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PREPARING FOR AN IMPOSSIBLE EVENT: LINGUISTIC PERFORMATIVITY AND POETIC ADDRESS TO THE ABSOLUTE OTHER — READING RILKE WITH DERRIDA*

Abstract: The essay argues that an event, if it deserves the name, is singular, unrepeatable, and thus unmediable: It cannot be represented or secured by prior conventions. It can only be prepared for through an unconditional turning-toward. Following Derrida, I propose that lyric apostrophe is the figure of this preparation: Not a mechanism that enables the event but an exposure that keeps the future (the to-come) open to whatever arrives.

Reading Rilke's *Ninth Duino Elegy*, I analyze the poem's address to the Earth as an exemplary scene. The apostrophe singled out from the elegy does not merely illustrate praise; it presents, within the conventional act of concluding a covenant, the once-only character of a life's traces — the singular marks of a singular life — which require attestation.

Reframing apostrophe as preparation rather than mediation, the essay departs from standard accounts of lyric address. Here apostrophe does not establish a symmetrical exchange with a responsive addressee, nor does it fold time back into a reversible 'now'. It stages an irreversible call in which the mortal addresses the mortal, and this address requires a witness: The Angel, who both threatens with erasure and promises the survival of the very trace it attests. Contrary to readings that construe the Angel as a timeless, undivided transcendence, I read — by bringing de Man and Gadamer into tension — the Angel as a real witness at once inner and outer, intra- and extratextual, not a guarantor of presence but the instance that exposes the trace and attests — without guaranteeing — to its survival.

Keywords: *performativity of language, poetic address, singularity of the event, Rilke, Derrida*

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1. INTRODUCTION

An event worthy of the name is singular and unrepeatable: It has never occurred and will never recur. Precisely as such, it is unconditional — it does not arise from prior enabling conventions and cannot be mediated or represented; there is no 'event as such', since mediation presupposes representation. Yet an event leaves traces and effects: Encounters with the absolutely new inscribe affective marks of being addressed. A pertinent example is Rilke's *Ninth Duino Elegy*. After a brief orientation, I consider its apostrophic — hence, in a limited sense, performative — acts of addressing and being addressed, of turning away and turning toward, pausing first on the implications of the event's unrepeatability and unconditionality.

Foregrounding this unconditionality calls into question the phenomenological 'as such' and the institutional safeguards (legal, conventional, technical) that theories of performativity posit as conditions of possibility for an event. Emphasizing impossibility likewise unsettles any systematization of conditions. As Derrida writes, "performativity is necessary but not sufficient"; deconstruction "lets the other come"— that is, it turns toward the openness of the future (the to-come), keeping it open and preparing for it — while continuing to unsettle the very conditions that would neatly distinguish the performative from the constative.[1] The inquiry is not confined to linguistic performativity. In concluding remarks on "Is saying the event possible?" Derrida urges a rethinking of "the value of the possible" that marks Western philosophy: The question requires that one answer both yes and no at once — "possible, impossible, possible as impossible".[2]

A philosophical instance of the singular event is Heidegger's *Dasein*, which can never be a mere example: "The Being of any such entity is *in each case mine*."[3] Its evental singularity follows from finitude: We are mortal, divided from ourselves, thrown into time, never fully present to ourselves. Here Derrida diverges: Our never being present to ourselves, already delivered over to the world and referred to others, cannot be remedied by a turn back to what is one's own. What, or whom, we turn toward is not an inappropriable origin but the open future — the absolute other. The related poetic trope is apostrophe: A turning-toward by turning-away.

Though the absolute other is not mediable, it leaves traces, and we must prepare for it. Derrida names this unfulfillable, risk-laden preparation an affirmative turn

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1 Jacques Derrida, *Psyche: Inventions of the Other*, ed. Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth G. Rottenberg, vol. 1 (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 46.

