opens onto the invisible home of Being. The fundamental figure of the home provides the existential dwelling that Rilke sought in composing the Duineser Elegien (Duino Elegies) and Die Sonette an Orpheus (The Sonnets to Orpheus). However, Rilke’s desire to seclude himself in a house of song puts into question whether or not he sang in “Einklänge ins Allgemeine” (“harmony with the prevailing voice”) (368; 261). Recalling a conversation, Rilke’s close friend Katharina Kippenberg recounts how, disabused of any illusions in the proper dwelling of art, Rilke confessed: “‘Art is superfluous’” (qtd. in Graff

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\(^{23}\) The German word “Ton” refers not only to the cognate “tone” but also to “sound”. The philosophical resonance that Andreas-Salomé has in mind reverberates beyond empirical sounds to existential acoustics. In Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik. Welt—Endlichkeit—Einsamkeit (The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude), Heidegger discusses the philosophy of “tone” as “Stimmung” (“attunement”), which literally means “mood” and which has its roots in the word “Stimme” (“voice”): “Die Stimmung ist nicht ein Seiendes, das in der Seele als Erlebnis vorkommt, sondern das Wie unseres Miteinander-Daseins” (“Attunement is not some being that appears in the soul as an experience, but the way of our being there with one another” (Grundbegriffe 100; Fundamental Concepts 66). Registering more properly the musical resonance of the term, Heidegger adds: “Eine Stimmung ist eine Weise, nicht bloß eine Form oder ein Modus, sondern eine Weise im Sinne einer Melodie, die nicht über dem sogenannten eigentlichen Vorhandensein des Menschen schwebt, sondern für dieses Sein den Ton angibt, d. h. die Art und das Wie seines Seins stimmt und bestimmt” (“An attunement is a way, not merely a form or a mode, but a way [Weise]—in the sense of a melody that does not merely hover over the so-called proper being at hand of man, but that sets the tone for such being, i.e., attunes and determines the manner and way [Art und Wie] of his being” (original square brackets and italics; Grundbegriffe 101; Fundamental Concepts 67). In his poetics of silence, Paul Celan likewise understands the sense of “attunement” as listening with an ear to the existential silences that paradoxically resonate in poetic expression. For my discussion of Celan’s poetics of silence, see pp. 171-75 of chapter 4.
334). Wracked with illness at the end of his life, he confessed to another friend, Erika Mitterer, that his heart-space was inadequate for dealing with his suffering: “‘I who set out to say ‘yea’ to both life and death, am now stunned by the struggle which is called sickness’” (335). With his illness, Rilke could no longer deny just how earthbound he was. Throughout a life of struggling with his demons, Rilke strove to live among angels. That he had to sacrifice his social and family life in order to sculpt the language of angels, however, indicates the extent to which self-possession eluded him.
Chapter Four: “Als gäb es, weil Stein ist, noch Brüder”

(“As if, thanks to stone, there were still brothers”)

Just off the way from the rest of Todtnauberg’s residents juts out from the slope above the Black Forest valley the hut in which Heidegger did much of his thinking and writing, as if it had grown out of the landscape. Firs cut sparsely through the valley, primarily demarcating the lines of otherwise grassy properties with a few exceptional groves surrounding the homes. Just outside the hut, Heidegger drew water from the well that was constantly being filled by a hillside spring. Atop the well hovers a star carved of wood. In the distance loom the Alps. Apart from the bare necessities and a small library of his most cherished and well-worn books, the hut’s four wood-panelled rooms made a Spartan dwelling for one of the twentieth century’s most renowned philosophers. Although he and his wife led a generally secluded life in their small-town refuge, Heidegger admitted a number of visitors, the likes of which include a long list of philosophical and literary luminaries. One among them was the poet Celan who made his first visit on July 25, 1967.

At the heart of Celan’s career lies what appears to be an irreconcilable contradiction. As a Jew who fled Nazi-occupied Romania for Paris, he continued to write in his mother tongue, German. Fully aware of Heidegger’s position from 1933 to 1934 as the Rector of Freiburg University under Nazi leadership, Celan held a conflicted relationship with the philosopher whose thought exerted a deep pull on him. Heidegger, for his part, regarded Celan’s poetic gifts with the highest esteem. Besides exposing the absurdity of the myth of pure culture that the Nazis forced on Europe, Celan’s situation found its culminating expression in his most famous poem, “Todesfuge” (“Death-fugue”), which represents his own inability to reconcile Germany with Judaism. He sets the two cultures in stark contrast
with the grotesque couplet: “dein goldenes Haar Margarete / dein aschenes Haar Sulamith” (“your golden hair Margaret / your ashen hair Shulamith”) (Gesammelte 1, 42). Margaret, the iconic blonde German heroine of Germany’s height of literary culture, Faust, radiates beside the lifeless corpse of a Jewish victim named after the figure from the “Song of Solomon” who is transposed to modern times as a victim of the Nazi crematory ovens. The rift that exposes this juxtaposition opens the fundamental problem of modernity of the conflict between opposed identities. This rift was opened much earlier and found its philosophical expression in Hegel’s work, with which both Celan and Heidegger reckoned.

While the opposition that the Nazis set up against European Jewry is a political one, Hegel’s philosophy of recognition serves as the modern starting-point for unfolding the logic of split-identity. Celan takes up Hegel’s logic of identity by bringing language, identity, and history together in the body of his work, and breathes life into them. He describes himself as one who “mit seinem Dasein zur Sprache geht, wirklichkeitswund und Wirklichkeit suchend” (“goes with his very being to language, stricken by and seeking reality”) (Gesammelte 3: 186; Selected 396). The means by which he tests reality is to look at it from opposite poles; understanding reality is not possible otherwise.

\[
\text{UNLESEBARKEIT dieser Welt. Alles doppelt.}
\]

\[
\text{Die starken Uhren geben der Spaltstunde recht, heiser.}
\]

\[
\text{Du, in dein Tiefstes geklemmt, entsteigst dir für immer.}
\]

\[
\text{ILLEGIBLE this}
\]

24 The translation of this passage is mine.
world. Everything doubled.

Staunch clocks
confirm the split hour,
hoarsely.

You, clamped in your depths,
climb out of yourself
for ever. (Gesammelte 2: 338; Selected 333)

By accounting for the other side of life, he opens the curtain on the drama of the double-world. In fact, Celan tears the curtain apart. Just as the two spaces reflect each other, time is likewise doubled, which gives existence the character of two streams flowing simultaneously. The “Spaltstunde” (“split hour”) shows how time is divided and its separate moments interact with one another (2: 338; 333). The task that Celan poses is to establish how the separate moments of divided time relate to one another and therefore reflect upon each other. By way of the palpable images with which Celan describes the double-life, the generally sparse and surreal juxtapositions that he uses require entering his double-world as if it were another sphere entirely.

The “Du” (“you”) that he addresses and describes as being buried in self-regard in “Unlesbarkeit dieser” (“Illegible this”) suggests taking an excursion outside the self, surveying the land, and returning to the inner regions of the self with the findings (2: 338; 333). Self-regard constitutes the depths out of which the modern individual has ever to climb. The space of the excursion out of the self to other identities is the field of inquiry that Celan explores throughout his career; his map is Hegel’s structure of recognition. As Hegel describes it in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Phänomologie des Geistes), identity is a substance that “in Wahrheit wirklich ist, nur insofern sie die Bewegung des Sichselbstsetzens oder die Vermittlung des Sichanderswerdens mit sich selbst ist” (“is in
truth actual only in so far as it is the movement of positing itself, or is the mediation of its self-othering with itself’) (Phänomologie 23; Phenomenology 10). Of utmost importance for Hegel is that the Subject undergoes the process of discovering the substance that it already is.

In dem Leben eines Volks hat in der Tat der Begriff der Verwirklichung der selbstbewußtsein Vernunft, in der Selbständigkeit des Anderen die vollständige Einheit mit ihm anzuschauen oder diese von mir vorgefundene freie Dingheit eines Anderen, welche das Negative meiner selbst ist, als mein Fürmichsein zum Gegenstände zu haben, seine vollendete Realität. Die Vernunft ist als die flüssige allgemeine Substanz, als die unveränderbare einfache Dingheit vorhanden, welche ebenso in viele vollkommen selbständige Wesen wie das Licht in Sterne als unzählige für sich leuchtende Punkte zerspringt.

It is in fact in the life of a people or nation that the Notion of self-conscious Reason’s actualization—of beholding, in the independance of the ‘other’, complete unity with it, or having for my object the free thinghood of an ‘other’ which confronts me and is the negative of myself, as my own being-for-myself—that the Notion has its complete reality. Reason is present here as the fluid universal Substance, as unchangeable thinghood, which yet bursts asunder into many completely independent beings, just as light bursts asunder into stars as countless self-luminous points. (original italics; 264-65; 212)

While Celan does not consider subjectivity a frozen substance in the Aristotelian sense that Hegel adopts, he is highly concerned with the process of making knowledge actual. What “actual” suggests is the process by which subjectivity makes knowledge its own. For, what is the process of making knowledge actual, if not owning it? The concept of appropriation that Hegel uses to describe the process of making knowledge actual for oneself exposes the fundamental premise of private-property relations that underlie the ideology of identity in the modern period since the French Revolution. Giving the political background to his phenomenology of reflection in Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts (Philosophy of Right), Hegel describes the fundamental right to appropriation: “Die Person hat das Recht, in jede Sache ihren Willen zu legen, welche dadurch die meinige ist, zu ihrem substantiellen
Zwecke, da sie einen solchen nicht in sich selbst hat, ihrer Bestimmung und Seele meinen Willen erhält, — absolutes Zueignungsrecht des Menschen auf alle Sachen” (‘A person has as his substantive end the right of putting his will into any and every thing and thereby making it his, because it has no such end in itself and derives its destiny and soul from his will. This is the absolute right of appropriation which man has over all ‘things’”) (Rechts 106; Right 41). Although Celan developed the logic of the double-world from Hegel’s structure of recognition, the more recent rifts in Europe during the Second World War actualized it for him in his poetry. Hegel’s philosophy was not just an intellectual problem for Celan to understand but rather a fully embodied historical situation that left him divided; in turn, the division demanded a means of gaining control over it.

Throughout his entire poetic career, Celan questioned the nature of split-identity. By pitching a self-posited identity against its negative counterpart as distinct entities in his poetry, he built a stage where the drama of difference plays out. What gathers together in a number of images for negativity, such as shadow, silence, and stone, describes the process of reflection. In “Das Geschriebene” (“What’s Written”), he questions the nature of reflection and draws the cool, dark waters of the deep to the surface.

DAS GESCHRIEBENE höhlt sich, das
Gesprochene, meergrün,
brennt in den Buchten,

in den
verflüssigten Namen
schnellen die Tümmler,

im geewigten Nirgends, hier,
im Gedächtnis der über-
lauten Glocken in – wo nur?

wer
in diesem
Schattengeviert
schnaubt, wer
unter ihm
schimmert auf, schimmert auf, schimmert auf?

WHAT’S WRITTEN goes hollow, what’s
spoken, seagreen,
burns in the bays,

dolphins race
through
liquefied names,

here in foreevered Nowhere,
in a memory of out-
crying bells in – but where?,

who
in this
shadow quadrant
is gasping, who
underneath
glimmers up, glimmers up, glimmers up? (Gesammelte 2: 75; Selected 263)

Emptied of its given meanings, the written poetic word rests as a code for negativity,
conceived here spatially and temporally as an eternal non-place. Shadow, another recurrent
image in Celan’s work is a symbol precisely for such negativity. Giving depth to the
“Schattengeviert” (“shadow quadrant”), Celan suggests a way of thinking that is constantly
mindful of the unknown parts of self and reality (2: 75; 263). In search of the surface, the
obscure self struggles to wrest itself from the nebulous depths. But what offers itself to light
only becomes visible upon passing through obscurity.

Building a specific philosophical, linguistic, historical, and cognitive model upon the
foundation of light, Celan uses dialogue as the logic of insight. At its purest level, the logic
of dialogue in Celan’s poetry derives from Hegel’s dialectics as the structure in which one
identity opens itself in the encounter with a different one and becomes transformed in the
process. Throughout his career, Celan gives image to the dynamic relationship between identity and difference with the I/Thou structure. In its broadest sense, the field of inquiry that Celan opens questions the identity of Self and Other. Within Hegel’s structure of recognition, the Subject enacts this process in the encounter with the other by recognizing itself in the Other; upon going out of itself, the Subject returns to itself: “wiederherstellende Gleichheit” (“self-restoring sameness”) (original italics; Geist 23; Spirit 10). Hegel refers to the “Reflexion im Anderssein” (“reflection in otherness”) as a process in which the Self appropriates self-knowledge through the Other (23; 10). Das Sein ist absolut vermittelt; – es ist substantieller Inhalt, der ebenso unmittelbar Eigentum des Ichs, selbstisch oder der Begriff ist” (“Being is then absolutely mediated; it is a substantial content which is just as immediately the property of the ‘I’, it is self-like or the Notion”) (39; 21). Appropriation is the mechanism by which the relationship between Self and Other functions and makes substance the property of the Self. In the I/Thou structure of his verse, Celan portrays the nature of the relationships that he holds with his various addressees. Often, the addressee is so indefinite as to be open to wild speculation; in other instances, more clues are provided. Is the addressee the obscure part of his psychology? His existential self? His poetic self? His muse? Poetry? His reader? A friend? An opponent? In many of Celan’s poems, a number of these options even overlap. Some of the actual people whom he addresses include fellow poet Nelly Sachs, his mother, and even philosopher Martin Heidegger. Despite the plurality of figures he addresses, Celan nevertheless gives image to the core logic that holds the various dimensions of existence together, which accounts for the

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25 Celan would draw heavily upon the principle of dialogue found in Martin Buber’s Ich und Du (I and Thou). In his copy of Martin Buber’s book, Celan would underline a telling statement that would inform the basis of his poetics: “Geist ist nicht im Ich, sondern zwischen Ich und Du” (“Spirit is not in the I, but between I and You”) (Ich/Du ; I/Thou 89).
sparseness of his verse and gives it the appearance of hermeticism. Fundamentally, his engagement with reflection invites inquiry into the nature of exchange between identity and difference. Whereas Hegel is merely concerned with the Other as the means by which the Self re-affirms itself, Celan proposes equal exchange between Self and Other as the basis of self-possession.

In applying dialectics to questioning identity – whether philosophical, historical, psychological or poetic – Celan presents a model for development that not only opens the way for insight but also for change. Celan’s use of dialectics as a structuring principle in his verse represents a poetics of transformation. More apparently does Celan develop the structure of reflective consciousness in “Sprich auch du” (“Speak You Too”) in which he characterizes the I/Thou relationship in terms of a living dialogue:

Sprich auch du,
sprich als letzter,
sag deinen Spruch.

Sprich –
Doch scheide das Nein nicht vom Ja.
Gib deinem Spruch auch den Sinn:
gib ihm den Schatten.

Gib ihm Schatten genug,
gib ihm so viel,
als du um dich verteilt weißt zwischen
Mittnacht und Mittag und Mittnacht.

Blicke umher:
sieh, wie’s lebendig wird rings –
Beim Tode! Lebendig!
Wahr spricht, wer Schatten spricht.

Speak you too,
speak as the last,
say out your say.

Speak –
But don’t split off No from Yes.
Give your say this meaning too:
give it the shadow.

Give it shadow enough,
give it as much
as you see spread round you from
midnight to midday and midnight.

Look around:
see how things all come alive –
By death!  Alive!
Speaks true who speaks shadow.  (Gesammelte 1: 135; Selected 77)

Focusing attention upon what is not self-evident – or in other words, not apparently given – Celan acknowledges the effort required for “Wirklichkeit suchend” (“seeking reality”) (3: 186; 396).  “Gib ihm Schatten genug” (“Give it shadow enough”) marks the threshold at which self-negation leads to self-transformation (1: 135; 77).  Liveliness is the evidence that bears witness to the development that Celan urges witnessing; the reality that he wants to actualize in his poetry is precisely this liveliness.  Declaring his aesthetic standards in his speech upon winning Germany’s prestigious Georg Büchner prize in 1960, Celan favours life over art.  He makes his claim in quoting a passage from Büchner’s story, “Lenz”: “»…Das Gefühl, daß, was geschaffen sei, Leben habe, stehe über diesen beiden und sei das einzige Kriterium in Kunstsachen«” (“‘…The feeling that what’s been created possesses life outweighs both of these and is the sole criterion in matters of art…’”) (original ellipses; 3: 190; 403).  Celan’s reference establishes a lineage that passes from Büchner back to Jakob Michael Reinhold Lenz, himself a progressive, materialist German writer from the eighteenth-century.  In Büchner’s fictionalized account, Lenz holds forth vehemently against Idealism in literature: “Ich verlange in allem – Leben, Möglichkeiten des Daseins, und dann ist’s gut; wir haben dann nicht zu fragen, ob es schön, ob es häßlich ist.  Das Gefühl, daß,
was geschaffen sei, Leben habe, stehe über diesen beiden und sei das einzige Kriterium in Kunstsachen” (What I demand in all things is – life, full scope for existence, nothing else really matters; we then have no need to ask whether something is ugly or beautiful, both are overridden by the conviction that ‘Everything created possesses life’, which is the sole criterion in matters of art”) (Büchner 72; 149). Seeing beyond aesthetic values, Celan joins an artistic lineage that focuses upon life within the work of art. While it challenges description, the breath that animates the work of art bears historical life, which is so familiar to its contemporaries as to be taken for granted; the historical breath that animates the work of art, however, is the means by which future generations can actualize history in the understanding. The work of art is a historical medium that connects generations by way of the appropriation-mechanism of reflection. In the materialist inversion of the Idealist, biblical breath of the word, the reader breathes the air that animates the historical world of poetry.

