

Rilke, Phenomenology, and the Sensuality of Thought

Rochelle Tobias

Johns Hopkins University

*This paper takes as its point of departure Husserl's claim that the only world we can speak of is the one given in consciousness or that presents itself to intuition. Husserl's insistence on the world's status as a phenomenon whose being can never be verified, as such a verification would require an act of mind, has led to the accusation that phenomenology is nothing but a form of idealism that discounts the validity of everything apart from consciousness. This paper turns this accusation on its head. To the extent that phenomenology addresses the role that consciousness plays in constituting the world, it draws attention to consciousness' worldly aspects as not only the ground for all intuition but intuition itself in its sensuality. Consciousness is identical with what it observes, be it a bird in flight, the unfolding petals of a rose bud, or a discarded doll gathering dust in an attic. Rilke's poetry more than any other exposes the sensuality of thought by exploring the inner contours of feeling or what he calls elsewhere the *Weltinnenraum*. This paper shows the intersection of poetry and phenomenology through a close reading of "Die Rosenschale," which forms the conclusion of the first volume of the collection *Neue Gedichte*.*

*Rochelle Tobias is a Professor of German at the Johns Hopkins University and Co-director of the Max Kade Center for Modern German Thought. She is the author of *The Discourse of Nature in the Poetry of Paul Celan: The Unnatural World* (Johns Hopkins 2006) and has a study forthcoming on the truth of fiction entitled *Pseudo-Memoirs: Life and Literature in Twentieth-Century German Fiction*. She is currently working on a project on Rilke that explores the subjective constitution of the world and the concomitant representation of the self as an ever-changing and ever-expanding landscape.*

Husserl believed phenomenology could provide a secure foundation for the world, so that it could be an object of study in turn. This may seem like an odd statement to make regarding a philosopher who declared that we must set aside the assumption that the world exists until we have established the meaning of existence itself. In a less than felicitous turn of phrase he claimed that the analysis of the world begins with its destruction, in German: *Vernichtung*.¹ At the same time he insisted that the destruction of the world represents not a loss but a gain. For instance, in the first volume of *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy* (1913) he states, "Strictly

speaking, we have not lost anything, but rather have gained the whole of absolute being, which, rightly understood, contains within itself, 'constitutes' within itself, all worldly transcendencies" (*Ideen I*, §50, 113). In setting aside the world apart from us, we open philosophy to a realm of being based in the subject: the world of consciousness.

This is the one indisputable world for Husserl, the "whole of absolute being." It contains within itself "all worldly transcendencies," which in his terminology means things as they are given in or present themselves to consciousness without the mediation of concepts or ideas. Carsten Strauthausen explains this dynamic as follows, "Husserl's aspiration to focus on the things themselves (*Zu den Sachen selbst*) insists on there being no higher form of truth than the intuitive evidence of how things present themselves in actual experience."² Husserl's innovation, if it can be called that, was to turn philosophy back toward things, albeit with the caveat that we can speak of things only to the extent that we intuit them or they appear to us, which is to say as phenomena that are inextricably bound up with our mental life.

Much like Descartes, Husserl argued that everything we perceive (every *cogitatum*) refers back to us as the perceiving subject (or *cogito*) that makes this phenomenon possible. We, in other words, are the ground for all worldly objects since what defines them as objects in the first place is that they are given in consciousness. This may seem like a circular argument—and a case could be made that it is since it amounts to saying that what is given in consciousness attests to consciousness—but the point worth noting is that what does not appear to us cannot be said to exist. It cannot even be identified as what has yet to be thought. The world we inhabit is in Husserl's vocabulary an egological sphere because of its foundation in the ego. Rilke called it the *Weltinnenraum*.

In her landmark essay "Die phänomenologische Struktur der Dichtung Rilkes," Käte Hamburger argued that Rilke, like Husserl, explores the role consciousness plays in the construction of the external world.³ For both poet and philosopher, consciousness operates intentionally, which means that it posits a world beyond it to organize the impressions that run through it in a continual

stream. Intentionality is thus often summarized in the phrase, “Consciousness is always the consciousness *of* something.” The mind’s orientation toward objects enables it to project a unity out of the various and sundry impressions that run through it—impressions that are *immanent* to consciousness. These impressions are reclassified, in turn, as manifestations of a single object that can never be grasped fully, as it *transcends* consciousness. For example, a table can be viewed from above, below, or at an angle but never from all sides at once; it is present to us in its various aspects or *Abschattungen* (adumbrations), but never in its entirety. Rilke’s poetry and especially his thing-poems draw attention to the “stream” of experiences that flood consciousness and the synthetic labor that transforms them into a unity. But they also do more than that. They call into question the distinction between inside and outside or self and world by revealing the subjective basis of all objective phenomena and even objectivity itself. In this manner they locate even in the most mundane matters and everyday things a transcendent dimension or what Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei calls “the ecstatic quotidian.”⁴