2 Jacques Derrida, "A Certain Impossible Possibility of Saying the Event," *Critical inquiry* 33, no. 2 (2007): 454.

3 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 67.

toward the absolute other. Poetic address — apostrophe — enacts this paradigmatically. He distinguishes 'pure address' or prayer from ode-like praise: The latter predicates and conditions the other's coming; the former addresses the other as other, withholding predicates and safeguards, exposing itself to whatever arrives — whether death or living-on. Such address "does not speak *of*, but *to*",[4] and, prior to any performative doing, executes a decision that occurs not only in poetry but whenever, in life, we turn toward another.

The turning toward, in this sense, is not identical with what literary studies calls apostrophe, though it is not independent of it. Definitions of apostrophe vary even within literary studies; a full reconstruction is offered elsewhere, and here I only sketch the necessary groundwork.

We must first recall de Man's reading of Rilke: The governing figure of this poetry is a chiasmus of substitution grounded in an originary lack — the emptiness of inscription — a lack the poems attempt to fill by an impossible promise issued in the name or address of 'God'.[5] To this problematic belong de Man's essay on Riffaterre, which traces linguistic deixis to the trope of poetic address (prosopopoeia),[6] and his two essays on Hegel — above all the one on the sublime — which locate the absolutely beautiful or the sublime in an unbridgeable rupture between divine and human, and between the non-sensuous and the sensuous.[7] Preparing an interpretation of the *Ninth Elegy* would then require showing how these texts place that unrepeatable, singular event which de Man calls materiality, inscription, or an undeniable empty fact, and which Derrida names the absolute other and, in certain cases, 'God'; how de Man's Rilke reading defines the name 'God', and, in relation, whom or what Derrida calls 'God'; and why Derrida retains the name despite its metaphysical overtones, thereby exposing himself to the risk of misunderstanding. Since I cannot elaborate here, I register these points in outline and accept the risk of conflating God's metaphysical proper name with 'God' as absolute other.

The medium of the turn toward the absolute other is apostrophe. It does not mediate the event; it prepares it. Paul de Man, Heinz Schlaffer, and Jonathan Culler define apostrophe differently by how many and what kinds of speech-positions they

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4 Jacques Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, ed. Harold Coward and Toby Foshay, trans. Ken Frieden (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 111.

5 Paul de Man, "Tropes (Rilke)," in *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979), 55–56.

6 Paul de Man, "Hypogram and Inscription," in *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 27–53.

7 Paul de Man, "Hegel on the Sublime," in *Aesthetic Ideology*, ed. Andrzej Warminski (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 105–118.

distinguish (addresser, addressee, witness).[8] Crucially, unlike Schlaffer and Culler, de Man excludes the third — the public or witness — treating that mediating, quasi-divine figure as a metaphysical stop that freezes prosopopoeia's exchange and its hallucinatory, appearance-unsettling effects.[9]

If I nonetheless claim that the witness's position is key in Rilke, 'witness' does not mean the Schlaffer/Culler type. That supposed divine guarantor of undivided presence, representability, and mediation must first be rigorously deconstructed in order to reach the placeless place Derrida names the absolute other, the secret, God, or the event — which is also the witness's place. Traces of such a non-metaphysical, thoroughly concrete third position (or trace) appear both in the poem and in its reception; I indicate them via points of contact between Paul de Man's and Hans-Georg Gadamer's readings.

Without attempting a full demonstration, I argue in outline that the experience of time voiced in the poem's praise of finitude exceeds the terms set by Schlaffer's and Culler's accounts of apostrophe, as well as by the frameworks of de Man and Gadamer. Each, in different ways, reintroduces a return or reversal that resists — or conditions — the radically irreversible, unrecallable, one-way, asymmetrical movement of time. Returns to an origin, to inscription, or to lyric's reversible 'now' function as turns back, but the event in question affords no such return. There is no turning back, even if the event seems graspable only as a turning back; yet neither return nor calculation can simply be eliminated.