With the structure of historical dialogue that he establishes in “Sprich auch du” (“Speak You Too”), Celan engages not only Hegel, but also Martin Heidegger; it is a conversation that he continues throughout his career. The spirit that Hegel regarded as a substance that consciousness inherits and passes on, Heidegger considers unsubstantial in his discussion of Dasein. Literally taken as “Being-there,” Dasein characterizes human life as it is present in relationship to time and as it is without definite properties. The feeling of being present is not a state of Aristotelian substance frozen in time:

The “essence” of Da-sein lies in its existence. The characteristics to be found in this being are thus not objectively present “attributes” of an objectively present being which has such and such an “outward appearance,” but rather possible ways for it to be, and only this. The thatness of this being is primarily being. Thus the term “Da-sein” which we use to designate this being does not express its what, as in the case of table, house, tree, but being. (original italics; Sein 56-7; Being 40)

Within the context of temporality, Dasein cannot be a lasting substance. Being is simply the state of Being in time. Regardless of the characteristics that define it at any given moment, Being lets itself pass along in the course of time. “Die Zeitlichkeit »ist« überhaupt kein Seiendes. Sie ist nicht, sondern zeitigt sich” (“Temporality ‘is’ not a being at all. It is not, but rather temporalizes itself”) (original italics; 434; 302). Where Hegel conceived of consciousness as an instrument that needed to resuscitate the spirit of reflection, Heidegger bequeaths the more fundamental experience of Being qua Being. Although he never managed to complete the projected third division of Sein und Zeit (Being in Time) in which he was to develop the definition of Being in terms of temporality, Heidegger does give time central importance in the first two divisions: “Die fundamentale ontologische Aufgabe der Interpretation von Sein als solchem begreift daher in sich die Herausarbeitung der Temporalität des Seins” (“The fundamental ontological task of the interpretation of being as such thus includes the elaboration of the temporality of being”) (original italics; 26; 16-17). The task of Dasein is to prevent Being from getting stuck in time and let it remain open to its potential. Such a task requires tremendous resolve as of constantly balancing on a tightrope.

Heidegger depicts the balancing act of Being with his complementary images, thrownness (Geworfenheit) and projection (Entwurf). Implicit in Heidegger’s conception of thrownness, Dasein is tossed about in the already-flowing current of the objective circumstances of the world.
Das Selbst des alltäglichen Daseins ist das Man-selbst, das wir von dem eigentlichen, das heißt eigens ergriffenen Selbst unterscheiden. Als Man-selbst ist das jeweilige Dasein in das Man zerstreut und muß sich erst finden. Diese Zerstreung charakterisiert das »Subjekt« der Seinsart, die wir als das besorgende Aufgehen in der nächst begegnenden Welt kennen. Wenn das Dasein ihm selbst als Man-selbst vertraut ist, dann besagt das zugleich, daß das Man die nächste Auslegung der Welt und des In-der-Welt-seins vorzeichnet.

The self of everyday Da-sein is the they-self which we distinguish from the authentic self, the self which has explicitly grasped itself. As the they-self, Da-sein is dispersed in the they and must first find itself. This dispersion characterizes the “subject” of the kind of being which we know as heedful absorption in the world nearest encountered. If Da-sein is familiar with itself as the they-self, this also means that the they prescribes the nearest interpretation of the world and of being-in-the-world. (original italics; 172; 121)

The quotidian concerns of the they-self that distract attention from the authentic self comprise the stream into which Dasein is thrown. Although Dasein’s Being is carried along by the current of the quotidian, it can nevertheless raise its head above the surface. Dasein is not entirely at the mercy of objective conditions.

Heidegger answers the objectivity of thrownness with the subjectivity of projection. As a source of answers to the questions that thrownness poses, Dasein has the potential to respond to its given conditions by virtue of the ‘projects’ that it undertakes as interventions in the world. “Der Entwurfcharakter des Verstehens konstituiert das In-der-Welt-sein hinsichtlich der Erschlossenheit seines Da als Da eines Seinkönnens. Der Entwurf ist die existenziale Seinsverfassung des Spielraums des faktischen Seinkönnens. Und als geworfenes ist das Dasein in die Seinsart des Entwerfens geworfen” (“The project character of understanding constitutes being-in-the-world with regard to the disclosedeness of its there as the there of a potentiality of being. Project is the existential constitution of being in the realm of factical potentiality of being. And, as thrown, Da-sein is thrown into the mode of
being of projecting”) (193; 136). Projection amounts essentially to the potential that Dasein has for being anything despite the given conditions of the world; projection is the philosophical basis of gaining self-possession. Thrownness and projection are so intertwined, however, that the latter is a condition of the former: potential is itself a given condition of thrownness. Braided together, thrownness and projection form the tightrope upon which Dasein’s Being must walk. While the suspension of the tightrope produces great tension, this tension is also the condition that animates Being: “wie’s lebendig wird rings” (“how things all come alive”) (Gesammelte 1: 135; Selected 77).

In contrast to Hegel who sought to resurrect spiritual substance, Heidegger simply sets out to depict the event (Ereignis) by which Dasein lets its Being be in the world. Although he had not fully developed the specific movement of transformation to the extent that Heidegger did, Hegel nevertheless laid the groundwork for the mechanism of appropriation in reflection. The way in which things come alive in Celan’s “Sprich auch du” (“Speak You Too”) through darkness refers to the confrontation with the nothingness of Being that characterizes the movement from the familiar to the foreign. In the crosscurrent of thrownness and projection, a void opens. Since Dasein lacks any stable substance of Being, the potential for Being anything is the nothingness of the potential that lies at the heart of Dasein. In other words, the ground of Being is an abyss (Sein 202; Being 142). Yet in this open space, Dasein enters into history with its projects. Dialectics is the logical structure that provides a way of rendering transformation visible and communicable in word and image. The condition of living the tension produced by the abeyance of thrownness and projection resonates in the “stumm / vibrierender Mitlaut” (“mutely vibrating consonant”) of “Schliere” (“Streak”) (Gesammelte 1: 159; Selected 101). The resolve to keep Being
animated is the path that Dasein may follow; otherwise, Being is concealed from Dasein in the quotidian preoccupations of the they-self. For a poet like Celan, part of his journey involved preserving the legacy of Jewish culture in his verse. The line “sprich als letzter” (“speak as the last”) (1: 135; 77) echoes a comment that Celan once made before composing “Sprich auch du” (“Speak You Too”) as a call for commemorating his people: he recognized his mission to speak as “‘one of the last who must live out to the end the destiny of the Jewish spirit in Europe’” (qtd. in Celan 80). With Jewish culture almost nearly wiped out with its people, Celan’s understanding of Hegel’s dialectic of reflection and Heidegger’s Being form the need not only to affirm his culture but also a call for others to acknowledge it, to be with it. The call resonates not only for saving his own people and their culture but also any people and culture under threat.

While so many of Celan’s structuring images such as shadow, stone, and breath are rich in implication at the existential and linguistic levels, they also resonate with historical and autobiographical undertones. In the dialogue between light and shadow, new idioms constantly emerge. For instance, engaging in conversation with Celan’s verse preserves not only the Jewish culture that had nearly vanished entirely, but also the value of openness that his poetry calls upon the reader to preserve. The kind of Being or ‘liveliness’ that Celan’s poetry calls upon the reader to encounter is not a substance, as Hegel would have it; rather, it is a way of Being. To the extent that such a way of Being resembles Heidegger’s practice of letting beings be, it does not have Dasein’s relation with merely its own Being in view. Celan, instead, establishes the relation of Being with other beings. The relation to other beings is what he has in mind when, in his speech upon winning the Bremen prize for literature, he announces his primary task as the poet who “damit auf das unheimlichste im
Freien, mit seinem Dasein zur Sprache geht, wirklichkeitswund und Wirklichkeit suchen”
(“thus most uncannily in the open, goes with his very being to language, stricken by and seeking reality”) (Gesammelte 3: 186; Selected 396). His understanding of reality contains neither metaphysical substance nor Idealist Being, but the world as it is. Reality is so undeniable as not only to strike its marks but also to do so in a wounding manner as the German diction “wirklichkeitswund” makes explicit (Gesammelte 3: 186). Celan understood that projecting himself into the fray of historical thrownness would come with a certain amount of anguish.

The way in which he endured such uncomfortable feelings in poetry happened in the manner in which he pushed himself to his limits in language. As far as the question of mediation is concerned, the reality that Celan conveys in his poetry takes shape in a form analogous to a shared language in which differences are expressed through individual idioms. As Celan’s own poetry attests, a different idiom – though in a shared language – can be almost as obscure as a foreign language. The concluding stanza of “Sprich auch du” (“Speak You Too”) conveys the difficulty and uncertainty that speaking shadow poses:

Nun aber schrumpft der Ort, wo du stehst:
Wohin jetzt, Schattenentblößter, wohin?
Steige. Taste empor.
Dünner wirst du, unkenntlicher, feiner!
Feiner: ein Faden,
an dem er herabwill, der Stern:
um unten zu schwimmen, unten,
wo er sich schimmern sieht: in der Dünung wandernnder Worte.

But now the place shrinks, where you stand:
Where now, shadow-stripped, where?
Climb. Grope upwards.
Thinner you grow, less knowable, finer!
Finer: a thread
the star wants to descend on:
so as to swim down below, down here
where it sees itself shimmer: in the swell
of wandering words. (Gesammelte 1: 135; Selected 77)

In the confrontation with the unfamiliar, identity is stripped to its barest minimum. Celan once declared: “La poésie ne s’impose plus, elle s’expose” (“Poetry no longer imposes itself, it exposes itself”) (Gesammelte 3: 181)\(^{26}\). As the form of stripping identity bare, the kind of existence that Celan describes is a stripping away of all concealing artifice. The German adjective “eng,” which refers to “straitened conditions,” would come to occupy an important part of his poetics, as it refers to the cramped living conditions and limited means to which his parents and so many others were reduced under the Nazis. “Eng” also refers to the straits of Celan’s poetics and philosophy in which he draws the most out of the fewest words and concepts; this semantic root represents the linguistic economy of his poetics\(^{27}\). As entries in the log-book of his navigations to unfamiliar depths, Celan’s lyrics amount to obscure illuminations. They give trust in the light that reaches the bottom swirl of existence.

In his early essay on the French Surrealist, Edgar Jené, Celan provides encouragement in navigating the looming undercurrents of reality: “die Tiefe nie verlassen und immerzu Zwiesprache halten mit den finstern Quellen” (“never come out of the deep, never stop communing with the dark springs”) (Gesammelte 3: 157; Prose 52). Rather than passively strolling the shore of familiar language, Celan urges diving bravely into the unfamiliar depths.

\(^{26}\) The translation of this passage is mine.

\(^{27}\) Felstiner notes that the title of Celan’s important long poem “Engführung” derives from the “fugue’s ‘stretto,’ the intense overlapping entrances of themes, literally a ‘leading narrowly’ or ‘leading into the straits’” (Celan 118). Within the context in which the poem commemorates the victims of the Shoah, the title also resonates at the existential and material levels in terms of surviving with the barest means possible. The economy of being that Celan describes in “Engführung” is reflected in the sustenance that he draws from minimal language throughout his poetry.
In the effort to preserve the living breath of his mother tongue while residing and working in France, Celan would make frequent trips to Germany to recite his poems, participate in seminars on his work, and meet with his literary agents. In addition, to keeping him current with Germany’s language, culture, and politics, Celan’s trips also gave him a sense of his readers’ relationship to his work. As a result of being away from home so frequently, he engaged in a lengthy correspondence with his wife and son. While on a particular trip in 1954 to Düsseldorf where he participated in a radio show, Celan sent a postcard to Gisèle after his conversation with Rolf Schroers, the German author who had arranged Celan’s appearance on Westdeutscher Rundfunk and the Nobel Prize winning novelist, Heinrich Böll: “Au milieu de vraies paroles vraiment échangées, nous pensons à vous” (“In the midst of true words truly exchanged, we are thinking of you”) (Celan/Lestrange 1: 50). Just what Celan spoke about with his two friends, he gives no indication; however, the nature of the relationship in which their words were exchanged in a truthful manner indicates the extent to which Celan went “mit seinem Dasein zur Sprache geht” (“with his very being to language”) and in his relationships with people (Gesammelte 3: 186; Selected 396). For Celan, a conversation was an exchange in the fullest sense of the word in which he gave himself fully and expected the same from others.

On one of his trips in the summer of 1965, Celan would sit in on some sessions of a seminar that Beda Alleman, a favoured critic of his, had held. In a letter from July 31, 1965 to Gisèle, he recounts how Alleman’s students had shown their gratitude by sending him a postcard in recognition “für das von Ihnen mit so viel Bereitwilligkeit und Geduld geführte

Seminargespräch” (“for the discussion that he had led with so much benevolence and patience during the seminar”) (Celan/Lestrange 2: 230). She responded to him with reassurances of understanding the kind of successful communication that Celan sought:

j’essaye aussi de penser aux autres réalités. A ce groupe d’étudiants par exemple, que tu m’as dit si silencieux pour t’écouter. Lesquels, en dehors de la possibilité de t’entendre faire passer ta poésie en la disant, ont pu aussi t’écouter parler de ta poésie. Tu sais combien les échanges humains et les moments de compréhension sont rares, il faut les savoir rares, savoir aussi que ce sont des “moments seconds” comme tu dis des “états seconds”.

Tu es si riche, tu connais (d’une vraie connaissance), tu as aussi un savoir, tout cela est si rare et t’a été donné si généreusement, et tu as su aussi non seulement le garder mais le faire fructifier et su le partager. C’est très beau, tu sais. Je me le répète souvent.

I’m also trying to think about the other realities. About this group of students for example, who you told me were so silent when listening to you. Who, besides the opportunity of listening to you transmit your poetry while reading it, had also been able to hear you talk about your poetry. You know how much human exchanges and moments of understanding are so rare, they must be acknowledged as rare, also that they are “second moments” in the way that you speak of “second states”.

You are so rich, you know (by way of true understanding), you also have such learning, all that is rare and was given so generously to you, and you knew not only how to keep it, but also how to make it bear fruit, and knew to share it. That’s very nice, you know. I often repeat it to myself. (original underscores; 1: 280)

Gisèle’s reassuring words were crucial at this point, since Celan was undergoing particularly trying times with his editors at S. Fischer Verlag, one of Germany’s two main literary publishing houses; he would eventually leave Fischer for the other leading publishing house, Surhkamp Verlag. Celan’s wife understood the extent to which Celan was invested in his poetry, readings, and conversations as exchanges of Being. Celan was not simply passing on information, but extending his hand in an existential relationship. In a letter to Hans Bender dated May 18, 1960, he declared: “Ich sehe keinen prinzipiellen Unterschied zwischen Händedruck und Gedicht” (“I cannot see any basic difference between a
handshake and a poem”) (Gesammelte 3: 177; Prose 26). Clues to the nature of that relationship are found in the economic resonance of dialogue as exchange in Gisèle’s letter, which suggests the kind of shared property that underlies the kind of relationship that Celan seeks with language and his readers. That the students with whom he discussed his poetry were so receptive and engaged with his work reassured Celan of the value of his work in Germany.

Celan would formally develop his conception of exchange in what would amount to a poetic manifesto of sorts, the Meridian speech. In his speech, Celan developed the trope of the “encounter” (“Begegnung”) for the I/Thou relationship that he explores in “Sprich auch du” (“Speak You Too”) and throughout his entire corpus. Although it amounts to just under fifteen pages, Celan had devoted five months gathering quotes, taking notes, and sketching formulations that fill an entire book of materials numbering some 314 pages (Celan 163). After labouring so long on his statement, he would compress his thinking into the final speech in just three days before delivering his very dense pronouncement on his poetics. Portraying the trope of the encounter as a fully-imagined relationship between two speakers, he dramatizes the act of self-estranged cognition, in which the “I” confronts the poem as an inner “Thou”:

Das Gedicht ist einsam. Es ist einsam und unterwegs. Wer es schreibt, bleibt ihm mitgegeben. Aber steht das Gedicht nicht gerade dadurch, also schon hier, in der Begegnung – im Geheimnis der Begegnung?