It is this aspect of Rilke’s poetry that leads Hamburger to claim that the thinker and the poet address the same problem, albeit it in different ways. (Her line that Rilke writes “lyric poetry in lieu of epistemology” could be considered the motto of the essay.⁵) But such an interpretation, for all its formidable intelligence, ignores what Rilke’s poetry has to say not only about the constitution of the world but also about the self. For if the subject constitutes the world, then subjectivity is itself worldly. It is identical with what it observes, be it a bird in flight, the unfolding petals of a rose bud, or a discarded doll gathering dust in an attic. As Lawrence Ryan observes, “[The subject] has above all to listen [“lauschen”] to the secret life that is *in* him, but not entirely *of* him. He speaks not *of* things, but *with* things as they impinge on the self, and precisely in so doing he speaks of himself, is subjective.”⁶ Inside and outside, self and other meet in the space of consciousness, which for both Rilke and Husserl is the world we inhabit:

Durch alle Wesen reicht der *eine* Raum:
Weltinnenraum. Die Vögel fliegen still
durch uns hindurch. O, der ich wachsen will,
ich seh hinaus, und *in* mir wächst der Baum.

Ich Sorge mich, und in mir steht das Haus.
Ich hüte mich, und in mir ist die Hut.
Geliebter, der ich wurde: an mir ruht
der schönen Schöpfung Bild und weint sich aus.⁷

[*One* space spreads through all creatures equally—
inner-world-space. Birds quietly flying go
flying through us. Oh, I that want to grow,
the tree I look outside at grows in me!

It stands in me, that house I look for still,
in me that shelter I have not possessed.
I, the now well-beloved: on my breast
this fair world's image clings and weeps her fill.^{8]}

Natural and Unnatural Worlds

A brief sketch of the main ideas of phenomenology will provide the background for the discussion of Rilke's poetry in the second half of this essay. Throughout his career Husserl tried to write what he thought would serve as a general introduction to phenomenology from the 1907 lecture course *The Idea of Phenomenology* to the 1929 lectures *Cartesian Meditations*, subtitled "An Introduction to Phenomenology," and finally the unfinished 1936 volume *The Crisis of European Sciences*, also subtitled "An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy." The most successful introduction nonetheless remains the first volume of *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology* (1913), itself subtitled a

“General Introduction,” where he formulated the method of “transcendental phenomenology” that was to shape his work until his death in 1938. As the description of this method as “transcendental” already implies, phenomenology explores the conditions under which knowledge is possible at all. Like Kant, Husserl was convinced that philosophy had erred in looking toward the object instead of the subject for the basis of experience. In contrast to Kant, however, he also believed that knowledge was not the representation of a thing apart from us, a so-called *Ding an sich*, but a synthesis that produces external objects or what he called “worldly transcendencies.” The task of phenomenology is to show how this process works and the first step in doing so is to cast a spotlight on the assumption that the world exists characteristic of the “natural attitude.”

The natural attitude can be summed up in the proposition that the world is always there for us, and since it is there we can experience it in any number of ways—for instance as something we perceive, remember, imagine, or contemplate to name but a few examples. More often than not, however, we experience the world as something we rely on, as when we take a step without looking at the ground in front of us to make sure that it is there. No modern author has explored more forcefully how much we rely on the natural world than Franz Kafka, whose works invariably begin with the protagonist’s discovery that the world he previously assumed does not in fact exist. Think, for example, of Gregor Samsa who wakes up one morning to find out that his body has been transformed overnight into a many-legged insect body with a hard, round shell for a back; or Josef K. who upon awakening learns that his private bedroom is in fact an auxiliary courtroom belonging to the state. To indicate how far the natural world extends, Husserl emphasizes that everything we perceive is accompanied by an “obscurely apprehended horizon of indeterminate actualities” [einem dunkel bewußten Horizont unbestimmter Wirklichkeiten] (*Ideen I*, §27, 52/57), by which he means a background of objects that have yet to be defined, as they have yet to rise to prominence. (I only notice the ground, for instance, when I trip.) This is the world posited in the natural attitude. It is a shared or common

space, albeit one that could easily exist without us since it does not depend on us for its being. In *Ideas*, Husserl questions the self-evidence of just this world.