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8 The structure of apostrophe, for both Culler and Schlaffer, is 'indirect': A seemingly direct turning toward an altogether different instance that simultaneously turns away from the audience or reader, who is thereby addressed only indirectly: "Triangulated address is the root-form of presentation for lyric, underlying even those poems that do not engage in the strange forms of address and invocation endemic to the genre. But it is scarcely clear that 'overheard' is best way to speak of this pretense to address someone or something else, while actually proffering discourse for an audience." Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 186. Schlaffer likewise conceives poetic address — more precisely *Anrufung* ('invocation') — as modeled on the liturgical act of invoking the divine: "Rather, the course of lyric communication corresponds to the worship service, in which the priest, standing before the congregation and on its behalf, calls upon God. It is to him that the priest's praise and petition are addressed, not to the congregation, who see him only from behind as he performs his prayers. In this constellation three, not two, parties are involved: The speaker, the addressed instance, and the overhearers, who, as witnesses and beneficiaries, follow the priestly speech act […]." Heinz Schlaffer, *Geistersprache: Zweck und Mittel der Lyrik* (München: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2012), 23, [Translation is mine – H. H.].

9 This becomes most evident in those passages where de Man distinguishes between apostrophe/prosopopoeia and personification/anthropomorphism. While the former has a tropological structure, the latter has a referential one. See de Man, "Hypogram and Inscription," 47; Paul de Man, "Anthropomorphism and Trope in the Lyric," in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 239–244.

That time's passage cannot be denied means it must be affirmed — unconditionally. It may seem impossible; yet, as Derrida insists, it happens in every moment of life.[10] Our separation from ourselves appears as loss, emptiness, metaphysical homelessness, tropological errancy, loss of identity, or inauthenticity only so long as we look back rather than turn toward the other. Such a turn seems impossible and demands absolute risk and dispossession, without safeguards or returns, yet it is our only chance to enter relation and, as Rilke says, to leave a once-only mark in the world. That mark is read by the other in me — carried invisibly within and therefore always already excluded from me. It is precisely this contamination between 'I' and other — the interpenetration of positions without collapse — that the apostrophe below will let us observe.

Given the limits of this essay, I cannot offer a full account of the *Ninth Elegy*'s addresses or its reception. I concentrate instead on Gadamer and de Man, whose sharply different views of language serve as exemplary poles. Explaining why their readings have left only scant — more allusive than substantial — traces in the reception would itself require extended analysis. By contrast, Manfred Engel's writings have been far more influential; much of the reception still draws on the complexity of his structuralist framework.[11] Christoph König's detailed commentary, published with the critical edition he edited,[12] should also be noted — but this too can only be pursued elsewhere.

An interpretation of poetic address from the vantage of Derrida's late writings is, with few exceptions, not yet part of Rilke's interpretive horizon.[13] I therefore situate the apostrophe singled out from the *Ninth Elegy*, in which the speaker addresses the

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10 See, for example, the passage in *The Gift of Death* where, reading the story of Abraham and Isaac, Derrida concludes that the turn toward the absolute Other (for instance, God), a turn that requires turning away from everything and everyone else and sacrificing even the beloved son Isaac, is not an exceptional occurrence but "the most common event in the world". Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago / London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 85.

11 Manfred Engel, *Rainer Maria Rilkes "Duineser Elegien" und die moderne deutsche Lyrik: Zwischen Jahrhundertwende und Avantgarde* (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 1986), 123–150; Rainer Maria Rilke, *Werke. Kommentierte Ausgabe in vier Bänden, vol. 2: Gedichte 1910–1926*, ed. Manfred Engel and Ulrich Fülleborn (Frankfurt am Main and Leipzig: Insel, 1996), 591–702.

12 Christoph König, *Kreativität: Lektüren von Rilkes 'Duineser Elegien'* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2023), 110–132; Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duineser Elegien und zugehörige Gedichte 1912–1922*, ed. Christoph König (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2023).

13 For a rare exception, see Silvia Henke, "Die Rhetorik der Blindheit als Trauerarbeit im Sichtbaren bei Derrida und Rilke," in *Mnema: Derrida zum Andenken*, ed. Hans-Joachim Lenger and Georg Christoph Tholen (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2007), 157–170, who, reading Derrida's *Memoirs of the Blind*, argues that Rilke's rhetoric of blindness performs mourning-in-the-visible by producing blindness through language rather than image, at the medial limit where drawing, seeing, and writing intersect.