Das Gedicht will zu einem Andern, es braucht dieses Andere, es braucht ein Gegenüber. Es sucht es auf, es spricht sich ihm zu. Jedes Ding, jeder Mensch ist dem Gedicht, das auf das Andere zuhält, eine Gestalt dieses Anderen.
The poem is lonely. It is lonely and underway. Whoever writes one stays mated with it.

But in just this way doesn’t the poem stand, right here, in an encounter – in the mystery of an encounter?

The poem wants to reach an Other, it needs this Other, it needs an Over-against. It seeks it out, speaks toward it.

For the poem making toward an Other, each thing, each human being is a form of this Other. (original italics; Gesammelte 3: 198; Selected 409)

Thinking about his living relationship to his poems, Celan conveys the kind of estrangement that comes from encountering another identity. His poems, however, are his own creations, which means that his encounter with his poems amounts to an encounter with himself, as if he were his own stranger. Yet the relationship that he describes is not simply limited to self-reflection; rather, he is mindful of the relationship that other readers have with his poems.

The encounter that he has in mind is predicated upon an unprepossessing way of being; it does not make room for reactionary judgements devoid of brotherly benevolence. Only with benevolence can the “I” properly dwell alongside the “Thou”. Being open to difference is the basis of Celan’s trope of the encounter; whoever is closed, however, is not welcome.

Complementing the existential and social dimensions of the encounter, a historical one also opens up. On October 22, 1960, the day that he delivered the Meridian speech in Darmstadt, Germany, Celan addressed his audience by talking about the time of the Other:

Die Aufmerksamkeit, die das Gedicht allem ihm Begegnenden zu widmen versucht, sein scharferer Sinn für das Detail, für Umriß, für Struktur, für Farbe, aber auch für die »Zuckungen« und die »Andeutungen«, das alles ist, glaube ich, keine Errungenschaft des mit den täglich perfekteren Apparaten wetteifernden (oder miteifernden) Auges, es ist vielmehr eine aller unserer Daten eingedenk bleibende Konzentration.

»Aufmerksamkeit« – erlauben Sie mir hier, nach dem Kafka-Essay Walter Benjamins, ein Wort von Malebranche zu zitieren –, »Aufmerksamkeit ist das natürliche Gebet der Seele.«


The attentiveness a poem devotes to all its encounters, with its sharper sense of detail, outline, structure, color, but also of “quiverings” and “intimations” – all this, I think, is not attained by an eye vying (or conniving) with constantly more perfect instruments. Rather, it is a concentration that stays mindful of all our dates.

“Attentiveness” – allow me here to quote a saying by Malebranche from Walter Benjamin’s Kafka essay – “Attentiveness is the natural prayer of the soul.”

A poem – under what conditions! – becomes the poem of someone (ever yet) perceiving, facing phenomena, questioning and addressing these phenomena; it becomes conversation – often despairing conversation.

What is addressed takes shape only in the space of this conversation, gathers around the I addressing and naming it. But what’s addressed and is now become a Thou through naming, as it were, also brings along its otherness into this present. Even in a poem’s here and now – the poem itself really has only this one, unique, momentary present – even in this immediacy and nearness it lets the Other’s ownmost quality speak: its time. (3: 198; 409-410)

By giving the Other its own time, Celan makes a case for historical consciousness, with the structure of the encounter as the bridge that spans the banks of past and present. By the same token, Celan also built bridges to the future. Although he describes it as “oft... verzweifeltes Gespräch” (“often despairing conversation”), Celan expresses his faith that consciousness can access different historical moments (my ellipsis; 3: 198; 410). In the exchange between I and Thou, both express their historical time in their own idiom and manage to understand each other by way of the shared language of historical consciousness. When speaking, the I must remain mindful of the Thou’s own language. “Language,” in the
sense that Celan uses it, refers not simply to its linguistic usage, but rather to the specific historical position out of which it names its own world. To the extent that Celan is concerned with the existential Being of the Thou, he does not predicate it upon metaphysical mystifications but rather upon historical reality; history connects the I to the Being of the Thou. Like the line that connects two points on the earth at the shared point of midday, the meridian after which his speech is titled captures precisely the existential bridge through history that Celan spent his entire life building with his poetry.

Among the most important tropes in his work, the encounter came to Celan by way of Osip Mandelstam’s image of the message in a bottle in his essay “On the Addressee”. First published in 1913 as an Acmeist riposte to Symbolism, Mandelstam’s essay explains why he did not write for his contemporary readers:

Every man has his friends. Why shouldn’t the poet turn to his friends, to those who are naturally close to him? At a critical moment, a seafarer tosses a sealed bottle into the ocean waves, containing his name and a message detailing his fate. Wandering along the dunes many years later, I happen upon it in the sand. I read the message, note the date, the last will and testament of one who has passed on. I have the right to do so. I have not opened someone else’s mail. The message in the bottle was addressed to its finder. I found it. That means, I have become its secret addressee.

My gift is poor, my voice is not loud,
And yet I live – and on this earth
My being has meaning for someone:
My distant heir shall find it
In my verses; how do I know? my soul
And his shall find a common bond,
As I have found a friend in my generation,
I will find a reader in posterity.

Reading this poem of Baratynsky, I experience the same feeling I would if such a bottle had come into my possession….The message, just like the poem, was addressed to no one in particular. And yet both have addresses: the message is addressed to the person who happened across the bottle in the sand; the poem is addressed to “the reader in posterity”. (“Addressee” 68-69)
Speculating upon the perspective of future readers demands the formidable task of thinking about future history. There is much at stake. Successfully gauging the context out of which the future reader’s judgement will be located determines not simply whether or not the poet will achieve posterity, but in Mandelstam and Celan’s cases, whether or not their culture and way of life will be recognizable and offer any sense of direction. The hand that they extend to future readers is the gift of solidarity in recognition across time. The question of readership in the trope of the encounter therefore applies not only to cognition and phenomenology but also to history. Celan did not just enter into a conversation with the dead; he also wrote his poetry with the hope that his voice would echo beyond his own time. Consequently, Celan took Mandelstam’s message and passed it on. In his Bremen speech, Celan describes the grim hope of touching the shores of a distant reader’s heart:


Worauf? Auf etwas Offenstehendes, Besetzbares, auf ein ansprechbares Du vielleicht, auf eine ansprechbare Wirklichkeit.

Um solche Wirklichkeiten geht es, so denke ich, dem Gedicht.

A poem, as a manifestation of language and thus essentially dialogue, can be a message in a bottle, sent out in the – not always greatly hopeful – belief that somewhere and sometime it could wash up on land, heartland perhaps. Poems in this sense too are underway: they are making toward something

Toward what? Toward something standing open, occupiable, perhaps toward an addressable Thou, toward an addressable reality.

Such realities, I think, are at stake in a poem. (Gesammelte 3: 186; Selected 396)

From a desert island in the midst of the open seas, Celan holds out the promise of contact and even of a shared place with whoever gets his message. As the space of Being, the heartland is rare, because it defies the entanglements of property relations. In capitalist
culture, where even meaningful intimacy is kept private, Celan urges the need to come out of isolation and build the shared bonds of Being. In contrast, the frozen political climate of the Stalinist bureaucracy in which Mandelstam was writing later kept its citizens in the grip of its chill. That Celan and Mandelstam send their messages from distant desert islands highlights not simply their isolation, but also the openness with which they made themselves available to whoever seeks them out. The stakes are no less than reaching the heartland.

The echoes that he has left for future attentive listeners, Celan figured in terms of the relationship between speech and silence. Taken as the negative correlative of speech, silence is not barren, but rather pregnant in “Schliere” (“Streak”):

Schliere im Aug:
von den Blicken auf halbem Weg erschautes Verloren.
Wirklichgesponnenes Niemals,
wiedergekehrt
Wege, halb – und die längsten.

Seelenbeschrittene Fäden,
Glasspur,
rückwärtsgerollt
und nun
vom Augen-Du auf dem steten Stern über dir
weiss überschleiert.

Schliere im Aug:
daß bewahrt sei
ein durchs Dunkel getragenes Zeichen,
vom Sand (oder Eis?) einer fremden Zeit für ein fremderes Immer
belebt und als stumm vibrierender Mitlaut gestimmt.

Streak in the eye:
Lostness caught sight of
Halfway along by the beholder.
Truly spun Never,
Ways, half – and the longest.

Soul-stridden threads,
glass trace
rolled backward
and now
filmed white
by the Eyes’ Thou on a steady
star above you.

Streak in the eye:
so as to guard
a sign dragged through the dark,
quickened by the sand (or ice?) of a
strange time for a stranger Ever
and tuned as a
mutely vibrating consonant.  (original parentheses; 2: 159; 101)

The streak that passes over the eye partially covers vision, but not necessarily as a
hindrance; rather, the streak forms part of the structure of vision in which the eye cannot
ignore concrete reality and must also take into account the unseen. Lost possibility,
unrealized potential, unknown quanta are ever present in Celan’s perspective; they open
closures of ignorance and alienation onto paths of knowledge and Being. As a development
of Walter Benjamin’s theory of the dialectical image, Celan’s streak in the eye represents the
structure of dialectical vision. What remains unthought demands attention, since it

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29 In Das Passagen-Werk, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, vol. 5, part 1 of
Gesammelte Werke, 6 vols. in 15 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972-1987), Walter Benjamin describes his
understanding of the dialectical image in the following manner: “Wenn die Bilder von den »Wesenheiten« der
Phänomenologie unterscheidet, das ist ihr historischer Index. (Heidegger sucht vergeblich die Geschichte für
die Phänomenologie abzukürzen, durch die »Geschichtlichkeit« zu retten.) Diese Bilder sind durchaus
abzugrenzen von den »geistetheswissenschaftlichen« Kategorien, dem sogenannten Habitus, dem Stil etc. Der
historische Index der Bilder sagt nämlich nicht nur, daß sie einer bestimmten Zeit angehören, er sagt vor allem,
daß sie erst in einer bestimmten Zeit zur Lesbarkeit kommen. Und zwar ist dieses »zur Lesbarkeit« gelangen
ein bestimmter kritischer Punkt der Bewegung in ihrem Inneren. Jede Gegenwart ist durch diejenigen Bilder
bestimmt, die mit ihr synchronistisch sind: jedes Jetzt ist das Jetzt einer bestimmten Erkennbarkeit. In ihm ist
die Wahrheit mit Zeit bis zum Zerspringen geladen. (Dies Zerspringen, nichts anderes, ist der Tod der Intentio,
der also mit der Geburt der echten historischen Zeit, der Zeit der Wahrheit, zusammenfällt.) Nicht so ist es, daß das Vergangene sein Licht auf das Gegenwärtige oder das Gegenwärtige sein Licht auf das Vergangene
provides bearings for following the horizon of understanding and existence. As the “durchs Dunkel getragenes Zeichen” (“sign dragged through the dark”), the streak echoes the predicament of language, as the Nazis had obscured its relationship to reality beyond all recognition; more broadly, it reveals how negativity gives a fuller sense of reality in language (2: 159; 101).

Standing out as one of the most striking images in Celan’s poetry, the “stumm / vibrierender Mitlaut” (“mutely vibrating consonant”) captures how expression is brought to life in silence (1: 159; 101). In another moment of shared sensibility, Celan in a radio address on Mandelstam shows how he was attuned to the vibrations that resonate throughout his fellow poet’s verse:

wirft, sondern Bild ist dasjenige, worin das Gewesene mit dem Jetzt blitzhaft zu einer Konstellation zusammentritt. Mit andern Worten: Bild ist die Dialektik im Stillstand. Denn während die Beziehung der Gegenwart zur Vergangenheit eine rein zeitliche ist, ist die des Gewesnen zum Jetzt eine dialektische: nicht zeitlicher sondern bildlicher Natur. Nur dialektische Bilder sind echt geschichtliche, d. h. nicht archaishe Bilder. Das gelesene Bild, will sagen das Bild im Jetzt der Erkennbarkeit trägt im höchsten Grade den Stempel des kritischen, gefährlichen Moments, welcher allem Lesen zugrunde liegt” (“What distinguishes images from the ‘essences’ of phenomenology is their historical index. (Heidegger seeks in vain to rescue history for phenomenology abstractly through ‘historicity.’) These images are to be thought of entirely apart from the categories of the ‘human sciences,’ from so-called habitus, from style, and the like. For the historical index of the images not only says that they belong to a particular time; it says, above all, that they attain to legibility only at a particular time. And, indeed, this acceding ‘to legibility’ constitutes a specific critical point in the movement at their interior. Every present day is determined by the images that are synchronous with it: each ‘now’ is the now of a particular recognizability. In it, truth is charged to the bursting point with time. (This point of explosion, and nothing else, is the death of the intendio, which thus coincides with the birth of authentic historical time, the time of truth). It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is purely temporal, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: not temporal in nature but figural <bildlich>. Only dialectical images are genuinely historical—that is, not archaic—images. The image that is read—which is to say, the image in the now of its recognizability—bears to the highest degree the imprint of the perilous critical moment on which all reading is founded” (original italics; Gesammelte 5.1: 577-78; Arcades 462-63). As a form that Benjamin had in mind for opening revolutionary consciousness, the dialectical image consists of an image that juxtaposes two historical moments in a manner that jars consciousness into recognition of the dialectical nature of history. The resulting flash of historical recognition strikes like a lightning bolt and opens critical class consciousness of historical subjectivity. In turn, the flash ought to affect the will to historical intervention. The English translation refers to the following edition: Walter Benjamin, The Arcades Project, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Belknap, 1999) 462-63.
Es ist dieses Spannungsverhältnis der Zeiten, der eigenen und der fremden, das dem mandelstamm’schen Gedicht jenes schmerzlich-stumme Vibrato verleit, an dem wir es erkennen. (Dieses Vibrato ist überall: in den Intervallen zwischen den Worten und den Strophen, in den „Höfen“, in denen die Reime und die Assonanzen stehen, in der Interpunktion. All das hat *semantische Relevanz*).

It is this tension [these strained relations] of the times – that is ours and that is strange – that lends to the Mandelstammian poem that painfully-mute vibrato, by which we recognize it. (This vibrato is everywhere: in the intervals between the words and the stanzas, in the “courtyards” where the rhymes and assonances stand, in the punctuation. All that has *semantic relevance*). (my square brackets, original parentheses and italics; *Meridian* 216)\(^{30}\)

While vibration seems like a benign and even negligible effect of poetic rhythm, Celan indicates rather that it plays a pivotal role in conveying the sense of Being. The tension that Heidegger describes arising from the place where the currents of thrownness and projection cross each other are the vibrations that Celan finds twanging throughout Mandelstam’s poetry. As the poet scans the comfortable ground of familiarity from the heights of creative flight, which is at once exhilarating and frightening, the vibrations convey the flow of poetic breath. The vibrations are those of the tightrope of Being, as Dasein ventures out across its span and keeps balance in self-possession. The kind of poetic breath in question is not simply a metaphysical or metaphorical one but rather a literal kind of breathing; in turn, the vibrations of Being are actually perceptible at the physiological level. The vibrato that Celan hears throughout Mandelstam’s poetry is the music that resonates from the strings of Being when they are struck. In Celan’s own verse, the vibrations of Being are captured not only in his rhythms but also in his images. Gathered under the title *Ich hörte sagen: Gedichte und Prosa* (*I Heard It Said: Poems and Prose*), recordings exist of a number of

\(^{30}\) Paul Celan, *Der Meridian: Endfassung, Vorstufen, Materialien*, ed. Bernhard Böschenstein and Heino Schmull (Frankfurt am Main: Surhkamp, 1999) 216. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from this text are mine.
poems that Celan recited variously throughout the 1950s and 1960s. One of the predominant features of his reading of “Schliere” (“Streak”) is the momentum that he builds up with all the rolling “r” sounds in the title and the first stanza. “Wirklichgesponnenes Niemals” (Hörte) culminates in propulsion before suddenly being yanked back by “wiedergekehrt,” and again by the later “rückwärtsgerollt” of the streak coming over the glassy eye turning back in its water. The final thrumming of the “m” repeated in the closing phrase “als stumm vibrierender Mitalaut gestimmt” sets the ear hovering right at the point of tension where the two currents of Being meet (Hörte). A poem about the poetic word turning against the current of quotidian usage and coming into the sight of Being, “Schliere” (“Streak”) manifests precisely the kind of awareness to existential movement that he hears in Mandelstam’s work. Vibration however, does not simply correspond to pure Being but rather to historical Being to the extent that both Celan and Mandelstam have in mind the quickening of historical consciousness in their verse: “ein durchs Dunkel getragenes Zeichen, / vom Sand (oder Eis?) einer fremden / Zeit für ein fremderes Immer” (“a sign dragged through the dark, / quickened by the sand (or ice?) of a / strange time for a stranger Ever”) (original parentheses; Gesammelte 2: 159; Selected 101). The “Spannungsverhältnis der Zeiten” (“tension of the times”) is carried forth through history in the encounters with their poetry (Meridian 216).