Indeed, one of the achievements of phenomenology was to highlight the role consciousness plays in establishing the so-called objective world. It does so not by subjecting the external world to extra scrutiny but by setting it aside in a move known as the *epoché*, which is the Greek word for suspending or bracketing. Through this seemingly dramatic maneuver, which Husserl also called the *Weltvernichtung*, phenomenology is able to determine the acts of consciousness that produce objects and the phenomena that refer back to them. A key tenet of phenomenology is that there is a correlation between the modes in which things are given (*Gegebenheitsweisen, noema*) and the mental acts by which we apprehend them (*Erlebnisarten, noesis*). For example, every thing or person remembered corresponds to an act of memory, as every perceived object corresponds to an act of perception. In broad terms, every thought (or *cogitatum*) corresponds to an act of thinking (or *cogitatio*), since without the mental act there would be no phenomenon at all. Husserl accordingly asserts, “Whatever things are...they are as things of experience [*Dinge der Erfahrung*]. It is experience alone that prescribes their sense” (*Ideen I*, §47, 106/100, translation modified). In other words, whatever we are conscious of is determined by our mode of our apprehension. Examining these modes, submitting them to an eidetic analysis is the principal task of phenomenology.

One might ask how the sketched relationship between phenomena and consciousness can be made to cohere with Husserl’s famous dictum, “To the things themselves,” which is then reformulated in the *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology* as the “principle of all principles.” The principle asserts “that every originary intuition is a legitimate source of knowledge, that everything that is originarily (so to speak in its bodily actuality) offered to us in ‘intuition’ is to be accepted simply as what it is presented as being, but also only within the limits in which it is presented” [daß jede originär gebende Anschauung eine Rechtsquelle der Erkenntnis sei, daß alles, was sich uns in der ‘Intuition’ originär, (sozusagen in seiner leibhaften Wirklichkeit) darbietet, einfach hinzunehmen sei, als was es

sich gibt, aber auch nur in den Schranken, in denen es sich gibt] (*Ideen I*, §24, 44/60). Phenomenology begins, as I suggested in the introduction, with what is evident to us without the mediation of concepts, which turn all specific and idiosyncratic phenomena into generic types. The phenomena it starts with are in this sense “originary”: One can never get behind them to arrive at their source, since they are inaccessible to us except as intuited objects or objects given in consciousness. Everything we experience is, consequently, limited to or bound by consciousness; all phenomena inhere in the subjectivity that constitutes them as intentional objects, which are correlates of consciousness. To turn “to the things themselves” thus means to turn toward things as we apprehend them in their multiple adumbrations. In either case, consciousness is the parameter in which things become evident to us. But the reverse of this statement is true as well: Things are the parameter in which consciousness becomes evident to us as the basis for the known world.

While Husserl never says explicitly that consciousness becomes visible in its intentional objects, he does indicate that it is concretized in its *Erlebnisse* or mental acts, which distinguish it not only from other egos but also from transcendental subjectivity itself. Like the German Idealists before him, he draws a distinction between empirical and transcendental consciousness, as the following quote demonstrates: “In a certain way...we can also say that *all real unities are ‘unities of sense.’* Unities of sense presuppose...a *sense-bestowing* consciousness which, for its part, exists absolutely and not by virtue of another sense-bestowal” (*Ideen I*, §55, 128-29). This absolute consciousness, which creates all unities of sense (i.e., objects) but is not itself created by another subjectivity, is Husserl’s primary interest as a philosopher who seeks to establish a system of knowledge that is not derived from anything else. Like Descartes before him, he finds the foundation for this system in the ego, which is evident to itself through the act of thinking and nothing else. In the *Cartesian Meditations*, a series of lectures he delivered in Paris in 1929 and later revised for publication, he retraces Descartes’ steps, first considering the evidence produced by the senses as a measure of truth on which to base all subsequent judgments. And

like his predecessor, he immediately points out that the evidence of the senses is unreliable, as it depends on the appearance of something that could easily disappear, thereby revealing a rift between a thing's appearance and its essence. He thus proposes another form of evidence that attests to something whose inexistence or absence is inconceivable—"unausdenkbar" to use his phrase. This evidence, which he describes as apodictic, is the mind at work or consciousness engaged in thinking, which is subjectivity's unique domain.