Earth, within these contexts, relying above all on Derrida's insights. My guiding question is simple: Who bears witness to this exemplary apostrophe?

2. DEIXIS, TESTIMONY, AND ADDRESS

Jonathan Culler illustrates apostrophe's animating force in *Theory of the Lyric* with a passage from Rilke's *Ninth Duino Elegy*. The Earth-address is itself framed by further addresses — "To the Angel laud this world" and "Tell him — things"[14] — so it exemplifies the praise the addressee/s is/are to perform. Culler argues that apostrophe desires that things function as '*thous*': If Earth can be addressed, it 'wants to be spirit', to become at least partly invisible or conceptual through a 'rearising' in us, and the poem even promises such transformation — leaving open whether it occurs in the poem's moment. For Culler, this animating power typically interiorizes the external or projects the self outward; hence lyric folds linear narrative time into an iterable, reversible 'now'. Lyric language does not represent a past event; it is the event of this now.[15]

Within the ten *Duino Elegies*, the *Ninth* is pivotal: Like the *Seventh*, it turns lament over transience into praise, redirecting speech from the Angel to the Earth and things. Having renounced the aim of 'winning' over the Angel ("No longer beseeching, no beseeching"; "Don't think that I am beseeching. And even if / I were beseeching, you would not come."), the speaker urges a turn toward earthly being-there and to bearing witness to the finitude and singularity of our existence and our singular relations to finite things — each time otherwise repeated, which properly falls to the Angel to attest.

In what follows I single out events of address — a turning toward that is also a turning away — that bring speaker(s) and witness(es) into being and configure their relations:

[…]

Hier *ist des* Säglichen *Zeit,* hier *seine Heimat.*
Sprich und bekenn. […]

Preise dem Engel die Welt, nicht die unsägliche, ihm
kannst du nicht großtun mit herrlich Erfühltem; im Weltall,
wo er fühlender fühlt, bist du ein Neuling. Drum zeig
ihm das Einfache, das, von Geschlecht zu Geschlechtern gestaltet,
als ein Unsriges lebt, neben der Hand und im Blick.

[14] Martin Travers, *Duino Elegies: A New Translation and Commentary* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2023), 253. All subsequent quotations from the *Ninth Elegy* are taken from this translation.
[15] Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, 224–226.

Sag ihm die Dinge. Er wird staunender stehn; wie du standest
bei dem Seiler in Rom, oder beim Töpfer am Nil.
Zeig ihm, wie glücklich ein Ding sein kann, wie schuldlos und unser,
wie selbst das klagende Leid rein zur Gestalt sich entschließt,
dient als ein Ding, oder stirbt in ein Ding –, und jenseits
selig der Geige entgeht. Und diese, von Hingang
lebenden Dinge verstehn, daß du sie rühmst; vergänglich,
traun sie ein Rettendes uns, den Vergänglichsten, zu.
Wollen, wir sollen sie ganz im unsichtbarn Herzen verwandeln
in – o unendlich – in uns! Wer wir am Ende auch seien.

Erde, ist es nicht dies, was du willst: unsichtbar
in uns erstehn? – Ist es dein Traum nicht,
einmal unsichtbar zu sein? – Erde! unsichtbar!
Was, wenn Verwandlung nicht, ist dein drängender Auftrag?
Erde, du liebe, ich will. Oh glaub, es bedürfte
nicht deiner Frühlinge mehr, mich dir zu gewinnen, einer,
ach, ein einziger ist schon dem Blute zu viel.
Namenlos bin ich zu dir entschlossen, von weit her.
Immer warst du im Recht, und dein heiliger Einfall
ist der vertrauliche Tod.
Siehe, ich lebe. Woraus? Weder Kindheit noch Zukunft
werden weniger ..... Überzähliges Dasein
entspringt mir im Herzen.[16]

[…]

Here is the time for the *sayable*, *here* is its homeland.
Speak out and bear witness. […]