As his finely-tuned ear indicates, Celan’s sensitivity to the affective dimensions that lie outside semantics proper gets to the core of his aesthetic. Although his verse is full of literary references, it amounts to more than an intertextual play of literary references. What is so often mistaken for hermeticism in his verse is instead a careful engagement with the traditions out of which he is working; the fundamental images such as stone, eye, and mouth
all belong to long cultural traditions with which he converses. Rather than merely expressing his own private emotions, Celan speaks with the traditions of poetic tropes in mind. In so doing, he keeps his own version of what Hegel calls the “Gesit” (“spirit” or “mind”) of these traditions alive; rather than merely expressing his own personal emotions in hermetic verse, Celan keeps the spirit alive by embodying it in the images that – although rendered unfamiliar – he develops out of tradition. What seems hermetic in his verse is simply tradition that he transforms by virtue of his active engagement with it, rather than any kind of mere conservative mummification of culture. Whereas Hegel adopts the spirit of culture as a set of substances, Celan acknowledges their changing historical quality by praising, questioning, and even countering them. His poetry embodies the spirit of the traditions that he keeps alive and thus in flux. Although Celan’s poetry portrays long swaths of history, philosophy, and even geologic time as the largest perspective possible for exceeding personal confession, it nevertheless does convey emotion; instead of ignoring tradition, emotion in his verse is compacted with it. The tension in the paradox between speech and silence of the “stumm / vibrierender Mitlaut” (“mutely vibrating consonant”), for instance, registers not only at the existential and affective-physiological levels but also at the historical one (Gesammelte 1:159; Selected 101). The image is not simply to be interpreted per se, but rather sensed; its significance lies in feeling the vibration as the full embodiment of resonant silence not as a theme, but rather as the experience of Being in what Celan recognized in Mandelstam’s verse as the “Spannungsverhältnis der Zeiten” (“tension of the times”) (Meridian 216).

A look at a book in Celan’s library resonates with his attunement to Being in verse. In the Spring of 1954, Celan picked up a copy of Helmuth von Glasenapp’s Die Literatur
Indiens von ihren Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart (Indian Literature from Its Beginnings to the Present) in Cologne. He found an expression of his poetics in a comment that von Glasenapp makes regarding the sound of silence:

“die Seele der wahren Poesie ist das Unausgesprochene, der “Ton” (dhvani), auf welchem sie gestimmt ist. Der Grad der Vollkommenheit einer Dichtung bestimmt sich deshalb danach, ob sie bei dem empfänglichen Hörer oder Leser neben den Vorstellungen, die in ihm das Wort des Dichters weckt, noch solche Gedanken hervorruft, die nicht mit Worten ausgedrückt wurden oder ausgedrückt werden können”.

“the soul of true poetry is the unspoken, the “tone” (dhvani), in which it is voiced. The degree of perfection in a poem therefore defines itself accordingly, whether it lies in the imaginings that the poet’s words arouse in the receptive listener or reader, or those thoughts that call out to them, which either are not or cannot be expressed with words”. (qtd. in Kommentar 184)

Von Glasenapp’s discussion of the unspoken in such a long tradition as that of Indian poetry gives credence to Celan’s awareness of vibration and silence in his own verse. While the theme and structure of silence is traditionally conceived in terms of an absence proper, the suggestion of the unspoken in von Glasenapp’s definition is not an absence per se; rather, he proposes that the unspoken belongs to the tone (sound; note) (“Ton”) according to which the poetic words are attuned (qtd. in Kommentar 184). In addition to tone as such, von Glasenapp suggests more pointedly the spirit in which the words are expressed. Neologisms aside, Celan’s vocabulary is utterly elemental: eye, mouth, stone, grass, flower come to life on his pages. However, the air that his words breathe – “Schärfer als je die verbliene Luft” (“Sharper than ever the air remaining”) – is entirely different from that of their anemic usage in the quotidian, prosaic sense (Gesammelte 1:178; Selected 113). Poetic and prosaic language are tuned differently; hence, the voice that von Glasenapp claims for the tone of

31 Jürgen Lehman, ed, Kommentar zu Paul Celans »Sprachgitter«, (Heidelberg: Winter UP, 2005) 184. All translations of citations from this edition are mine.
poetry is the absence that requires filling in or rounding out on the part of the reader or listener. Since poetry does not have the clues of notation that musical scores provide, the tone in which a poem is voiced amounts to the unspoken. Tone, as Celan understands it in von Glasenapp’s passage is the historical dimension come to life; the pockets of silence in the poem are the places of historical life that the poet voices and “shows” (i.e. gives appearance or face to), and that the reader sees and hears: “als stumm / vibrierender Mitlaut gestimmt” (“tuned as a / mutely vibrating consonant”), the key to “Schliere” (“Streak”) is the tension between speech and silence as if of a violin-string either being plucked or snapping (Gesammelte 1:159; Selected 101). The double-vision and double-hearing that characterizes Celan’s poetry sets the tone for straddling the line between speech and silence and erasing the distinction between them. Coming to the edge of language in silence is the springboard to voicing poetry. Feeling the vibration on that edge is the feeling of poetic spirit on its anxious yet exhilarating course.

The philosophical source that was more thoroughly developed with regards to the role of silence in language for Celan, Heidegger’s questioning of Being, provides a similar approach to the attunement that von Glasenapp suggests. According to Heidegger, the language of Being contains an unspoken element that remains hidden, yet lies present within the silent crevasses of utterance. Celan’s claim from “Sprich auch du” (“Speak You Too”) that “[w]ahr spricht, wer Schatten spricht” (“[s]peaks true who speaks shadow”) illuminates precisely the kind of silence that Heidegger thought about throughout his career (1: 135; 77). Heidegger had conceived of Celan’s kind of shadow-talk in terms of the “Verschwiegenheit” (“reticence”) of speech. In a set of lectures that Heidegger delivered in 1925 and that were subsequently published under the title, Prolegomena zur Geschichte des
Zeitbegriffs (History of the Concept of Time: Prolegomena), Heidegger claims: “Solcher Verschwiegenheit entstammt das echte Hörenkönnen und in diesem konstituiert sich das echte Miteinandersein” (“Genuine ability to hear comes from such reticence, and genuine being-with-one-another constitutes itself in this ability”) (Prolegomena 369; History 268).

Precisely by virtue of such reticence, Dasein enters the realm of its Being. Established in a relation of dialogue, the silence of language draws the listener into the realm of Being away from the “Gerede” (“chatter”) of quotidian language; silence, rather than speech proper, teaches the ability to hear. Indeed, silence eventually supersedes words for Heidegger.

Later in his career, Heidegger turns his attention to silence as the origin of language:

Zueinandersprechen heißt: einander etwas sagen, gegenseitig etwas zeigen, wechselweise sich dem Gezeigten zutrauen. Miteinandersprechen heißt: zusammen von etwas sagen, einander solches zeigen, was das Angesprochene im Besprochenen besagt, was es von sich her zum Scheinen bringt. Das Ungesprochene ist nicht nur das, was einer Verlautbarung entbehrt, sondern es ist das Ungesagte, noch nicht Gezeigte, noch nicht ins Erscheinen Gelangte. Was gar ungesprochen bleiben muß, wird im Ungesagten zurückgehalten, verweilt als Unziegbares im Verborgenen, ist Geheimnis. Das Zugesprochene spricht als Spruch im Sinne des Zugewiesenen, dessen Sprechen nicht einmal des Verlautens bedarf.

To speak with one another means: to tell of something jointly, to show to one another what that which is claimed in the speaking says in the speaking, and what it, of itself, brings to light. What is unspoken is not merely something that lacks voice, it is what remains unsaid, what is not yet shown, what has not yet reached its appearance. That which must remain wholly unspoken is held back in the unsaid, abides in concealment as unshowable, is mystery. That which is spoken to us speaks as dictum in the sense of something imparted, something whose speaking does not even require to be sounded. (original italics; Unterwegs 241-42; Way 122)

Like the unvoiced tones that von Glasenapp notes in his discussion of Indian verse, the silence that Heidegger discusses actually speaks plenty. Words contain silence just as much as they contain sound. Of decisive importance is being able to hear what the silence says.
In light of Heidegger’s silence on his political past, Celan would eventually demand answers.

The image that most characteristically conveys Celan’s themes of negativity in the forms of shadow, silence, and gaps is the speech-grille (Sprachgitter), after which he titled his most-renowned collection, as well as one of his poems.

Augenrund zwischen den Stäben.

Flimmertier Lid
rudert nach oben,
gibt einen Blick frei.

Iris, Schwimmerin, traumlos und trüb:
Der Himmel, herzgrau, muß nah sein.

Schräg, in der eisernen Tülle,
der blakende Span.
Am Lichtsinn
erätst du die Seele.

Standen wir nicht
unter einem Passat?
Wir sind Fremde.)

Die Fliesen. Darauf,
dicht beieinander, die beiden
herzgrauen Lachen:
zwei
Mundvoll Schweigen.

Eyes round between the bars.

Fluttering lid
Paddles upward,
Breaks a glance free.

Iris, the swimmer, dreamless and drab:
heaven, heartgray, must be near.

Aslant, in the iron socket,
a smoldering chip.
By sense of light
you hit on the soul.

(Were I like you. Were you like me.
Did we not stand
under one trade wind?
We are strangers.)

The flagstones. On them,
close by each other, both
heartgray puddles:
two
mouthfuls of silence.

(original parentheses and italics; Gesammelte 1:167; Selected 107)

Composed between 1957 and 1958 upon visiting his then-fiancée’s mother who was staying in a convent at the time, “Sprachgitter” (“Speech-Grille”) describes Celan’s efforts to establish a bond with his unapproving future mother-in-law. The attempt was challenging, because his fiancée’s mother, a French Catholic marquise, did not approve of her daughter marrying an Eastern European Jew (Celan 107). Depicting the attempt to secure his mother-in-law’s blessing, “Sprachgitter” (“Speech-Grille”) uses dialogue between figures from two different religious backgrounds as a means of coming to understanding, agreement, and even harmony in the French and German senses of the verb “to hear” in the reflexive voice “s’entendre” and “sich hören”; the poem therefore, takes on broader social implications with regards to religious acceptance. At its basic level, however, the speech-grille image represents recognition of the limits and freedoms of language; as one of the main – if not the main – images of Celan’s work, it deserves special attention. Like the bars of the convent door or of a prison, the speech-grille blocks free passage and permits only partial vision; by the same token, however, the bars are not entirely impermeable because of the spaces between them. As an image for language, the speech-grille represents the recognition that parts of reality pass through the latticework of language while others fail. In a letter to his
editor, Rudolf Hirsch, dated July 26, 1958, Celan describes the image of the speech-grille: “in »Sprachgitter« auch das Existentielle, die Schwierigkeit alles (Zueinander-)Sprechens und zugleich dessen Struktur mitspricht” (“‘Speech-Grille voices both the difficulty of all speaking (to one another) and at the same time its structure’”) (Celan/Hirsch 44-45; qtd. in Celan 107). Commenting on the existential relations between people at the period of composing Sprachgitter (Speech-Grille), Celan makes an important distinction for himself: he no longer finds people being “like” (Celan 107) one another but rather being “distanced” from each other (108). When Celan and Gisèle visited her mother, the grille of the convent-door separated them from her; although perhaps being able to pass their fingers through the bars, they could not fully interact. Surmounting the challenge that the condition of the speech-grille poses takes the kind of faith characteristic of self-possession.

The image of the speech-grille is even more appropriate from a historical perspective for suggesting the undeniable, tangible evidence of historical reality, as well as the potential for society to be different. Although Heidegger thought that he brought phenomenology into the historical realm, he nevertheless sheltered his understanding of Being in its relation to itself. His driving point of historical Being, especially in Sein und Zeit (Being and Time), remains strictly within the realm of existence proper as a kind of cloistered detachment from society. Proof of his detachment came in the form of his retreat around 1934 from his brief foray into politics when he realized that the so-called “Nazi revolution” would not bring about the transformation in the metaphysics of Being that he had in mind (Safranski 281). The primary problem that Heidegger addressed in the discussion of history is the question of destiny. His model of thrownness and projection gets at the algebra of destiny in terms of the intersection between the given conditions of existence and the power to act upon them.
The problem with Heidegger’s argument is that he lays the springboard of historical change on philosophy rather than on history proper.

In contrast to Heidegger’s strictly philosophical view of history, Marx and Engels’ answer to the question of the individual’s position within social relations captures the dialectical sense of the speech-grille image. Marx characterizes the intermediary position of the individual within social relations by making a crucial distinction regarding materialism in his “Thesen über Feuerbach” (“Theses on Feuerbach”): “Der Hauptmangel alles bisherigen Materialismus (den Feuerbachschen mit eingerechnet) ist, daß der Gegenstand, die Wirklichkeit, Sinnlichkeit nur unter der Form des Objekts oder der Anschauung gefaßt wird; nicht aber als sinnlich menschliche Tätigkeit, Praxis; nicht subjektiv” (“The chief defect of all previous materialism (that of Feuerbach included) is that things [Gegenstand], reality, sensuousness, are conceived only in the form of the object or of contemplation, but not as sensuous human activity, practice, not subjectively”) (original brackets, italics, and parentheses; “Thesen” 5; “Theses” 3). According to Marx, the individual is born into a set of given circumstances that are defining; however, those historically-objective circumstances are not necessarily definitive in a determining sense, because of the subjective component of being able to act upon them. The subjective component of existence is the variable that negates objective conditions in changing them.

If drawn in geometrical form, Marx and Engels’ understanding of the individual’s historical position represents an axis upon which the historically-objective line crosses the subjective one; the point at which they meet represents the core of human existence with regards to the ratio of social conditions to freedom and self-possession. The “[f]limmertier Lid” (“flittering lid”) (Gesammelte 1: 167; Selected 107) that “gibt einen Blick frei”
(“breaks a glance free”) (107) in “Sprachgitter” (“Speech-Grille”) represents being able to reach through the confining bars of reality and change it. Capturing the sense of the crosscurrent between given conditions and re-shaping them, Marx and Engels give a materialist understanding of the tension that Heidegger describes between thrownness and projection. Marx and Engels write in Die deutsche Ideologie (The German Ideology): “Die Produktion von Ideen, Vorstellungen, des Bewußtseins ist zunächst unmittelbar verflochten in die materielle Tätigkeit und den materiellen Verkehr der Menschen, Sprache des wirklichen Dasein. Das Vorstellen, Denken, der geistige Verkehr der Menschen erscheinen hier noch als direkter Ausfluß ihres materiellen Verhaltens’” (“The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men – the language of real life. Conceiving, thinking, the mental intercourse of men at this stage still appear as the direct efflux of their material behaviour”) (Ideologie 26; Ideology 36). As the historical point where objective conditions are woven with subjective consciousness, the point of contact on Marx and Engels’ historical axis echoes in the “stumm / vibrierender Mitlaut” (“mutely vibrating consonant”) (Gesammelte 1: 159; Selected 101). The decisive factor consists in being able to speak with one’s own words; doing so means speaking in the language of self-possession. The motifs of silence, stone, and the speech-grille that lead to a thematic of negativity therefore do not simply depict an image of language but also of history; they provide the clue to the potential for stepping into the flow of history and redirecting the current.

Continuing to develop the theme of negativity as free space, Celan invites his addressee to enter it as if it were a house of silence in “In die Ferne” (“Into the Distance”).
By using the extended metaphor of a landscape as a distant dwelling that is located in high altitudes where the air is hard to breathe, Celan concretizes otherwise intangible silence.

Stummheit, aufs neue, geräumig, ein Haus –:
Komm, du sollst wohnen.

Stunden, fluchschön gestuft: erreichbar die Freistatt.

Schärfer als je die verbliebene Luft: du sollst atmen,
atmen und du sein.

Muteness, afresh, roomy, a house –:
come, you should dwell there.

Hours, fine-tuned like a curse: the asylum in sight.

Sharper than ever the air remaining: you must breathe,
breathe and be you. (Gesammelte I: 178; Selected 113)

What is most peculiar about this poem in Celan’s oeuvre is the almost direct way that it maps the path to peace. Although Celan had already spent a lot of time in mental health institutions by the time that he wrote this poem in 1957, the German word for “asylum” (“Freistatt”) remains within the boundaries of “refuge” rather than of a mental hospital. Having struggled with so much hardship throughout his life, he understood that trekking to the distant refuge was arduous. Celan nevertheless promises peace at the end of struggle; in fact, peace only comes by virtue of striving, just as the pleasure of poetry is predicated upon the dogged commitment to language. Reaching the limits of language on the border of silence is indeed a painful task. Like the language of parable or aphorism, “In die Ferne” (“Into the Distance”) brings thinking to a halt, which can only be overcome with a leap. Yet silence is not simply the final destination; it is also the departure-point of poetry. Celan’s poems record the task of coming to silence as the starting-point for poetic language. The
initial impenetrability of his poem is significant precisely as the means by which it draws the reader into silence.