It is inconceivable that there would be no mind or that the mind would not exist, since such a judgment would require an act of mind, which would itself contradict the very proposition it sets out to demonstrate. The mind at work as such fulfills the criteria for apodictic evidence. What is more interesting, however, is how the ego manifests itself since, by Husserl's own admission, it is continuously engaged in thinking understood in the broadest sense as the full range of mental activities from verifying and counting to hallucinating and daydreaming. Again like Descartes Husserl finds indubitable proof of the ego in a negative act. Just as Descartes discovers the *cogito* in doubting everything around him, so too Husserl locates the transcendental ego in setting aside the assumption that the external world exists. In both cases, consciousness emerges as the agent of these otherwise privative acts, i.e., a force that cannot be doubted or bracketed since nothing would be left to set aside or doubt. Husserl consequently claims that for Descartes the statement "I doubt" precedes "I am" and would seem to echo this claim when he refers to the ego as the agent that withholds belief in the objectivity of the world ("jene Enthaltung übendes Ich"⁹).

Is this, however, the exclusive manner in which the ego becomes evident to itself? Does the mind emerge for Husserl only in this pared down form, albeit with the capacity to acquire predicates thanks to its newfound certainty, which makes it the bedrock for all knowledge? While Husserl would seem to point in this direction, he also leaves room for another interpretation, one which highlights the difference between doubting and bracketing or doubting and withholding belief in the external world.

It is useful to recall that what enables Descartes to affirm the existence of the ego by doubting everything around him is that doubt clears the slate, leaving nothing behind but the I that doubts, which is also the I that thinks—in short, the *cogito*. This reversal whereby the act of doubting becomes the grounds for certainty occurs in the Second Meditation, when Descartes realizes that even if an Evil Genius deceives him about everything, he must still exist since being deceived is still an experience available only to thinking subjects: “Beyond doubt then, I also exist, if [an Evil Genius] is deceiving me, and he can deceive me all he likes, but he will never bring it about that I should be nothing as long as I think I am something.”¹⁰ Bracketing, by contrast, does not negate the world. It directs our thoughts inwards to the world constituted in consciousness or what Rilke would call the *Weltinnenraum*. What remains once the external world has been set aside is the entire sphere of our mental life, including the unities created out of diverse impressions, i.e., intentional objects. This is why Husserl insists that the *epoché* brings about not a loss but a gain. It secures a world that derives its entire sense and claim to being from our *cogitationes*. One is tempted to say, drawing on the language of the “principle of all principles,” that the *epoché* preserves the world “so to speak in its bodily actuality [*sozusagen in [ihrer] leibhaften Wirklichkeit*]” (*Ideen I*, §24, 44/51), provided that one understands that “bodily actuality” is not the predicate of an object but of consciousness itself, which is identical with what it experiences since what it experiences is ultimately its own mental operations. The qualifier “so to speak” that Husserl throws into this statement may diminish the boldness of his claim regarding consciousness, but it cannot disguise the insight that in phenomenology thought acquires an immediacy usually reserved for bodies. Sensuality becomes in this school of thought an aspect of our mental life.

Kunstdinge

Rilke evokes the sensuality of thought in the poem “Die Rosenschale” (Bowl of Roses) written in 1907, six years before the publication of *Ideas* and more than two decades before Husserl’s Paris lectures. I mention these dates not because they are significant but to underscore that the poem has no direct relation to

phenomenology. Rilke was not influenced by Husserl's writing. And yet the poet seems to anticipate the philosopher's analysis of what it means to withhold belief in the objective world in an uncanny way. Of note is that in the *Cartesian Meditation*, Husserl does not speak so much of "bracketing" and "setting aside" as "withholding" or "abstaining" (Sich-Enthalten). Abstention, he tells us, does not strip us of everything but instead furnishes us with a pure "I" in an argument that all but reiterates Descartes' on doubt: "If I abstained...from every belief involved in or founded on sensuous experience, so that the being of the experienced world remains unaccepted by me, still this abstaining is what it is; and it exists, together with the whole stream of my experiencing life."¹¹ (The full quote in German reads, "Enthalte ich mich...jedes sinnlichen und in Sinnlichkeit fundierten Erfahrungsglaubens, sodaß für mich das Sein der Erfahrungswelt außer Geltung bleibt, so ist doch dieses Mich-Enthalten, was es ist, und es ist mitsamt dem ganzen Strom des erfahrenden Lebens."¹²) If abstaining from believing in the empirical world amounts to something—if it "it is what it is," as Husserl puts it awkwardly here—it is because it brings to the foreground the "I," which abstains from belief in everything save what it contains within itself, which is the "entire stream of [its] experiencing life." (In German one might pun, "Es enthält sich alles, außer was es in sich enthält.") For Husserl, even as the ego sets aside the world of experience, it maintains the full array of its experiences apart from any empirical referent. One could say in keeping with the vocabulary of "Bowl of Roses" that the ego "contains itself."