To the Angel laud this world, not the unsayable one.
You cannot impress him with your glorious emotion.
In the world-space where he feels with deeper feelings,
you are a novice. Show him, therefore, what is simple,
what shaped over generations lives on as our own,

[16] Rilke, *Duineser Elegien*, 37–38. All subsequent quotations from *Die neunte Elegie* are taken from this edition.

at hand and within sight. Tell him—things.
He will stand in amazement, just as you stood
beside the rope-maker in Rome or the potter
on the Nile. Show him how happy a thing
can be, how innocent and ours, how even
mourning grief can find its pure form,
and can serve as a thing or dies into a thing—
to escape in bliss beyond the violin—And these things,
which live in their demise, understand that you
laud them; ephemeral, they look to us for
deliverance, to us, the most ephemeral of all. They want
us to change them, entirely, in our hidden hearts, in—
oh, eternally—within us! Whoever, we may ultimately be.

Earth, is it not this that you want,
to arise within us, invisible—Is it not your
dream, for once to become invisible?—
Earth! Invisible! What, if not transformation, is your
pressing command? Earth, dearest one, I want this. Oh,
don't believe that I should need your spring times
to win me over. One, even just one, would be
too much for my blood. I came from afar,
already utterly resolved to be yours. You
were always right, and the holiest of your conceptions is
death, my companion.
Look: I am living. From what? Neither childhood nor future
is diminishing . . . superabundant being
springs from my heart.[17]

It appears — and appearance matters throughout — that the decisive turn is the speaker's call to turn away from the Angel and the 'unsayable' toward the Earth, the *'here'*, home of the *'sayable'*. At first sight the poem seems to demand a deictic act — showing or pointing — to astonish the Angel by attesting this *'here'*. The 'I' addresses Earth directly and the Angel only indirectly; the speech functions at once as testimony and address. On the scene we can discern a triad — 'I', Earth, Angel — as addresser, addressee, witness, yet it is framed by another apostrophic triad — 'I',

[17] Travers, *Duino Elegies*, 255, [modified].

'we', 'you' — that destabilizes fixed positions. Because these pronouns at points become interchangeable, reception often speaks of self-address. Manfred Engel, for his part, traces all pronouns and *dramatis personae* (Angel, Hero, Child, Creature, etc.) back to the central 'I', treating them as narcissistic projections or alter egos.[18]

Such a move effaces precisely the differences and turns that constitute address. Throughout the cycle a tension arises between the staging of figures and their identifiability, between visible and invisible dimensions. Staging — showing, pointing — aims at phenomenalization; so too, in part, does poetic address, which lends a sensuous face or name to what is non-sensuous, absent, or unrepresentable. Yet prosopopoeia leaves the scene fluid — spectral, present/absent — and not pre-given in the text. The repeated 'here'/'now' and the figures 'I', 'you', 'we' do not precede the poem; they come into being in the labor of reading and repetition, each time otherwise yet hauntingly alike. The reception's desire — often unsuccessfully[19] — to fix *dramatis personae*, above all the Angel, works against lyric's performativity and evental character. Referentializing tropes into proper names is an irreversible tendency of language, but indulging it risks working against the text.

If the *Elegies* are more lyric than narrative, every utterance that implicates an 'I' brings the communicative scene into being each time as a linguistic event. Taking seriously Culler's claim that lyric is not the mediation of an event but the event itself[20] means figures and names have no pre-textual self-identity. The poems may nonetheless present figures as seemingly self-identical — by leaning on narrative conventions or received notions of language and subject — but in Rilke this very difficulty signals an awareness of their evental condition. The question, then, is how particular passages present the 'I' or the Angel, whose identity is only a name or pronoun and who, in principle, appear each time otherwise and yet uncannily similar — "Just once, everything, / only just once" — as they step onto the stage.