While in an actual asylum in 1965 after his most serious breakdown, Celan read assiduously little else apart from the French newspaper, *Le Monde*, and an edition of French Surrealist and Resistance fighter, Paul Éluard’s poetry for a projected translation of his work. In the margin of one of Éluard’s poems, Celan wrote a statement that encapsulates the significance of silence in his verse: “Qui ne donne pas au poème la force de résistance de l’incommunicable n’a pas écrit de poème” ("Whoever does not give to poetry the force of the resistance of the incommunicable has not written a poem") (Celan/Lestrange 2: 266). Poetry amounts to setting up walls that must somehow be passed through. Celan still had the image of the speech-grille in mind. While the resistance that the poet creates seems to be far from a charmed life, it reveals the other side of the “[s]tunden, fluchschön gestuft” ("[h]ours, fine-tuned like a curse") (Gesammelte 1: 178; Selected 113). Instead of a merely strenuous demand, the resistance of poetry is the gift that the challenge to interpretive resources gives. By extension, the challenge with language that the poet sets for the reader acts not only as a model for interpretation but also for a way of Being that exercises subjective strength. Reading, according to Celan, is not simply an act of decoding signs but an ethos of active subjectivity; both poet and reader must pass their hand through the bars of the speech-grille. Celan sets the exercise of strength in contradistinction to the coercive, oppressive exercise of power. The resistance that Celan poses for reading calls the reader to engage in an ethics of courage. In addition to performing an ethos of strength, he invokes the reader to do the same. In response to Gisèle’s letter, Celan answered with his own words of support and illustration of the ethics that he and his wife both drew from their own work
and each other’s: “Je suis content que ton travail s’ordonne autour [de] ce que, dans l’art, tu fais vivre et que tu mets en évidence. Maintenant, en gravure, tu te réaliseras, en liberté” (“I am happy that your work is ordered around what, in art, you bring to life and make evident. Now, in etching, you will realize yourself, in liberty”) (original brackets; Celan/Lestrange 1: 359). Revealing their creative work as the rehearsal for the world, Celan and his wife’s correspondence indicates that the values expressed in art bear little currency unless they are put into practice.

As a form of metonymy for muteness, distance represents leaving behind familiar speech – the muteness of daily chatter – for the threshold of muteness that leads into the dwelling of the speech of Being. The crosscurrent of thrownness and projection that Heidegger describes as the tension of Being applies likewise to how Dasein lives in language. Although Celan describes muteness as the house of Being, he is merely giving the negative half of language. Dasein must therefore, counter the current of the quotidian chatter into which it is thrown and follow the current of poetic projection. The task of the poet is to keep such awareness of naming alive and to pass it on as the testimony of witnessing Being and history. In the notes to the Meridian speech, Celan explicitly states: “jedes durch ein Wort bezeichnete Ding trägt die Spur des […] Dichters; der Dichter wohnt in seinem Worten” (“every thing that is marked with a word bears the trace of the […] poet; the poet dwells in his words”) (original ellipsis, my brackets; Meridian 115). According to Celan’s testimony, poetry bears the marks of the poet; the greater implication is that history itself is inscribed in the poet and poetry. This inscription attests to Celan’s recognition of dwelling within history.
With the image of the house of silence in “In die Ferne” (“Into the Distance”), Celan engages with the existential trope of the dwelling as the trope of Being. Having read Heidegger’s various essays and articles on dwelling by the time that he had composed “Sprachgitter” (“Speech-Grille”), Celan had already made prolonged stays in the dwelling of Heidegger’s philosophical thinking. Celan builds upon Heidegger’s formulation from “Wozu Dichter?” (“What are Poets for?”) and “Brief über den Humanismus” (“Letter on Humanism”): “Die Sprache ist das Haus des Seins” (“Language is the house of Being”) (“Brief” 313; “Letter” 239). Celan introduces the trope of the dwelling in the opening line of “In die Ferne” (“Into the Distance”): “Stummheit, aufs neue, geräumig, ein Haus” (“Muteness, afresh, roomy, a house”) (Gesammelte 1:178; Selected 113). In Celan’s case, however, muteness is the house of Being. As the existential dwelling, muteness represents the crevices in language where Being is concealed. These mute crevices echo the “Ton” (“tone” or “sound”) in the statement that Celan had underlined in von Glasenapp’s anthology of Indian literature: “die Seele der wahren Poesie ist das Unausgesprochene, der “‘Ton’” (“the soul of true poetry is the unspoken, the “‘tone’”) (qtd. in Kommentar 184). Silence, in the form of muteness, is the point of unfamiliarity with which Celan confronts his readers in order to invite them into the dwelling of Being. By the same token, silence is the gift that Celan gives his reader to join in the conversation with him. As a daunting invitation to where “[s]chärfer als je die verbliebene Luft” (“[s]harper than ever the air remaining”), “In die Ferne” (“Into the Distance”) describes a dwelling place that houses the kind of relation to Being that Heidegger discusses (Gesammelte 1:178; Selected 113). Celan makes a similar invitation in another poem from Sprachgitter (Speech-Grille), “Heute und Morgen” (“Today and Tomorrow”): “So steh ich, sternern, zur / Ferne, in die ich dich führte” (“Thus I
stand, stony, to the / remoteness to which I led you”) (Gesammelte 1: 158; Speech-Grille 97). Celan openly acknowledges that he leads his readers down the path of unknown silence.

Built with walls of silence, the house of “In die Ferne” (“Into the Distance”) shelters vital language. Likened to a refuge, the house of silence draws from the long philosophical tradition of the home as an image for dwelling in thought and in Being; as the cipher for dwelling in the sense of thinking and of developing a sense of familiarity with a given place, the figure of the home stands as a cipher for Being. More specifically, Heidegger spent a considerable amount of his life devoted to dwelling upon dwelling. In his most comprehensive essay on the matter, “Bauen Wohnen Denken” (“Building, Dwelling, Thinking”), Heidegger characterized dwelling not as a kind of thinking, but as a way of Being and he goes to language to unearth its foundations:

Let us listen once more to what language says to us. The Old Saxon wuon, the Gothic wunian, like the old word bauen, mean to remain, to stay in a place. But the Gothic wunian says more distinctly how this remaining is experienced. Wunian means: to be at peace, to be brought to peace, to remain in peace. The word for peace, Friede, means the free, das Frye, and fry
means: preserved from harm and danger, preserved from something, safeguarded. To free really means to spare. The sparing itself consists not only in the fact that we do not harm the one whom we spare. Real sparing is something positive and takes place when we leave something to its being, when we “free” it in the real sense of the word into a preserve of peace. To dwell, to be set at peace, means to remain at peace within the free, the preserve, the free sphere that safeguards each thing in its nature. The fundamental character of dwelling is this sparing and preserving. It pervades dwelling in its whole range. That range reveals itself to us as soon as we reflect that human being consists in dwelling and, indeed, dwelling in the sense of the stay of mortals on the earth. (original italics and ellipsis; Vorträge 150-51; Poetry 147)

By unfolding the various eymologies of “Wohnen” (“dwellling”), Heidegger depicts it as the relation to beings that lets them be as they are.

In his early thinking on dwelling, Heidegger distinguished it from the home, which represents what is familiar to the point of being too comfortable (i.e. the homely). Counter to the ease of the homely, Angst compels Dasein into the unfamiliar territory of the unhomely (unheimlich). The unhomely captures the sense of simply not feeling at home in the world; the unhomely is the condition of Dasein being broken out of the habits of its habitation. Echoing Novalis’ claim “‘[d]ie Philosophie ist eigentlich Heimweh, ein Trieb überall zu Hause zu sein’” (“‘[p]hilosophy is really homesickness, an urge to be at home everywhere’”) (Grundbegriffe 7; Fundamental Concepts 5), Heidegger himself states “philosophizing, we heard somewhere, is supposed to be a homesickness” (120; 80). The set of associations regarding dwelling, the home, and homelessness around which Heidegger discusses Being places at the core of his philosophy the fundamental question confronting human relations.

Property relations form the basis of struggle in human history, as Marx and Engels made clear. In taking up a polemic with Eugen Dühring for fostering pseudo-science, Engels proceeds to mount a materialist understanding of history. Commenting upon the historical
events that led to the development of their materialist understanding of history, he observes in *Herr Eugen Dührings Umwälzung der Wissenschaft* (Anti-Dühring) (Anti-Dühring: Herr Eugen Dühring’s Revolution in Science) that with the working-class struggles in France in 1831 and in England in 1838 and 1842, the “neuen Tatsachen zwangen dazu, die ganze bisherige Geschichte einer neuen Untersuchung zu unterwerfen, und da zeigte sich, daß alle bisherige Geschichte die Geschichte von Klassenkämpfen war….Hiermit war…eine materialistische Geschichtsauffassung gegeben und der Weg gefunden, um das Bewußtsein der Menschen aus ihrem Sein, statt wie bisher aus ihrem Bewußtsein zu erklären” (“new facts made imperative a new examination of all past history. Then was seen that all past history was the history of class struggles….now a materialistic treatment of history propounded, and a method found of explaining man’s ‘knowing’ by his ‘being’, instead of, as heretofore, his ‘being’ by his ‘knowing’”) (original italics, my ellipses; Anti-Dühring 25; 26-27). Engels charts the course of human history along the lines of the struggle for shelter. Without refuge, food, and work, humankind cannot thrive. Under capitalism, not everybody experiences the security of a guaranteed home. Property insecurity does not necessarily mean being relegated to homelessness per se; rather, the insecurity of private property involves the constant divisive struggle for holding onto it and the ever-looming threat of losing it.

What Novalis had in mind with the concept of homelessness, however, he explains merely by way of philosophy. Along with Novalis, Heidegger in turn justifies the condition of homelessness as the natural condition of existence by describing language as “das Haus des Seins” (“the house of Being”) (“Brief” 313; “Letter” 239). As the disguise for explaining the fundamental affliction of hovering over a philosophical abyss, the association
between philosophy and homelessness conceals the reality that private property holds existence in abeyance without a safety net. On August 5, 1951, in the period during which Heidegger delivered “Bauen Wohnen Denken” (“Building, Dwelling, Thinking”) as a lecture, the problem of dwelling was a very tangible one. Just after World War II, Germany was in the midst of its reconstruction efforts, so that securing proper housing for its citizens was a fundamental problem. Acknowledging the situation in his conclusion, Heidegger nevertheless explicitly disregards the primary importance of material living conditions:

So hart und bitter, so hemmend und bedrohlich der Mangel an Wohnungen bleibt, die eigentliche Not des Wohnens besteht nicht erst im Fehlen von Wohnungen. Die eigentliche Wohnungsnott ist auch älter als die Weltkriege und die Zerstörungen, älter auch denn das Ansteigen der Bevölkerungszahl auf der Erde und die Lage des Industrie-Arbeiters. Die eigentliche Not des Wohnens beruht darin, daß die Sterblichen das Wesen des Wohnens immer erst wieder suchen, daß sie das Wohnen erst lernen müssen.

However hard and bitter, however hampering and threatening the lack of houses remains, the real plight of dwelling does not lie merely in a lack of houses. The real plight of dwelling is indeed older than the world wars with their destruction, older also than the increase of the earth’s population and the condition of the industrial workers. The real dwelling plight lies in this, that mortals ever search anew for the nature of dwelling, that they must ever learn to dwell. (original italics; Vorträge 163; Poetry 159)

Circumscribing the problem of homelessness within philosophical boundaries, Heidegger separates it from the problem of material dwelling. Furthermore, he does not attribute a proper sense of home even within philosophy. In his agreement with Novalis, homelessness is simply a fact of nature whether philosophical or social. The only given in Heidegger’s philosophy is nothingness despite his claim to “[p]ositives” (“positive”) sparing in his definition of dwelling (original italics; Vorträge 150-51; Poetry 147).

As an Eastern European Jewish immigrant, Celan had been subjected to a variety of uncomfortable living arrangements in Paris after World War II even after having lost both
parents and home in Romania. The struggle to regain a modicum of comfort compounded his trauma of having lost his parents in the camps. One of the symptoms of his psychological malaise was poetic silence. In October 1948, he laments to Swiss editor, Max Rychner: "'For months I haven’t written,’” because “‘something unnameable is laming me’” (qtd. in Celan 59). Likening his situation to the figure in Kafka’s parable “Before the Law,” Celan’s biographer, John Felstiner records a letter in which Celan describes feeling excluded from the space of poetic creativity: “‘When a door opens…I hesitate so long that this door closes again’” (original ellipsis; 59). Celan’s malaise would continue throughout 1952 once he started regaining his bearings with giving French and German lessons, studying philology and German literature at the École Normale Supérieure (60), and getting married (67). In 1957, Celan finally found the comfort of his own home when he and his new family moved into a home of their own, an apartment at 78, rue de Longchamp. From this moment onward in their correspondence, Celan and Gisèle frequently mention the sense of security that their home gives them. Often signing his letters off with the mention of “our house/home,” Celan refers not merely to the bricks and mortar to which he returned from his so frequent trips to Germany to make readings and maintain his German but also refers to the existential sense of home that he had with the woman that he loved and to whom he felt so strongly attached, as well as the son that he so cherished. Shortly before moving into their own apartment, Celan reassured his wife of the coming comfort that home would provide them: “Ne vous tourmentez pas, ma Chérie, quoi qu’il arrive, nous serions bientôt logés, et un peu à l’abri de la bassesse humaine” (“Don’t torment yourself, my dear, no matter what happens, we will soon have a good roof over our heads, and be sheltered somewhat from human baseness”) (Celan/Lestrange 1: 91). The sense of well-being that Celan mentions is not simply one of
an existential shelter but the recognition that such shelter depends upon having a dwelling of their own. A stable home life was crucial to Celan after having fled Czernowitz, spent unsettled stays in Budapest and Vienna, before finally settling in Paris. He had a high sensitivity for inauthenticity in people and the low tolerance for such people that usually comes with it. Furthermore, Gisèle was one of the few people whom he felt was genuine with him. For a man with the kind of experience that he had had, Celan was fully aware of the necessity of having a comfortable home in which to dwell.

While Celan had encountered the hardship of real homelessness, Heidegger lived from the comfortable advantage of his rectorship at the University of Freiburg and the Romantic idyll of his rustic hut located in the hills of the Black Forest where he excavated the foundations of ancient Greek philosophy upon which he constructed his phenomenology of dwelling. Not until a British and American bomber attack upon Freiburg at the end of 1944 were the comforts of his life as a university professor under threat (Safranski 332). Once the French occupied the city in the spring of 1945, Heidegger had to face the prospect of losing his home and employment (333-35). The French military government set about requisitioning the houses in the city in order to billet its soldiers. Among the first that they sought, were those of Nazi officials. As part of the occupation’s activities, the French military government also established a denazification committee to purge the city’s institutions of its officials. In the effort to rid the University of Freiburg of its Nazi professorship, the committee had billeted soldiers in Heidegger’s home and deprived him of his livelihood by forbidding him to teach. After deliberating upon the severity with which to reprimand Heidegger for his Nazi background, the committee decided on January 19, 1946 to strip him of his teaching license and leave him with a reduced pension (341). The
deprivations were vengeance for Heidegger’s greatest error in judgement. Heidegger’s political adventurism in German fascism betrayed a terrible naïveté on his part. How could such an insightful philosopher shoot so wide of the mark politically? Clearly, Heidegger did not approach politics scientifically any more than he did phenomenology, as his life-long philosophical attacks on science indicate. Celan, by contrast, understood how the very rich philosophical tradition of dwelling as a trope for existence was not simply an idea but rather grounded in actual, social reality. His understanding of dwelling in such material terms amounts to his own rebuttal to Heidegger’s questioning of dwelling.

In the course of composing the poems for his collection, Atemwende (Breathturn), Celan took a new path in his poetics. The title of the book indicates a turn towards a poetics based on the traditional trope of breath. Within Jewish mysticism, the word ‘breathturn’ refers to spiritual discovery. Much like the trope of the turn in Heidegger’s philosophy, Celan’s breathturn denotes a new direction in his spirit. In contrast to his later turn to light, as particularly registered in the posthumous collection, Lichtzwang (Light-Compulsion), Atemwende (Breathturn) announces the commitment to life in language. Celan describes the breath that flows in and out of the dwelling:

HOLS LEBNIGHF. Im Windfang
die leer-
geblassene Lunge
blüht. Eine Handvoll
Schlafkorn
weht aus dem wahr-
gestammelten Mund
hinaus zu den Schnee-
gesprächen.