Rilke placed "Bowl of Roses" at the conclusion of the first volume of *New Poems* published in 1907. The collection was inspired by his work with Auguste Rodin, whom he credited with teaching him how to see the world in a new manner. In the second half of the poem, the poet catalogues the various roses in a bowl and their distinct character or personalities. There is the pale cotton rose ("die batistene") that calls to mind the undergarments made from the same fabric; and there is an "opal porcelain" rose that is so named because it is as fragile as a teacup. And then there is a rose that has no name and no color:

und jene da, die nichts enthält als sich.

Und sind nicht alle so, nur sich enthaltend,
 wenn Sich-enthalten heißt: die Welt da draußen
 und Wind und Regen und Geduld des Frühlings
 und Schuld und Unruh und vermummtes Schicksal
 und Dunkelheit der abendlichen Erde
 bis auf der Wolken Wandel, Flucht und Anflug,
 bis auf den vagen Einfluß ferner Sterne
 in eine Hand voll Innres zu verwandeln.

Nun liegt es sorglos in den offenen Rosen. (KA I: 510)

[and that one, containing nothing but itself.

And aren't they all that way: simply self-containing
 if self-containing means: to transform the world outside
 and wind and rain and the patience of spring
 and guilt and restlessness and muffled fate
 and the darkness of the evening earth
 out to the roaming and flying and fleeing of the clouds
 and the vague influence of distant stars
 into a handful of inwardness.

Now it lies carefree in these open roses.^{13]}

What the philosopher can only conceive as an act of abstaining and renouncing (*Sich-Enthalten*) becomes in the poet's hands a gesture of gathering, containing, and embodying. Indeed, he tells us, "Sich-enthalten heißt: die Welt da draußen / ... / in eine Hand voll Innres zu verwandeln." Everything we set aside as an external reality returns in us as the content of our inner life, the landscape of our thoughts. This is how Rilke restores sensuality to what would otherwise be a

world stripped of all physical characteristics as a mere phenomenon or object of consciousness. The oppositions between self and other, inner and outer, and spirit and matter disappear as materiality and corporeality become metaphors of consciousness itself, “a handful of inwardness.” Put somewhat crudely, what Rilke’s poem shows in this final turn is that the colors and textures associated with objects are in fact the colors and textures of consciousness.

One might object that this reading reduces the poem to an allegory of phenomenology; it interprets the text as an illustration of a method rather than a reflection on the moment when rose buds open and reveal what they had held concealed in their interior. Käte Hamburger was frequently criticized on this score, though it is likely she would have claimed that she was not translating Rilke’s poetry into the language of phenomenology. On the contrary his poetry gave phenomenology what it did not otherwise have: the language of things. Things speak in his work, and at first it would seem that they do so because they are themselves endowed with consciousness. Such, however, is the lure of Rilke’s thing-poems.¹⁴ The life of things derives not from their independence, but from the fact that they are experienced or intuited, *erlebt*, and as *erlebte Gegenstände* they have the status of phenomena given in consciousness. We might call them *Kunstdinge*.

Hamburger herself demonstrates this in her reading of “The Swan,” which likewise appeared in *New Poems*. She notes that the poem begins with an analogy that would be trite, were it not for the unexpected reversal of terms in the comparison:

Diese Mühsal, durch noch Ungetanes
schwer und wie gebunden hinzugehen
gleicht dem ungeschaffnen Gang des Schwans. (KA I: 473)

[This laboring through what is still undone,
as though, legs bound, we hobbled along the way,
is like the awkward walking of the swan.¹⁵]

Hamburger comments that while one might assume that the lumbering gait of the swan is a metaphor for our struggles in life, the reverse is in fact the case.¹⁶ Our struggles are a metaphor for the awkward movement of the swan on *terra firma*, as indicated by the dative case. As she is quick to caution, however, this reversal does not mean that we in our toils illustrate the labor of the swan; our life is not a metaphor for this creature, known to paddle furiously underwater while gliding gracefully on the surface. Such a reading in Hamburger's opinion mistakes the point of the poem, which is to show that the swan is a phenomenon, whose meaning derives from our reflection on it. We endow the swan with meaning and in so doing make it speak by lifting it from its empirical state and turning it into an intentional object. We, in other words, turn this visible creature into an invisible essence so that it stands henceforth in consciousness as a product of consciousness, namely as a *Kunst Ding* or even a *Dinggedicht*. The poem "The Swan" shows with enormous precision that bracketing is the condition for the making of art and, more generally, the making of meaning.