From any angle, speaking positions lack a determinate origin: One voice repeatedly speaks in another's name. The 'I' is explicitly named only in the address to Earth *("Erde, du liebe, ich will."; "Namenlos bin ich zu dir entschlossen."; "Siehe, ich lebe.")*, where any potential 'you' who obeys the imperatives *("Preise dem Engel die Welt."; "Sag ihm die Dinge.")* and repeats the address speaks both for 'I' and for 'us'. The 'I' always addresses a 'you' in whose name it also speaks, most overtly in the plural. While singular and plural pronouns are interchangeable — even nameless *("Wer wir am Ende auch seien."; "Namenlos bin ich zu dir entschlossen.")*

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18 Engel, *Rainer Maria Rilkes "Duineser Elegien,"* 145–150.

19 For scholarly reflections on the difficulties of interpretation, see: Dieter Liewerscheidt, "Rilkes Duineser Elegien, ein zwiespältiges Experiment," *Literatur für Leser* 39, no. 2 (2016): 97–107.

20 Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, 226.

— the addressed figures (Angel, Earth) bear proper names; yet this does not ease identification, since proper names slide into common nouns (German *'Erde'* / *'Erde'*, both capitalized). 'Earth' appears expressly as a word — more precisely, as a flower's name: Not "a handful of earth" but a 'word' 'won', "the yellow and blue / gentian". This is no Cratylean equation of word and thing, nor does deixis sublate language into presence. As the exemplary apostrophe shows, things become singular not by descriptive pointing but by address, leaving singular, unrepeatable traces on the Earth or in the earth.

That the *Ninth Elegy* has a profound awareness of the problems — parallel to constative vs. performative language — of deixis and poetic address is signaled by its vivid surface staging. Examples include the repetition and italicization of deictics; the apparent interchangeability of pronouns; address framed by address; and figurations of hand, eye, tongue, teeth as the organs or material conditions of writing, pointing, seeing, speaking — joined to heart and immediacy of feeling. Also staged is the function of the example itself, which can be symbolic — producing a unity of singular and universal[21] — or sign-like, as with 'here' and 'now', which, as de Man notes, are not examples at all, point to nothing, and refer back to the emptiness of their own inscription.[22]

The poem not only stages but also problematizes the difference between deixis and address: After the initial linguistic exhibitions, pointing turns into an event of avowal *("Sprich und bekenn.")* that attests not a thing but the avower's irreplaceability and the singular, unrepeatable event of avowing. Enumeration and deixis, ostensibly constative, are re-situated within intersubjective acts of avowal and address. In the poem's second half, the frame of pointing is shown to be produced by a turn toward the other as other; the speaker summons the other (perhaps oneself, or ourselves each time) to speak here and avow to the absolute other — the Angel, i.e., to absolute interiority and exteriority — thereby also bearing witness to the inner, linguistic relation to Earth, things, world, the here.

The problems of linguistic pointing, avowal, and address belong to a broader inquiry: The finitude of the time of being-there. The deixis of *'here'* marks not only place but, above all, temporality. The poem asks about the struggle and the 'must' that orient finite human existence *("Warum […] also die Frist des Daseins hinzubringen", "warum dann / Menschliches müssen")* and, accordingly, about the willing — or here, the desiring — of finitude as fate *("warum dann […] / sich sehnen nach Schicksal?…")*, despite our evasive *("vermeidend")* relation to finitude and the

[21] Paul de Man, "Sign and Symbol in Hegel's 'Aesthetics'," *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 4 (Summer 1982): 761–775.

[22] de Man, "Hypogram and Inscription," 42.

possibility of 'spending' time *("hinbringen")* in the laurel's mode, a way of being that endures time. Earthly finitude, the temporal limit, both threatens effacement (making the human "the most fleeting of all" *["die Schwindendsten"]*) and confers singularity ("Just once", *"ein Mal"*, seemingly "irrevocable", *"nicht widerrufbar"*). Yet both traceless disappearance and the irrevocable mark ("Mal") are only apparent: The trace is always erasable, destructible, and is referred, by poetic address, to staging — to a figural semblance (the Angel, or even the actual reader).