HOLLOW HOMESTEAD OF LIFE. In the venthole
the blown-
empty lung
blossoms. A handful of
sleepgrain
wafts from the true-
stammered mouth
out toward snow-
conversations.  (Gesammelte 2: 42; Selected 253)

As if the empty shell of a vacant house, the lung is the dwelling. The home of Being is the space that Celan inhabits. Semantically speaking, “Gehöft” refers either to a “homestead,” “courtyard,” or “farmyard”. While such a word bears a few definitions, its earthy associations contribute to the primordial aspect of the trope of dwelling that he ascribes to life. Proper existence, Celan argues, requires a home that is shared. For the lung of the homestead of life to thrive in conversation, it needs the breath that such a home inspires. As if following a boomerang’s trajectory, however, the I can only properly dwell in its home by taking leave of its self-familiar coziness for the encounter with a Thou. The hollow house and lung, the unformed stammer, and the bare snow build the theme of inhabiting a vacant space of the unfamiliar Thou. Elaborating upon what at first appears to be a contradiction, Celan questioned his audience upon giving the Meridian Speech on the path to such a dwelling:


Are these paths only by-paths, bypaths from thou to thou? Yet at the same time, among how many other paths, they’re also paths on which language gets a voice, they are encounters, paths of a voice to a perceiving Thou, creaturely paths, sketches of existence perhaps, a sending oneself ahead toward oneself, in search of oneself…A kind of homecoming.  (original ellipsis; 3: 201; 412)

Although he seems to be mixing his metaphors by describing the different thou’s, voices, encounters, and sketches as paths, Celan is instead going beyond the limits of normative
logic by braiding together these various categories. According to the poetic logic that Celan invokes, voice is the product of an encounter between different identities that follow certain paths to finally reach a home; each one of these images functions as a category that bears developing.

In the dwelling shared between Self and Other, Celan renders visible the invisible relation of the encounter. For his part, Heidegger describes appropriation as a turning point of Being; at the point where the current of projection turns back upon thrownness arises what Heidegger terms the “Ereignis” (“Event”). In the crosscurrent of thrownness and projection, the resulting tension produces Dasein’s divided relation to Being: “Zu- und Weg-wenden folgt jedoch einer eigen tümlichen Wende des Hin und Her im Dasein” (“turning toward and away from is based on a peculiar turning to and from proper to Dasein”) (“Wahrheit” 196; “Truth” 150). The non-existential concerns of the quotidian pull Dasein away from its own Being; by extracting itself from those concerns, however, Dasein opens itself to the potential of its Being and turns back toward itself. The turn back to Dasein is the event in which authentic historical (i.e. existential) existence “versteht die Geschichte als die »Wiederkehr« des Möglichen und weiß darum, daß die Möglichkeit nur wiederkehrt, wenn die Existenz schicksalhaft-augenblicklich für sie in der entschlossenen Wiederholung offen ist” (“understands history as the ‘recurrence’ of what is possible and knows that a possibility recurs only when existence is open for it fatefully, in the Moment, in resolute retrieve”) (Sein 517; Being 358). Echoing Nietzsche’s eternal return, Heidegger’s own philosophy of the Turn (Wende and Kehre) exacts from Dasein the repeated resolve to Being. But such resolve is difficult, because it requires a self-possessed will capable of remaining in abeyance over the abyss of potential. The process of creativity, for instance,
elicits precisely this kind of existential abeyance as the artist safely treads the ground of aesthetic tradition, yet does not truly create until leaping into the abyss of Being. The risk of a painful fall poses existential danger. In fact, Heidegger refers to the threat of the fall as the “kehrige Gefahr” (“turning danger”) that ever looms and must come to light in order for the turn of Being to occur (“Kehre” 40; “Turn” 41). The safety of the familiar as well as the unchosen thrownness gets caught in a roiling motion with the daring of Dasein’s self-projecting. This roiling captures the way in which the turn can even be felt physiologically in both its exhilarating and terrifying aspects: “Die Stimmung erschließt nicht in der Weise des Hinblickens auf die Geworfenheit, sondern als An- und Abkehr” (“Mood does not disclose in the mode of looking at thrownness, but as turning toward and away from it”) (Sein 180; Being 128). But the dangerous turn is the necessary direction back home: “mit dieser Kehre die Wahrheit des Wesens des Seins in das Seiende eigens einkehrt” (“with this turning, the truth of the coming to presence of Being will expressly turn in – turn homeward – into whatever is”) (original italics; “Kehre” 40; “Turn” 41). According to the translator of “Die Kehre” (“The Turn”), the verb “einkehren” bears a number of meanings that resonate through Heidegger’s usage: “to turn in,” “to enter,” “to put up at an inn,” “to alight,” and “to stay” (40; 41). The related noun that Heidegger uses, “Einkehr,” refers to “putting up at an inn”; an “inn” or “lodging”. Both terms suggest the homecoming that comes about in the return of dwelling in Being.

While Heidegger had discussed Ereignis in Sein und Zeit (Being and Time) and many of his other works, he gave it full consideration in a work that he had not originally planned for publication. Shrouded in the mystery of legend for years, Beiträge zur Philosophie (Vom Ereignis) (Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)) comprises a
substantial gathering of meditations on Ereignis from the period between 1936 and 1938. Conceived by many as Heidegger’s most important work after Sein und Zeit (Being and Time), Beiträge zur Philosophie (Vom Ereignis) (Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)) was eventually published posthumously once his primary works and lecture texts had been published in his collected works, as outlined to his publisher. Beiträge zur Philosophie (Vom Ereignis) (Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)) is Heidegger’s project of circumscribing his philosophical inquiry strictly to Dasein’s relationship to Being in Ereignis. Heidegger puts it most succinctly when he writes: “Das Seyn ist das Er-eignis” (“Be-ing is en-owning”) (original italics; Beiträge 470; Contributions 330). Above all, he attempts to think and write within the purview of the Ereignis of Being.

Among the many etymological sediments that Heidegger unearths in “Ereignis,” the two most common ones include “sich ereignen” (“to happen”) and “aneignen” (“to appropriate”). “Ereignis” refers to the event of appropriation. In the course of synchronizing the given conditions of being thrown in the world with its will, Dasein does not simply experience Being as a happening; by virtue of this synchronization, Dasein purportedly steps into history by encountering the world into which it is thrown with its own will and Being. The appropriative aspect occurs in Dasein’s engagement in its Being with the world; for instance, in pulling itself together in the event, Dasein “repeats” or “retrieves” the historical past. In the event of appropriation, thrownness and projection are synchronized which creates the sense of Being. But there is a more fundamental aspect of Ereignis that digging to the root of the word reveals; “eigen” refers to the adjectival “(one’s) own,” which opens the matter of property at the root of Heidegger’s ontology of Being. In the course of the existential event, the process by which projection turns back upon
thrownness involves the kind of appropriation reminiscent of Hegelian reflection. By virtue of Dasein appropriating its own Being in the event, Heidegger describes the phenomenon of Dasein simply in relation to its own Being: “Selbstheit entspringt als Wesung des Da-seins aus dem Ur-sprung des Da-seins. Und der Ursprung des Selbst ist das Eigen-tum. Dieses Wort hier genommen wie Fürsten-tum. Die Herrschaft der Eignung im Ereignis” (“As essential swaying of Da-sein, selfhood springs forth from the origin of Da-sein. And the origin of the self is own-hood [Eigen-tum], [as in ‘own-dom’] when this word is taken in the same way as the word king-dom [Fürsten-tum]. Mastery of owning [Eignung] is enowning”) (original brackets and italics; 319-320; 224). Coded within the experience of Being is the question of property relations: “das Da-sein als je meines” (“Da-sein is always mine”) (original italics; 68; 47). The event that Heidegger describes points, therefore, in the direction of self-possession. As far as ownership is concerned, however, Heidegger only has in mind existential history as opposed to material history.


However, this basic “fact” of our history cannot be demonstrated by any “analysis” of the “spiritual” or “political” “situation” of the time, because even the “spiritual” as well as the “political” perspectives proceed from what is superficial and belongs to the heretofore and has already refused to experience the actual history – the struggle of enownment of man by be-ing – refused to inquire and to think along the tracks of the disposal of this history, i.e., to become historical from the ground of history. (Beiträge 309; Contributions 217)
The ownership of the event is merely a philosophical one, despite Heidegger’s claims to its historical dimension. For Heidegger, enowning bears a more fundamental role than history in its material conditions. He goes so far as to claim: (“Ereignis (Ursprung der Geschichte)” (“enowning is the “origin of history”) (453; 319). Understanding self-possession fully, however, requires taking into account material conditions. As Marx and Engels suggest with their analysis of property relations, philosophical self-possession is related to material self-possession. Heidegger’s description of the event therefore remains relegated to the sphere of philosophical Idealism.

Even more distant from material conditions, Heidegger does not entirely concede self-possession to Dasein in the event. The event provides the revelation of Being, which enables Dasein to identify beings and therefore name them. Pushing further into Being, Heidegger notes that his task is “[n]icht mehr handelt es sich darum, »über« etwas zu handeln und ein Gegenständliches darzustellen, sondern dem Er-eignis übereignet zu werden, was einem Wesenswandel des Menschen aus dem »vernünftigen Tier« (animal rationale) in das Da-sein gleichkommt” (“no longer a case of talking ‘about’ something and representing something objective, but rather of being owned over into enowning. This amounts to an essential transformation of the human from ‘rational animal’ (animal rationale) to Da-sein”) (original italics; 3; 3). In this way, Being appropriates man and makes him Dasein. “Die Er-eignung bestimmt den Menschen zum Eigentum des Seyns….denn Eigentum ist Zugehörigkeit in die Er-eignung und diese selbst das Seyn” (“Enownment determines man as owned by be-ing….for ownhood is belongingness into enownment, and this itself is be-ing”) (263; 185). Heidegger therefore places Dasein within the ownership of the event itself. But his argument raises a compromising question: how
does a philosophical experience own a person? The answer reveals most starkly Heidegger’s Idealism. Being given over to Ereignis is consistent with Heidegger’s acceptance of homelessness as the natural condition of human existence. Consequently, he ignores the possibility that the lack of self-possession is due to impeding social circumstances. Nevertheless, private property relations remain inscribed within Heidegger’s ontology of Being.

Devoid of all characteristics of the self and therefore, appearing to be pure negativity, the empty dwelling in “Hohles Lebensgehöft” (“Hollow Homestead of Life”) represents a set of property-relations that are different from Hegel’s and Heidegger’s. While Hegel described identity as a process of exploitative appropriation with the master/slave dialectic, Heidegger proposed an Idealist form of private ownership. By contrast, Celan developed in his trope of the encounter the relationship between I and Thou as one of fair exchange. Celan’s trope of the encounter is an image for responding to the most glaring form of appropriation in German history. The Nazi genocide of the homosexuals, communists, Jews, and Roma is the social wrenching by force that corresponds to Hegel’s development of dialectics out of the modern state – the grotesque inversion of Heidegger’s Turn in its concrete, historical manifestation. The distinction between Hegel’s and Celan’s notion of appropriation lies in the distinction between willing and unwilling participants in the exchange of identity. The trope of the encounter that Celan uses describes a consensual relating without coercion. Hegel himself uses the term “Kraft” (“Force”) to describe the dynamics of appropriation (Phänomenologie 107; Phenomenology 79). Yet force also characterizes Celan’s image of the encounter. As a fundamental part of his poetics, the task of re-creating the German language meant wrestling it away from the Nazis who had
mangled it during their reign. To the extent that language is a living, social construction, Celan felt that the Nazis had even killed the German language, as his claim about how language had to “hindurchgehen durch die tausend Finsternisse todbringender Rede” (“pass through the thousand darknesses of deathbringing speech”) indicates – the culmination being his re- appropriating language from its exploitative users with his breathturn (Gesammelte 3: 186; Selected 395). While Nietzsche had declared the death of God, the Nazis killed the German language. Celan’s task was to resurrect it.

That Celan’s vision was dialectical allowed him to see precisely that being unprepossessing does not contradict rejecting those who are not in turn benevolent. Celan figures these economic terms of relationships with the image of openness that was a mainstay of Heidegger’s thinking. However, Celan sets himself apart from Heidegger by making the image his own. In turn, he suggests the basis for the other side of openness, closure.

DIE GLUT
zählst uns zusammen
im Eselsschrei vor
Absaloms Grab, auch hier,

Gethsemane, drüben,
das umgangene, wen
überhäufts?

Am nächsten der Tore tut sich nichts auf,
über dich, Offene, trag ich dich zu mir.

THE HEAT
counts us together
in the shriek of an ass at
Absalom’s tomb, here as well,

Gethsemane, yonder,
circled around, whom
does it overwhelm?

At the nearest gate nothing opens up,

through you, Open one, I bear you to me. (3: 97; 357)

The bearing that Celan describes in the closing line suggests the preservation of the Open one within himself. Rather than an appropriation that deforms the Other in any exploitative way, a reverence for preserving the integrity of the Other is the ethos that he suggests. In the early years of their marriage, Celan would translate his poems into French for his wife so that she could have access to his poetic existence. In a letter dated January 23, 1958 in which she describes reading his poems, Gisèle describes how she has made herself open to them:

Je continuerai à lire vos poèmes ces jours-ci et tous les autres, ils sont en moi depuis longtemps, mon chéri, mais je ne voulais pas les accepter, ce sont des réalités, mais des réalités terribles. Je sais bien maintenant qu’on ne peut y échapper, ils me l’ont prouvé cent fois déjà et ce sont eux maintenant qui me sauvéreront en m’aidant à vivre ces réalités. Je ne les refuserai plus, je les ai crainits tes poèmes, maintenant je les aime, ils sont vrais et vérité et ils sont toi.

I will continue to read your poems during these days and all that follow, they have been in me for a long time, my dear, but I did not want to accept them, they are realities, but terrible realities. I now know well that they cannot be avoided, they have already proved that to me a hundred times and they are the ones that will save me now by helping me to live these realities. I will no longer refuse them, I was anxious about your poems, now I love them, they are true and truth and they are you. (Celan/Lestrange 1: 99)

The resistance that Celan’s wife initially put up against Celan’s verse and then proceeded to overcome represents the kind of openness that he establishes as an ethos of reading and Being. By making herself open to Celan’s verse, she let them dwell within her. While Heidegger’s thinking upon dwelling and its history in philosophy focuses upon inhabiting a dwelling, Gisèle’s comment about being inhabited by Celan’s verse represents a very
different relationship between property and Being. Rather than merely occupying a
dwelling, Celan and his wife have in mind dwelling as a shared situation by opening
themselves to each other and allowing themselves to be inhabited, rather than simply
encroaching upon each other’s space. The relationship that Celan establishes in “Die Glut”
(“The Heat”) is with the Open one, rather than with a closed one, which suggests that he
does not fuse himself with whoever is closed. The most significant example of such closure
is his refusal to reconcile himself with Germany.

While Celan shared many of Heidegger’s views on language as a gift, he began
countering them in the course of preparing his Meridian speech. Around the time of
composing the speech, Celan was re-reading Vorträge und Aufsätze (Lectures and Essays)
and Unterwegs zur Sprache (On the Way to Language), in which Heidegger elaborates on
his concepts of dwelling and the relationship of Being to language. Whereas Heidegger
placed language in what amounts to an Idealist sphere separate from history, Celan locates it
directly in reality. In a passage from his notes for the Meridian speech in which he thinks
through Mandelstam’s poetics, Celan gives evidence of his distinction from Heidegger:
“Das Gedicht ist hier das Gedicht dessen, der weiß, daß er unter dem Neigungswinkel seiner
Existenz spricht, daß die Sprache seines Gedichts weder “Entsprechung” noch… Sprache
schlechthin ist, sondern aktualisierte Sprache” (“Here the poem is the poem of someone who
knows… that the language of his poem is neither ‘response’ nor [‘more primordial’
language’ or even] language generally, but rather actualized language”) (my ellipsis,
original underlining; Meridian 69; original ellipsis, square brackets, and italics; Paul Celan
and Martin Heidegger 119). The key term is “actualized,” which Hegel used for describing the abstractions that consciousness takes from concrete reality as evidence of it (Phänomenologie 142; Phenomenology 108). Celan did not share Hegel’s ultimate view of these abstractions as evidence of divine spirit anymore than he shared Heidegger’s view of language as preserving primordial Being. Celan instead shares Mandelstam’s understanding that history is actualized in language. Actualized language is proof of the poet’s grounding in history. The poet does not merely listen to language to comment upon it, but rather brings history to the discussion-table. As the product of social relations, language is therefore not simply a semiotic, interpretative activity, but rather an encounter with history.