A similar structure is at play in "The Bowl of Roses" which as the final work in the first volume of *New Poems* lends itself to being read as an allegory for the entire collection. Indeed the two nouns that make up the title are significant in this regard. The roses in this one poem are figures for all the poems in the collection, as the bowl is a figure for the collection itself, which gathers various phenomena and places them in a single vessel where they are one and yet diverse. But "The Bowl of Roses" is also an allegory for art, which takes what is exterior and turns it into something interior, as the final two stanzas of the poem demonstrate. According to these stanzas, all the elements that the plant is exposed to—wind, rain, darkness—are incorporated into the blossom, which stands open in the final line like a gift to the reader or a hand offered in friendship: "Nun liegt es sorglos in den offenen Rosen." With this image, the poem is able to overcome the antagonism portrayed in the first stanza, where two boys wrestle with each other and form a tight ball reminiscent of a clenched fist:

Zornige sahst du flackern, sahst zwei Knaben
zu einem Etwas sich zusammenballen,
das Haß war und sich auf der Erde wälzte
wie ein von Bienen überfallnes Tier;
Schauspieler, aufgetürmte Übertreiber,
rasende Pferde, die zusammenbrachen,
den Blick wegwerfend, bläkend das Gebiß
als schälte sich der Schädel aus dem Maule.

[You've seen caged anger flare, seen two boys
roll themselves up into a knot
of pure hatred, writhing on the ground
like an animal attacked by bees;
you've seen actors, giant exaggerators,
careening horses crashing down,
flinging their eyes away, baring their teeth
as if their skulls were peeling through their mouths.^{17]}

The poem invokes but immediately turns away from this scene of conflict, which serves as a foil for the serenity and mutual dependence of the roses evoked throughout the poem and especially in the third and fourth stanzas.¹⁸ Inside the flower bowl, the poem finds a life that is neither hampered from without nor constrained from within, as it does not face anything opposed to it, like the two boys, or opposite it, as would, say, a botanist. Rilke never tired of noting, and not only in the Eighth Duino Elegy, that everything we set opposite us comes to function as our opponent, as it represents the limits of our powers and person.

The third stanza of the poem reads:

Lautloses Leben, Aufgehn ohne Ende,
Raum-brauchen ohne Raum von jenem Raum
zu nehmen, den die Dinge rings verringern,

fast nicht Umrissen-sein wie Ausgespartes
 und lauter Inneres, viel seltsam Zartes
 und Sich-bescheinendes—bis an den Rand:
 ist irgend etwas uns bekannt wie dies? (KA I: 509)

[Life lived in quietness, endless opening out,
 space being used without space being taken
 from the space that adjacent things diminish,
 outline just hinted at, like ground left blank
 and pure withinness, much so strangely soft
 and self-illuminating—out to the edge:
 do we know anything like this?^{19]}

The repetitions in this stanza have been the source of some consternation, as if the poem tries to draw distinctions where none exist, at least none that are registered in language. Particular pressure is brought to bear on the word “space” (“Raum”) which designates, on the one hand, a force that separates bodies and, on the other, one that joins them together. Both facets are evident in the lines, “Raum-brauchen ohne Raum von jenem Raum / zu nehmen, den die Dinge rings verringern,” in which the internal rhymes seem to speak in ways the words themselves cannot. For the kind of space that does not surround things and circumscribe them is one in which two things sound at once. This happens in the repeated phoneme “au” in “Lautlos,” “Aufgehen,” Raum,” “brauchen,” and “Ausgespartes” which is properly speaking a diphthong, and which stands in stark contrast to the phoneme “ing” in “Dinge,” “rings” and “verringern.” The former sound forms a bridge between elements, whereas the latter sets them apart, and in setting them apart also sets them outside this circle in which everything rises continually—“Aufgehen ohne Ende”—for there is nothing there to stop this movement.

The movement takes on specifically sexual connotations in the fourth stanza, which is as much about the ways flowers and poems transform an

outside into an inside as it is about the ways the two propagate themselves in an act that would have to be called autopoietic:

ist irgend etwas uns bekannt wie dies?

Und dann wie dies: daß ein Gefühl entsteht,
weil Blütenblätter Blütenblätter rühren?

Und dies: daß eins sich aufschlägt wie ein Lid,
und drunter liegen lauter Augenlider,
geschlossene, als ob sie, zehnfach schlafend,
zu dämpfen hätten eines Innern Sehkraft.

Und dies vor allem: daß durch diese Blätter
das Licht hindurch muß. Aus den tausend Himmeln
filtern sie langsam jenen Tropfen Dunkel,
in dessen Feuerschein das wirre Bündel
der Staubgefäße sich erregt und aufbäumt. (KA I: 509)

[do we know anything like this?

And like this: that a feeling arises
because flower-petals touch flower-petals?

And this: that one eye opens like an eye,
and beneath it lie eyelid after eyelid,
all tightly closed, as if through a tenfold sleep
they might curb an inner power of sight.