How has reception borne witness to this seemingly irrevocable singularity? The *Elegies* themselves establish a parallel between inner and outer witnesses: Angel and reader. The witness to the *Ninth Elegy*'s exemplary apostrophe ought to be, on the one hand, the Angel and, on the other, the ever-singular, likewise finite reader. As absolute other, the Angel is at least as unreachable and as unaddressable to the poem as its reader each time. Just as one can only turn away from the reader, so, according to the *Elegies*, one can only turn away from the Angel. The Angel's effect on the speaker is likewise aligned with fate and finitude, at once desired and feared: The human being relates ambivalently not only to its own finitude, its fate, but also to the 'terrible' Angel *("Jeder Engel ist schrecklich"* ["Every Angel brings terror"] — so begins the *Second Elegy*), desired despite the fact that from the Angel, like from everything that inspires terror, one can only turn away; any encounter with it can be testified to only by affects or traces.

This ambivalence becomes intelligible if we recall that the *Elegies* associate Angels not with eternal, undivided life but with death — more precisely, with finitude and self-division. As the *Elegies* themselves state, the angels are heralds, translators or specters of death. They do not promise God's eternal presence or immortal life, nor do they simply announce the death of God or of a metaphysical worldview. Rather, they attest that God is death[23] (and life): That death is inseparable from life and constitutive of it — "Angels (it is said) / often do not know whether they are moving / amongst the living or the dead" *(First Elegy)*. Angels can be deadly; they threaten us with death ("And even if one should suddenly take me to its heart, / I would perish from its greater being", *First Elegy*); they are "almost death-bringing birds of the soul" *(Second Elegy)*, and likewise they can bear witness to — or quicken — life. *To praise death is to praise life*; it is to praise finitude.

3. TWO WITNESSES TO RILKE: GADAMER AND DE MAN

In what follows I examine two exemplary readings of the *Duino Elegies* — Gadamer's and de Man's — focusing on how the elegies construct their figures and

[23] For Derrida's account of this idea, see: Martin Hägglund, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), 116, 8.

on what counts, for each, as attestation. For Gadamer, the Angel names the undivided totality of invisible human feeling: An absolute inner presence whose reality cannot be discursively demonstrated yet claims "absolute certainty".[24] Addressing the Angel calls a witness to that indemonstrable certainty; the Angel is invoked not to arrive, as if summoned, but to confirm what is already inwardly known — "a witness, who is to confirm what is already known",[25] namely the inward reality of feeling.

Gadamer situates this appeal within a mythopoetic inversion: By addressing the Angel as a person, the poem turns outward the inaccessible totality of inner affect; interiority appears as figure on the visible scene. Hermeneutics then undertakes a counter-turn, reversing the inversion — not to dissolve the figure but to read, in the presence of the word, the reality to which it bears witness. Because this is a reversal of an inversion, it can never be complete: "something disharmonious always remains".[26] Gadamer traces this logic above all in the *Fourth* and *Tenth Elegies*. What is disclosed is not myth continued as narrative but the "Mythopoiie of his own heart": The poem's capacity, in the coincidence of sound and meaning, to present the reality of inner certainty, a *"Parousia"* of the spoken word.[27]

De Man's Rilke moves on ostensibly opposite ground and yet along a parallel axis. He begins from an originary "lack":[28] The governing figure is chiasmus, a pattern of reversals by which inside and outside trade places, the self projects outward, and predicates exchange hosts.[29] Such tropological motion presupposes emptiness; figures are not vessels of presence but formal operations whose functioning forecloses any restoration of origin. In Rilke there is no self-identical state to be regained by reversing the reversal; hence the subject's wandering in a world without abiding *("Bleiben ist nirgends", First Elegy)*.

On this view, the 'divine' to which the poems speak is not a securing transcendence but a name for rhetoric's promise — the 'god' of poetic craft: The imagined harmony of sound and meaning, often figured by Orpheus.[30] Because that promise depends on tropes, the divine instance functions as an empty guarantor, a

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[24] Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Mythopoietic Reversal in Rilke's Duino Elegies," in *Literature and Philosophy in Dialogue: Essays in German Literary Theory*, ed. Dennis J. Schmidt, trans. Robert H. Paslick (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 157.