In contrast to Heidegger’s echo of Novalis’ claim that homelessness is the fundamental mood of philosophy, Celan offers the hope that a home is still possible even after the overwhelming destruction of World War II. In “Zuversicht” (“Confidence”), he builds on the themes of dialogue and double-vision by combining images of eyes, stone, and silence in an allegory of Being. Confirming the positive outcome of confronting negativity, “Zuversicht” (“Confidence”) provides an ethos of fraternity that supports self-possession. Continuing with the I/Thou structure, Celan figures it in terms of two eyes unfamiliar with each other.

Es wird noch ein Aug sein,
ein fremdes, neben
dem unsern: stumm
unter steinernem Lid.

Kommt, borht euren Stollen!

Es wird eine Wimper sein,

einwärts gekehrt im Gestein,
von Ungeweintem verstählt,
die feinste der Spindeln.

Vor euch tut sie das Werk,
als gäb es, weil Stein ist, noch Brüder.

There will be one more eye,
a strange one, next to
ours: mute
under a stony lid.

Come drill your shaft!

There will be an eyelash
turned inward in the rock
and steeled by what’s unwept,
the thinnest of spindles.

It does its work before you
as if, thanks to stone, there were still brothers.

(Gesammelte 1: 153; Selected 95)

The various pronouns in the poem raise a bit of confusion in terms of address and identity. While Celan’s other poems dealing with these themes have been structured along the I/Thou structure, “Zuversicht” (“Confidence”) incorporates a third figure with the pronoun “unsern” (“ours”) (1: 153; 95). The question of the identity of the figures in the poem is even more troubling considering that they each have only one eye. As the cipher for the dialectic of vision, the eyes of two strangers act as further examples of the double-vision that Celan describes throughout his poetry. That the speaker uses the pronoun “ours” suggests the dialectical vision that he has. The you that he addresses is another viewpoint. While it seems particularly perplexing, the third eye is the synthesis of the two individual viewpoints brought together in a new understanding. Urging the addressee to bore into the stony lid to get to the eye of Being, Celan performs a common collation of images and motifs that recurs throughout his poetry. Combining eye, mouth, and stone imagery, Celan develops
interrelated themes of silence, sight, and speech, as well as witnessing and testifying. In “Zuversicht” (“Confidence”), he develops the familiar theme of negativity by way of silence and stone. As the image traditionally associated with the inanimate, stone doubles in Celan’s verse as a cipher for actuality. Reality bears the weight of stone. Like the “Schliere im Aug” (“streak in the eye”) from “Schliere” (“Streak”), the stony lid suggests hampering vision when in fact it promises the fuller kind of seeing that incorporates what otherwise appears foreign, meaningless, or insignificant (2: 159; 101). The violent, visceral image of the spindle boring into the eye pursues negativity in the same way that the trek to where the air is refined in “In die Ferne” (“Into the Distance”) does. As the poet who “mit seinem Dasein zur Sprache geht, wirklichkeitswund und Wirklichkeit suchend” (“goes with his very being to language, stricken by and seeking reality”), Celan understood that seeing with the Other’s eye is the painful task that he must undertake (3: 186; 396).

Although “Zuversicht” (“Confidence”) does not have any images of dwelling as such, it is nevertheless concerned with dwelling insofar as it is a question of Being. The movement of the eyelash “einwärts gekehrt” (“turned inward”) (1: 153; 95) into the stony lid echoes the image of the turn homeward characteristic of Heidegger’s thinking in “Die Kehre” (“The Turn”) (“Kehre” 40; “Turn” 41). As the locus of Being, the “Herzland” (“heartland”) upon which the message in a bottle was supposed to wash up, as Celan describes in his Bremen speech, is where the suffering of the tears is felt (Gesammelte 3: 186; Selected 396). Yet the suffering is not necessarily vain; in fact, reconciliation with the tears of mourning is proof of the courage needed to confront the painful reality that, if otherwise ignored, would lead to deleterious effects. Facing pain, the speaker suggests, is precisely the means by which the eyelash will bore through the stony lid and restore sight;
that the eyelash “[v]or euch tut sie das Werk” “does its work before you” suggests that following the path of mourning will take its own course, which therefore offers hope of respite (1: 153; 95). The courage that the speaker has in mind is referred to in the title “Zuversicht” (“Confidence”). Within the context of the existential allegories of his poetry, the confidence that he suggests is the strength of self-possession that confronts and surpasses angst. Straddling the line between the comfortable familiarity and anxious uncertainty of Being is again reinforced in the eyelash that bores through stone in “Zuversicht” (“Confidence”). To give another example of an existential test, the entire task of writing the poetry of Being that Celan set up for himself took an enormous amount of confidence. In a letter to his friend, Petre Solomon from 22 March, 1962, he himself gives a definition of poetry that veers far from the usual description of mere mechanical features and goes straight to the existential: “‘Poetry, isn’t it confidence?’” (qtd. in Celan 189). In “Zuversicht” (“Confidence”), Celan acknowledges the great reserves required to write poetry.

In Celan’s recognition of the great courage needed for being a poet, he alludes to the pervasive alienation that the poet must constantly battle. Long the solitary figure, the poet’s only resort is often other writers – many of whom are no longer living. For Celan, the figures that alleviated his sense of alienation in his commitment to poetry were Franz Kafka and Osip Mandelstam. Kafka was a spiritual guide and a fellow-traveller on the path of language. Mandelstam, who perhaps represented an even greater bond of solidarity for Celan, was a kind of literary brother to him. The two writers in whose work Celan found the greatest solidarity served as sources of inspiration that instilled within him the confident sense of direction necessary for writing; indeed, their work acted as the eyelash that bores
through the stony lid, “als gäb es, weil Stein ist, noch Brüder” (“as if, thanks to stone, there were still brothers”) (1: 153; 95). By concluding “Zuversicht” (“Confidence”) with the mention of brotherhood, Celan is alluding to the necessity of solidarity for instilling confidence within the individual; strength does not simply come out of thin air but is drawn rather from a relation with another existence. That the final statement is in the subjunctive mood of the verb does not indicate that solidarity might no longer exist, but rather that the continued existence of social bonds depends upon stone, which represents negativity in terms of the undeniable reality of the Other who must be taken into account. The fact of affirming the Other, Celan suggests, is the means by which solidarity is possible; only by embracing the Other as a brother is negativity made positive. While the dialectic of identity suggests internal brotherhood for otherwise isolated individuality, “Zuversicht” (“Confidence”) extends beyond alienation to brotherhood. In a letter to Vladimir Markov dated May 31, 1961, Celan commented upon the intensity of his identification with Mandelstam; the Russian poet offered “‘what is brotherly – in the most reverential sense I can give that word’” (qtd. in Celan 131). Rather than a threat to his sense of self, merging with the Other is precisely the means of guaranteeing self-possession. Negativity in the form of the mute, inanimate, yet incontestable stone is the reason for the continued existence of brotherhood. The eye that is “unsern” (“ours”) therefore, is simply the third eye that takes both I and Thou into account (Gesammelte 1: 153; Selected 95). Celan’s wife expressed her own solidarity with her husband in a letter in which she reassured him that he was indeed reaching his readers in the meaningful way that he had hoped: “Ne l’oublie pas, même si tu ne le sens pas toujours, sache-le, Paul, beaucoup vivent avec ta poésie, par ta poésie” (“Don’t forget, even if you do not always feel it, know, Paul, that many live with
your poetry, by your poetry”) (Celan/Lestrange 1: 358). Just as Celan lived with, and by, Kafka’s prose and Mandelstamm’s verse, so too have readers lived on with his work. In the process, Celan’s readers have inherited the spirit of Kafka’s and Mandelstamm’s works, which he incorporated into his verse. From Celan’s standpoint, his poetry shares a heritage through history, which keeps alive that sense of brotherhood.

As the image for the space of Being, the heart takes on full dimensions in Celan’s imagery. In describing the place of the heart, Celan gives embodiment to the otherwise invisible, yet actual realm of Being. Composed to commemorate his son’s first word, “fleur” (“flower”), “Blume” (“Flower”) marks the line at which Being first takes shape in the act of naming. Returning to the familiar image of a stone floating in the air, Celan gives body to spirit in language:

Der Stein.
Der Stein in der Luft, dem ich folgte.
Dein Aug, so blind wie der Stein.

Wir waren
Hände,
wir schöften die Finsternis leer, wir fanden
das Wort, das den Sommer heraufkam:
Blume.

Blume – ein Blindenwort.
Dein Aug und mein Aug:
sie sorgen
für Wasser.

Wachstum.
Herzwand um Herzwand
blättert hinzu.

Ein Wort noch, wie dies, und die Hämmer schwingen im Freien.

The stone.
The stone in the air, which I followed.
Your eye, as blind as the stone.

We were hands,
we scooped the darkness empty, we found
the word that ascended summer:
Flower.

Flower – a blindman’s word.
Your eye and my eye:
they take care
of water.

Growth,
Heartwall by heartwall
adds on petals.

One more word like this, and the hammers
will be swinging free. (Gesammelte 1: 164; Selected 105)

As an image that particularly captures the sense of the space of Being and the drama that it undergoes, scooping the darkness conveys the labour involved in digging to the depths of existence. Likewise, as if building a structure upon the foundation for which he has dug into the darkness, Celan describes the development of language as a dwelling that is being built with one wall going up after another. “Herzwand um Herzwand / blättert hinzu” (“Heartwall by heartwall / adds on petals” describes the growth in language in terms of the spiritual building process that unfolds organically (1:164; 105). The hammers swinging freely at the end adds to the process that he describes, as if it were an entire construction crew working away energetically at building a house and their violence adding to the strain under which the creative process and life in general occur. The hammers swinging freely describe the flight of his son’s initial forays into speaking. The violence of the swinging motion captures the fortitude with which Celan himself undertakes the uncertain creative process of writing. As a poet thrown into language and trying to project his own voice
amidst the fray, Celan captures the sense of the turn at the cross-currents of thrownness and projection with the image of the hammers swinging in their arc. The resulting tension of this Turning represents the experience of self-possessed Being in its eventfulness.

In light of the terrible ambivalence that Celan felt for Heidegger, their relationship was a concrete test to the kind of encounter that Celan developed throughout his poetry. Wavering back and forth between acceptance and acrimony throughout the occasions on which they met, Celan could not in the end reconcile himself with Heidegger’s political past as a Nazi, despite respecting his significant contributions to philosophy. To say that Celan was ambivalent about one of his intellectual signposts does not adequately capture the mixture of admiration, resentment, and guilt with which he struggled. Heidegger, for his part, expressed empathy for Celan to a colleague to whom he confided: “I know about his difficult crisis” (qtd. in Celan 245). Hans-Georg Gadamer recounts how impressed Heidegger was with Celan’s knowledge of the local flora and fauna: “Heidegger told me…that in the Black Forest, Celan was better informed on plants and animals than he himself was” (my ellipsis; 245). In one of his worst periods, Celan had reacted very irrationally towards Heidegger during one of their last meetings by wavering repeatedly over posing for a photograph with him and which he finally refused.

The most significant part of the conversation that Celan held with Heidegger comes in the form of the poem “Todtnauberg” that Celan wrote upon visiting Heidegger’s secluded hut in 1967. Upon entrance to the hut, Heidegger’s visitors were invited to sign his registry and leave a comment. Celan for his part, had more than well-wishes on his mind when he signed the guestbook with the call for an answer to his past. “Into the hut-book, looking at the well-star, with a hope for a coming word in the heart. On 25 July 1967 Paul Celan”
Addressing the controversy of Heidegger’s past as a member of the Nazi party, Celan’s call for an answer is a call for an apology, accountability, and recognition. Celan would later turn his comment in Heidegger’s guestbook into a poem:

Arnika, Augentrost, der  
Trunk aus dem Brunnen mit dem  
Sternwürfel drauf,  

in der  
Hütte,  

die in das Buch  
– wessen Namen nahms auf  
vor dem meinen? –,  
die in dies Buch  
geschriebene Zeile von  
einer Hoffnung, heute,  
auf eines Denkenden  
kommendes  
Wort  
im Herzen,  

Waldwasen, uneingeebnet,  
Orchis und Orchis, einzeln,  

Krudes, später, im Fahren,  
deutlich,  

der uns fährt, der Mensch,  
der’s mit anhört,  

die halb-beschrittenen Knüppel-pfade im Hochmoor,  

Feuchtes,  
Viel.  

Arnica, Eyebright, the  
drink from the well with the  
star-die on top,  

in the  
hut,
into the book
– whose name did it take in
before mine? –
the line written into
this book about
a hope, today,
for a thinker’s
(un-
delayed coming)
word
in the heart,

woodland turf, unleveled,
Orchis and Orchis, singly,
crudeness, later, while driving,
clearly,

the one driving us, the man
who hears it too,

the half-
trodden log-
paths on high moorland,
dampness,
much. (original parentheses; Gesammelte 2: 255-56; Selected 315)

In the fullest sense of the aspect of answerability – the counterpart to Heidegger’s primary focus on questioning – Celan’s call indicates the decisive difference between his understanding of Being and Heidegger’s. The “die halb- / beschrittenen Knüppel- / pfade im Hochmoor” (“half- / trodden log- / paths”) refer perhaps to the one-sided manner in which Heidegger portrayed the call of Being upon Dasein; furthermore, his primary pursuit of ontology left him at an impasse most significantly ever since his initial involvement with Nazism (2: 255-56; 315). As one of the fundamental philosophical points to which he devoted his attention, Heidegger focused simply on Dasein’s relation to its own Being. Furthermore, his romanticized trust in Nazism as the means of bringing about the revolution
in Being that he sought obscured his perception of political reality. Where the “star-die on top” of the well by the hut represented Heidegger’s turn to philosophy as his guide, Celan could distinguish between the star of philosophy and the ground of politics.

Not allowing Heidegger’s remarkable philosophical insight to blind him, Celan understood that philosophy is not detached from politics. Like so many others within Heidegger’s circle (Karl Jaspers, Herbert Marcuse, Hannah Arendt), Celan demanded a reckoning from the man whom they knew as philosophical genius, teacher, mentor, friend, lover, and even Nazi. As a result of his combined brilliance and abhorrent political affiliation, Heidegger poses one of the most – if not the most – significant ambiguous relationships for intellectuals in the modern period. Never having received the answer that he sought from Heidegger, Celan remained ambivalent towards Heidegger until the end of his life. The philosopher who had devoted his attention to hearing the call of his own Being thought that his silence on his political past would say enough. But it did not, because his silence was inappropriate as a philosophical answer to a political question. Celan understood that the conversation of Being does not simply happen with the self, but in brotherhood.
Conclusion

On the morning of April 6, 1924, Rilke welcomed Valéry at the train station in Sierre, Switzerland. After breakfast in town, Rilke invited his guest to Château Muzot where they spent a pleasant afternoon discussing their work. Rilke presented Valéry with a French poem for his wife; in turn, Valéry encouraged Rilke to write more poems in French. He would go on to write three entire volumes of French verse during this late period of his career (Jarrety 565-66). Their meeting was long overdue since having held each other in high esteem for a few years. Once Rilke had become aware of Valéry’s work, he undertook a number of translations of the French poet’s poems and dialogues, which he would eventually publish in 1925 (496-97). Rilke had even tried his hand at a translation of *La Jeune Parque*. After his attempt at translating Valéry’s long-poem, however, Rilke felt that he could not do justice to the project. He claimed that Valéry’s poem was simply “‘untranslatable at present: (if only someone could convince us otherwise)’” (qtd. in Celan 138). Rather than feeling slighted at Rilke’s failure, Valéry could not have been more honoured. The whole impetus of the composition of *La Jeune Parque* was to create a quintessentially French poem. Having gone so far as to consult etymological dictionaries, Valéry wove into his poem numerous semantic strands from the history of the French language so as to create an untranslatable poem. Composed over the years of World War I, *La Jeune Parque* stands as a national bulwark in the history of French letters. By drawing decidedly French borders around *La Jeune Parque*, Valéry was reflecting in verse the nationalist ideology of France as a way to self-possession.

Valéry’s *La Jeune Parque* provides a prime example of a poem that illustrates self-possession in language as it corresponds to social relations. The question of self-possession
raises the issue as to the different kinds of ownership over language. Put differently, is it possible to own words? When poets develop their own voice, what does that mean and what does that process look like? More specifically, the question of philosophical ownership of language invites examination as it corresponds to property relations. A compelling aspect of the problem is when speech does not belong to the speaker and has been planted in the mind and mouth by voices other than the speaker’s own. Even more astounding is the speaker not realizing when such words belong to other voices. Coming upon the realization that the words expressed belong to other voices sets the speaker adrift at sea. As J. Edward Chamberlin indicates, only two options seem available: “being marooned on an island or drowning in the sea” (Land 24). Daring to brave the current and find a way home is daunting, but the promise of remaining afloat is enticing.