And this above all: that through these petals
light must pass. From a thousand skies
they slowly filter out that drop of darkness
in whose fiery glow the tangled mass
of stamens bestirs itself and grows erect.^{20]}

Much as in the third stanza, so too here the sound quality of the poem evokes what the words can hardly express. The unfolding petals of the rose, each of which rests upon the other, is conveyed in the alliteration evident in the line “weil Blütenblätter Blütenblätter rühren,” which is all but impossible to read aloud without tripping over the repeated labial consonants (i.e., “Blüten” and “Blätter”). In this manner the poem is able to generate the sensation of rose petals touching each other. But it also does more than that. It mimics the fluttering movement of the petals in its alliteration and in so doing forges a link between rose petals and eyelids, which is not unusual in Rilke’s poetry, but which here has a particular valence, since the two are not only metaphors for each other but for the text itself, which cannot open itself completely without dispelling its inner secret, its “inner power of sight,” as the poem puts it.²¹ The poem “The Rose Interior” from the *New Poems: The Other Part* considers just this situation, when flowers begin to exfoliate and by extension to lose the interior they had formed by absorbing the elements:

... viele ließen
 sich überfüllen und fließen
 über von Innenraum
 in die Tage, die immer
 voller und voller sich schließen. (KA I:569)

[... many let themselves
 fill up with inner space
 until they overflow and stream
 into the days.²²]

In “The Bowl of Roses,” the tenfold power to see is never fully disclosed. It remains hidden beneath numerous veils, and this withholding preserves its vehicle, which is as much the poem itself, as it is the bowl of roses after which it takes its name, and finally the hull or shell—another meaning of the word

Schale—of every blossom described in the poem in luxuriant detail. How this inner power, drawn from the filtered light outside, is able to engender a work is the concern of the remainder of the poem, which explores the poetic process of creation through the reproductive dimensions of roses.

The botanical process of self-fertilization is almost alchemical for Rilke, converting light into matter and making what is bright dark. Indeed the last four lines of the fourth stanza could be said to trace the entire reproductive process whereby sunlight is turned into liquid that feeds the flower's receptacle, from which the stamens rise loaded with pollen that fertilizes the plant as it passes from the stigma to the ovaries:

...Aus den tausend Himmeln
 filtern sie langsam jenen Tropfen Dunkel,
 in dessen Feuerschein das wirre Bündel
 der Staubgefäße sich erregt und aufbäumt.

[...From a thousand skies
 they slowly filter out that drop of darkness
 in whose fiery glow the tangled mass
 of stamens bestirs itself and grows erect.]

The sexual nature of this process is hardly concealed in the poem. The stamens are said to be aroused and stand erect in the final line, which reminds us that in botany they are the masculine reproductive organs.

The absence of any explicit reference to the female reproductive organs of a flower may strike one as odd, especially in a poem in which each of the roses is personified as a feminine figure. This is due in part to the gender of the noun "die Rose," but it is just as much a choice of the poet who plays up the feminine personalities of the various roses in the bowl. I would suggest that the female organs of the flower are included in the title of the poem—in the word "Schale" which, as mentioned previously, is also the hull surrounding the fruit and seed of

every blossom. The poem hints in this direction when it compares the interior of one rose to Botticelli's Venus standing in a shell—"wie eine Venus aufrecht in der Muschel"—though it refrains from using the word "Schale" directly.²³ Every rose in "The Bowl of Roses" is at once fruit and husk, seed and shell, blossom and bowl, that is, a world unto itself, which Husserl would call an egological sphere and Rilke the space of art. This world, though set apart ("Ausgespartes"), is not closed. It is always visible and available to us, though we never see it, since we look for it outside rather than inside. To teach us to see and feel the space we already inhabit was Rilke's and Husserl's shared goal. Rilke says as much in the fourth *Duino Elegy*, which I quote by way of conclusion: "Wir kennen den Kontur / des Fühlens nicht: nur was ihn formt von außen" (KA II: 211) [We do not know the contour of feeling, only what shapes it from without].

¹ The term first appears in Volume I of *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy*, as Husserl discusses the difference between the absolute reality posited in the natural attitude and the relative one considered in phenomenology. The section in which he discusses this difference is entitled, "Das absolute Bewußtsein als Residuum der Weltvernichtung" [Absolute Consciousness as the Residuum after the Annihilation of the World]. See Edmund Husserl, *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie, Erstes Buch: Allgemeine Einführung in die reine Phänomenologie*, in *Husserliana*, vol. 3:1, ed. Karl Schuhmann (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1971), §49, 103-106. The English translation is quoted from: E. Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, Book I: General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology*, tr. F. Kersten (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1983), 109-112. Both the German edition and English translation will be referred to parenthetically in the text as *Ideen I*. Section numbers will be followed by pages numbers for the English translation; where appropriate, page numbers will also be included for the German.