According to Heidegger, the confluence of the forces of thrownness and projection produces the sense of such abeyance, which is the feeling of Being. While such an experience in language is incontestable, it remains relegated to a sphere detached from historical reality. Taken from Marx and Engels’ standpoint, the experience of Being in language is decisive to the extent that it engages historical forces. Although Heidegger denies the significance of material relations in his thinking on dwelling, home, and homelessness, property-relations are nevertheless encoded in those images to the extent that he engages the question of ownership in his discussion of Ereignis. As far as the poets are concerned, their struggle with language is the battle over taking possession of words in poetry. From Eliot, Valéry, and Rilke staking out internal private property to Celan sharing space with his reader, the history of modern poetry is the struggle for ownership over language. Rilke’s appropriative strategies, while under Rodin’s mentorship, describes a
long professional arc that records the struggle to become a poet. What Rilke’s example indicates is that the poet is one who takes ownership of words in naming.

But what does the poet possess in appropriating ways of creating and of Being, as Rilke did while learning from Rodin? His successes in the poetic and philosophical realms remain restricted to those spheres. In Eliot’s case, the initial impetus involved reckoning with the seventeenth-century British literary tradition, especially in the form of the Metaphysical poets that he admired. Such a reckoning meant staking out his own poetic territory and defending it. When he claimed “[i]mmature poets imitate, mature poets steal,” Eliot was acknowledging that poetry is not a creation ex nihilo in the manner that so much theology posits for an original creative cause of all causes (Selected 206). However, his later turn to Anglicanism answered his need for bringing order and certainty to his life if only intellectually. Although he was enmeshed in the historical upheaval of World War II in London and even contributed to the war effort by volunteering as an air-raid warden visiting houses in his neighbourhood and staying on fire-watch two nights a week (Gordon 354), Eliot nevertheless responded to the war by promoting the obscurantist vision of a Christian Europe in his later lectures The Idea of a Christian Society (1939) and papers Notes towards the Definition of Culture (1945-1946). Although his turn to the Anglican Church marked a decision of his own, he nevertheless surrendered the freedom that a progressive, scientific understanding of history offers. To the extent that he derided democracy for Christianity with aristocratic underpinnings, Eliot exhibited a dispossession that was not simply theological. He forfeited his historical subjectivity.

In his later work on language, Heidegger undertook the problem of ownership and found that locating Being in language involves paradoxically giving oneself to Being.
Enowning amounts to being enowned. In his own efforts at addressing the origin of language insofar as ownership is concerned, Valéry occupied a similar position by holding one foot firmly on his own ground while extending the other foot to unknown territory. The footwork covering two different spaces amounted to a dance, according to Valéry: “Commencer de dire des vers, c’est entrer dans une danse verbale” (“To recite poetry is to enter into a verbal dance”) (Œuvres 1, 1400; Aesthetics 208). Mystery remains an unquantifiable variable as far as ownership over language is concerned and it arises from entering into the dance with language. For all of his conscious intentions and logical means of control, Valéry nevertheless acknowledged the mystery of language. He knew well enough that language cannot be fully controlled in utterances, poetic or otherwise. While talent, creativity, and cultivation are recognizable in poetry, they nevertheless cannot be entirely engineered at will. The inability to wield fully the instruments of language attests to the mystery of poetry. Until that mystery is illuminated, the full grasp on language remains elusive. But how can that mystery be solved? Is a divine being responsible for the mystery? Science tells us otherwise. Do we simply need better instruments? Perhaps. But a great amount of mystery is produced and foisted upon consciousness, as Marx and Engels indicate in The German Ideology. In turn, the most significant implication of their argument indicates that ownership in language does not come about without owning the means of production.

Rilke responded to the problem of owning language much as Valéry did by trying to build a special internal space for poetry and Being apart from the marketplace. But as Marx and Engels indicate, language is not so easily retractable when life is so entangled in the market. Getting to the “Sprache des wirklichen Lebens” (“language of real life”), as they
call it, means acknowledging the struggle for gaining self-possession by taking ownership of the means of production (Ideologie 26; Ideology 36). Whereas Valéry more explicitly concerned himself with the inner realm of logic, Rilke more clearly preoccupied himself with the space of Being. Both poets sought refuge in the inner world of beauty. As Valéry’s Narcissus is in thrall to beauty, Rilke captures the same sentiment towards his angel in more striking terms by acknowledging the awful power of beauty:

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  das Schöne ist nichts
  als des Schrecklichen Anfang, den wir noch grade ertragen,
  und wir bewundern es so, weil es gelassen verschmäht,
  uns zu zerstören. Ein jeder Engel ist schrecklich.

  beauty’s nothing
  but the start of terror we can hardly bear,
  and we adore it because of the serene scorn
  it could kill us with. Every angel’s terrifying.
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(Sämtliche 685; Elegies/Sonnets 5)

Something as ephemeral as beauty holds such sway that it can incapacitate the beholder. When the devotion or care that the aesthete gives to beauty is so encompassing that it crowds out historical concerns, it exemplifies one of the worst kinds of dispossession. However sublime it may be, beauty holds tremendous appeal as a distraction from history. Cowering before the power of beauty is overdramatic at best considering the military and political terrors that had swept through Europe during World War I. As part of Rilke’s aestheticism, his defending the world of Being in poetry against encroaching market forces reveals a faith in a private sanctuary akin to those that Eliot and Valéry built. However, as the laws of the market indicate, no space is sacred; the colonial and imperial imperatives of modernity penetrate the most intimate spheres of existence. Without the proper material conditions, the kind of free space that Rilke sought to preserve is constantly under threat. Ultimately, the problem that Rilke’s strategy poses amounts to whether or not possessing
Being is possible simply through possessing language. His appropriative practices while under Rodin’s mentorship and in Orphic transformation indicate the attempt to come to self-possession in language itself. But as Marx and Engels indicate, the voice of self-possession is an Idealist mirage unless the means of production are held firmly in the speaker’s hand.

Rather than creating a space simply for himself, Celan opened a poetic space to be shared with his reader. That he likened writing a poem to shaking hands encapsulates the common ground that he cleared for the reader. The other fundamental tropes, such as the encounter and the speech-grille mark his conviction in communion. As part of that communion, historical conversion in consciousness is crucial. Poetry makes the turn of historical consciousness possible: “läßt es das ihm, dem Anderen, Eigenste mitsprechen: dessen Zeit” (“it lets the Other’s ownmost quality speak: its time”) (Gesammelte 3: 198; Selected 409-410). To make room for the other’s historical moment, Celan had to step out of his own time. Yet the process is not entirely about foregoing one space for another entirely. One foot rests in his own space while the other stands on common ground. Where Valéry considers metaphor a “danse verbale” (“verbal dance”), Celan sees the dance going on between partners from different places and times (Œuvres 1: 1400; Aesthetics 208). Most remarkable in light of considering himself “‘one of the last who must live out to the end the destiny of the Jewish spirit in Europe’” is that Celan still considers the dance possible (qtd. in Celan 80). The trope of dialogue represents the image that captures the dance between two subjectivities. In turn, it invites recognition of the kind of reflection that is not simply devoted to assuring one’s own existence, as with Valéry’s Narcissus and Young Fate figures but rather of other existences. The dialogue that Celan has in mind is a conversation that unfolds through history. Achieving a fully realized historical dialogue
involves being able to assert his own subjectivity and acknowledge other subjectivities. For Celan, the encounter is the event of appropriation (Ereignis). By the same token, such a moment of recognition is the moment when the self fully attains its own subjectivity. Only by the “Ich-Ferne” (“I-distantness”) (Gesammelte 3: 193; Selected 406) does the self achieve the “Art Heimkehr” (“kind of homecoming”) that Celan describes in his Meridian speech (3: 201; 412). The kind of territory that is covered, therefore, is not one private space demarcated from another but rather two spaces turned into one shared territory. Much like Rilke who gives value to something while simultaneously withholding it, Celan enacts an economy of Being. Where the two poets differ, however, occurs where Rilke is more concerned with his own values, whereas Celan is concerned not simply with himself but with his reader. Rilke is much more akin to Valéry to the extent that the Young Fate is concerned about others coming after her only to the extent that they may forget or not recognize her image once she is gone: “Hélas! de mes pieds nus qui trouvera la trace / Cessera-t-il longtemps de ne songer qu’à soi?” (“Ah, whoever finds the print of my bare feet, / Will he cease for long to think only of himself?”) (Oeuvres 1: 105; Poems 91). Celan is just as much concerned about leaving a trace but not simply of himself; rather, he wants to leave the trace that encounters are possible even along great stretches of time. Although Rilke had declared Valéry’s quintessentially French poem “‘untranslatable,’” Celan decided to achieve the impossible (qtd. in Celan 138). In addition to numerous other challenging translation projects by which he partially earned his income throughout his career, Celan worked on his version in 1959. As a result, he managed to open the walls of linguistic nationalism that Valéry had built around La Jeune Parque in France, Celan’s adopted country since 1948. The impetus behind Celan’s position regarding translation is consistent
with his poetics to the extent that he sought to extend his hand to his reader. Faced with the false alternatives that Chamberlin describes as being either stranded on an island or adrift at sea (Land 24), Celan holds out for the hope that the wayfarer’s message “an Land gespült werden, an Herzland vielleicht” (“could wash up on land, on heartland perhaps”) (Gesammelte 3: 186; Selected 396). It is a hope that Chamberlin himself would share with Celan.

The solution to the grim prospect of the castaway requires a tremendous amount of faith and daring. Part of the terror that beauty inspires, as Rilke suggests, applies not simply to aesthetic appreciation but to artistic creativity. The distinction lies between consumption and production. For what concerns the poets of modernity if not the act of creation rather than mere aesthetic judgement? Standing on the mountain terrace from where the Château Muzot sits, Rilke made his cry to the angels: “Wer, wenn ich schrie, hörte mich denn aus der Engel / Ordnungen?” (“And if I cried, who’d listen to me in those angelic / orders?”) (Sämtliche 685; Elegies/Sonnets 5). His cry too indicates that familiar anxiety over expression: whether or not shared communication is possible. Celan understood very well the fear of not finding a listener. While contemplating Heidegger’s structure of thinking as a form of questioning, Celan wondered whether or not anyone answered. Having abandoned conviction in an answering divinity, Celan maintained his faith in being able to reach his reader, however much it was a “verzweifeltes Gespräch” (“despairing conversation”) (Gesammelte 3: 198; Selected 409-410).

One of the underlying implications associated with the problem of the unanswerable question is not simply lacking an answer or not reaching the reader but rather not having a sense of certainty. In theology, divine voice provides the answers to questions. In Eliot’s
Four Quartets, the speaker finds himself in the company of someone with the “look of some dead master” walking beside him (Complete 193). As if structured subconsciously, the voice of divinity becomes the form in which a sense of strength girds the fortress of consciousness. However, that voice is based upon faith in inhabitants of an “[u]nreal city” in The Waste Land (Complete 62). By virtue of belonging to the imaginary realm, such a voice dispossesses consciousness; the surrender to religion is the surrender of historical subjectivity. Abandoning the existential wisdom of theology, however, is dangerous. The non-believer still needs to recuperate faith from theology as a means of maintaining a sense of direction for historical subjectivity. But that faith functions in the manner of resolve in projection against the current of thrownness rather than simply in adhering to the illusions of superstitious sanction. Without the reassuring voice of divinity, the seafarer either risks drifting at sea or takes the ship’s wheel in hand. Having the brio to seek out answers is crucial to asserting subjectivity, the departure on the course to self-possession.

Rilke’s struggle while under the influence of Rodin’s genius is analogous to overcoming the divine voice that subjectivity undergoes in the modern period. By consciously seeking out Rodin’s influence and surrendering to it, Rilke allowed the sculptor’s voice to speak louder than his own. However, the poet needed to mimic that voice in order to harmonize his own with Rodin’s. Such speaking is being “Einklänge ins Allgemeine” (“in harmony with the prevailing voice”) (Andreas-Salomé/Rilke 368; 261). By adopting aesthetic criteria and practices from his mentor, Rilke was able in turn to transfer his skills to sculpting his own words. Such transfer is precisely the kind of appropriation that describes the matter of ownership in artistic learning and creating. Taken at the more fundamental existential level, developing such an independent voice requires a
similar process. Taken at the historical level, asserting subjectivity involves an analogous
dialogue with objective conditions. To the extent that voice is constructed and given, an
equally constructed response is necessary in order for ownership to take place. Such self-
production is a difficult challenge in light of the obstacles by which alienated social relations
impede the way to self-possession.

Overcoming the obstacles of alienation requires speaking and acting with the voice
and hand of subjectivity. As Rilke showed, the Angel was a kind of repository for his
weaknesses, fears, and ideals; but it also represented his transformative powers: “Der Engel
der *Elegien* ist dasjenige Geschöpf, in dem die Verwandlung des Sichtbaren in Unsichtbares,
die wir leisten, schon vollzogen erscheint” (“The angel of the *Elegies* is that creature in
whom the transformation of the visible into the invisible, which we are accomplishing,
appears already consummated”) (Briefe 2, 377-78; Letters 2, 375-76). As Heidegger
described it, the transformative power of Rilke’s Angel represents an “Umkehrung”
(“conversion”) by which one value is turned into another in the face of death (Holzwege
304; Poetry 123). As an angelic figure, the poet who performs the conversion in language,
which is an act of ownership, exercises the power of naming. While his theory of “l’attente”
(“waiting” and “expecting”) demonstrates a like concern with the ability to name, Valéry
also examines powerlessness in creating. He reconciled himself with the degree of
dispossession that the poet must face. However, he only addressed the problem to the extent
that it operated in the mind rather than how it related to the social world; he ignored the
concrete materials of social reality as they coded themselves into the supposed pure logic
that he was describing for consciousness. In great contrast to Valéry but much like Rilke,
Celan was more concerned not primarily with the intellectual mechanisms of the mind but
rather with the Being of creating and relating. Celan’s unusual yet fitting definition for poetry in his letter to Petre Solomon on March 22, 1962 gives a full sense of subjective assertion: “‘Poetry, isn’t it confidence?’” (qtd. in Celan 189). The confidence that he describes is the poet’s self-possession. Creating with such strength is not simply an intellectual operation but rather a way of Being. As a way of Being, writing poetry requires sustaining an ethos of confidence. When describing the flower chiseled out of stone with hammers in “Blume” (“Flower”), Celan portrays the kind of continuity that describes his sustained ethos. Commemorating his son’s first foray into speech with the word “fleur,” Celan captures the inception of that ethos in language: “Ein Wort noch, wie dies, und die Hämmer / schwingen in Freien” (“One more word like this, and the hammers / will be swinging free”) (Gesammelte 1: 164; Selected 105). By describing the construction of the house of Being in language, Celan accounts for the ongoing aspect of such creativity. Language and Being are lived in time and must be ongoing. Such an ongoing process requires the poet’s confidence.

What the matter of ownership poses for language relates specifically to silence. As much of Celan’s verse is concerned, silence manifests itself in different ways. On the one hand, it represents the unspoken resonance in poetry. The pregnant silences require a carefully attuned ear; hearing such silences involves a special connection between speaker and listener. The French “s’entendre” and German “sich hören” (“to understand one another”) capture precisely this sense of harmonization that comes about in listening to one another. The verb not only refers to hearing but also suggests harmonious existential understanding. However, silence also manifests itself in the form of words spoken from a voice dispossessed. So much of words that a speaker does not own remains silent. Coming
to that realization and then bringing fully enowned resonance to language describes the nature of naming. Just as Heidegger took over the word “Sorge” (“care”) and gave it his secular philosophical tones, for instance, so did Celan give new meaning to common figures such as stone and flower. The confrontation with silence, naming is the process of owning and appropriating words. In “Blume” (“Flower”) for instance, Celan takes over images from modern Jewish philosophy and develops them in his own manner while preserving some of their spirit. In a passage from Der Stern der Erlösung (The Star of Redemption), Franz Rosenzweig summarizes the human relation to the Jewish divinity with elemental images: “beginnt doch erst in der Liebe Gottes aus dem Fels des Selbst die Blume der Seele zu wachsen; vorher war der Mensch fühllos und stumm in sich gekerht; nun erst ist er – geliebte Seele” (“For it is only in the love of God, pouring into the rock of the Self that the flower of the soul begins to grow; before this, man was turned in on himself, mute and devoid of feeling. Only now is he – beloved soul”) (Stern 189; Star 183). Having abandoned the divine, Celan nevertheless recuperates Rosenzweig’s figures. Such an appropriation requires an ear attuned to the silent tone with which Celan speaks. While forsaking divinity, he still holds to the necessity of love. As the model of dialogue suggests, that love comes from hearing it in voices like Rosenzweig’s; Celan, in turn, adopts that tone and shares it with his readers. By entering into dialogue with Rosenzweig in “Blume” (“Flower”), Celan suggests that pouring love into the silent stone of language makes the reader blossom and sway like the flower. By renaming Rosenzweig’s words, Celan reanimates his reader. These and other such exchanges in dialogue open the common ground on which Celan builds confidence in language. In the shared exchange of poetry, naming offers a sense of self-possession.
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