² Carsten Strathausen, *The Look of Things: Poetry and Vision around 1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 77.

³ Käte Hamburger, "Die Phänomenologische Struktur der Dichtung Rilkes," in *Rilke in neuer Sicht*, ed. K. Hamburger (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1971), 83-158. Hamburger's monumental achievement in this essay is to demonstrate the uncanny parallels between the structure of consciousness in Husserl's

phenomenology and Rilke's poetry. To the degree that she explores the premises that underlie Rilke's work, she engages in a transcendental critique, outlining the conditions in which Rilke's poetry is possible at all. Few critics since Hamburger have produced such a systematic analysis.

⁴ See her discussion of the simultaneous defamiliarization and elevation of everyday objects in modern art, as these objects are shown to inhere in experience in Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei, *The Ecstatic Quotidian: Phenomenological Sightings in Modern Art and Literature* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007), 13-40.

⁵ Hamburger, 84.

⁶ Lawrence Ryan, "Neue Gedichte—New Poems," in *A Companion to the Works of Rainer Maria Rilke*, ed. Erika A. Metzger and Michael M. Metzger (Rochester: Camden House, 2001), 129.

⁷ Rainer Maria Rilke, "Es winkt zu Föhlung fast aus allen Dingen," in R. M. Rilke, *Werke: Kommentierte Ausgabe in vier Bänden*, ed. Manfred Engel, Ulrich Fülleborn, Horst Nalewski, August Stahl (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1996), II: 113 (hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as KA).

⁸ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Possibility of Being: A Selection of Poems*, tr. James Blaire Leishman (New York: New Directions, 1977), 108-109.

⁹ Both quotes are from Edmund Husserl, *Cartesianische Meditationen und Pariser Vorträge*, in *Husserliana*, vol. 1, ed. Stephen Strasser (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1963), §9, 23 and §8, 21 respectively. The reference for the English translation is, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, tr. Dorion Cairns (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1963).

¹⁰ René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy with Selections from the Objections and Replies*, trans. with an Introduction and Notes by Michael Moriarty (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 18.

¹¹ *Cartesian Meditations*, §8, 19.

¹² *Cartesianische Meditationen*, §8, 20.

¹³ Rainer Maria Rilke, "The Bowl of Roses," in R. M. Rilke, *New Poems: A Revised Bilingual Edition*, selected and translated by Edward Snow (San Francisco: North Point Press, 2001), 165.

¹⁴ I discuss the supposed autonomy of things as a projection of interiority in Rilke's *Malte Laurids Brigge* in R. Tobias, "Rilke's Landscape of the Heart: On

The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge, in *Modernism/modernity* 20:4 (November 2013): 667-684.

¹⁵ Rainer Maria Rilke, "The Swan," in *Ahead of All Parting: Selected Poetry and Prose of Rainer Maria Rilke*, ed. and tr. Stephen Mitchell (New York: The Modern Library, 1995), 35.

¹⁶ Hamburger, "Phänomenologische Struktur der Dichtung Rilkes," 103-105.

¹⁷ Rilke, "The Bowl of Roses," *New Poems*, ed. and tr. Edward Snow, 161.

¹⁸ Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei argues that while the violence depicted in the first stanza may not be mentioned in the remainder of the poem, it informs its representations all the same inasmuch as the roses catalogued in the poem are cut roses taken from a garden where they were exposed to the elements. See J. A. Gosetti-Ferencei, "Immanent Transcendence in Rilke and Stevens," *German Quarterly* 83:3 (Summer 2010): 282.

¹⁹ Rilke, "The Bowl of Roses," *New Poems*, ed. and tr. Edward Snow, 161.

²⁰ Rilke, "The Bowl of Roses," *New Poems*, ed. and tr. Edward Snow, 161-163.

²¹ Rilke compares rose petals to eyelids most notably in the epigraph he composed for his gravestone:

Rose, oh reiner Widerspruch, Lust,
Niemandes Schlaf zu sein unter soviel
Lidern. (KA II: 394)

²² R. M. Rilke, "The Rose-Interior," *New Poems*, ed. and tr. Edward Snow, 277.

²³ I am indebted to Jennifer Gosetti-Ferencei's reading of the poem for drawing my attention to the reference to Venus. See Gosetti-Ferencei, "Immanent Transcendence in Rilke and Stevens," 282.

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