[25] Ibid., 158.

[26] Ibid., 160.

[27] Ibid., 171.

[28] de Man, "Tropes (Rilke)," 37.

[29] Ibid., 49–50.

[30] As de Man argues, Rilke's poetics stakes everything on a "phonocentric Ear-god" — "the ultimate figure, the phonocentric Ear-god on which Rilke, from the start, has wagered the outcome of his entire poetic success" — a wager the later poems themselves expose as "error and betrayal"; see de Man, "Tropes (Rilke)," 55.

proper name playing absolute witness to an arbitrary tie between word and sense. Emptiness is not ineffectual; it appears as the rhetoric of the impossible promise (compelling because impossible), as the lament of nothingness, or as the "euphoria"[31] of tropological freedom released from reference — an alternation that helps explain the *Elegies*' oscillation between elegiac and odic registers.

In contrast, where Gadamer discerns under the Angel's name an inner certainty borne witness to in the word's presence, de Man identifies a structure that makes any such presence systematically precarious. Yet they converge at a pressure point: What is decisive in Rilke compels assent yet resists possession. For Gadamer, it must be attested; for de Man, it appears only in and as figuration.

De Man's analysis of inscription brings the point into focus. Negatively defined, inscription is "neither figure, nor sign, nor cognition"; it does not appear and is not phenomenalizable.[32] Its single positive determination is its undeniability. Pointing in writing is neither true nor false; it shows nothing and contains nothing; yet it undeniably occurs — as inscription. What is thus written leaves a mark that seems irrevocable, and de Man's related reflections on memory *(Gedächtnis)* suggest why: The domain of memory that resists recall *(Erinnerung)* is at once inner and outer — and more external than internal — insofar as it remains inappropriable, irreducible to interiorization.[33]

Viewed through this lens, Gadamer's claim can be restated without contradiction. For Gadamer, the Angel's attestation does not collapse the outer into the inner or dissolve figuration into presence; rather, the Angel's function is to confirm that what cannot be proved — "the reality of feeling" — nevertheless bears the force of reality, "lifted beyond any doubt".[34] The site of such confirmation is not a transparent interior but the poem's sounding word, where the poem's address stages, as event, the coincidence of sense and sound. In other words, Gadamer's *'Parousia'* is not a metaphysics of presence; it names the experience, in and through language, of a reality that cannot otherwise be secured.

The same staging looks different from de Man's vantage. God's name, precisely as the name of an absolute witness, risks defiguring — masking — the singular, material traces of inscription by offering an all-purpose authority. The danger is that invocation slides into legitimation: The divine proper name appears to underwrite what rhetoric produces. Pushed further, de Man's caution would read the Angel as a name for the effect whereby tropological operations are taken, mistakenly but

31 Ibid., 31.
32 de Man, "Hypogram and Inscription," 51.
33 de Man, "Sign and Symbol in Hegel's 'Aesthetics'," 761–775.
34 Gadamer, "Mythopoietic Reversal in Rilke's Duino Elegies," 157.

compellingly, for guaranteed meanings. The task of reading is then to keep the 'empty' guarantor empty — to show how its force arises from figural motion rather than from any external warrant.

Gadamer's and de Man's interpretations seemingly point in opposite directions: Whereas Gadamer links certainty — or undeniability, reality — to an inner sphere, de Man links it to something absolutely outer. Whereas Gadamer associates semblance, or the presence of the word, with the happening of truth, de Man associates the semblance of prosopopoeia with the repetition of a presumed error. Yet they run in parallel insofar as — beyond the apparent oppositions (outer/inner, truth/error) — both imply that the inner reality of the heart or the outer trace of inscription cannot be denied or revoked, and yet neither language as such, nor the presence of the poetic word, nor the repeated inversion or hollowing of prosopopoeia can possess it. This invisible, non-sensuous reality cannot be translated back into the visible; it can only be borne witness to.

4. DERRIDA

On the basis of Derrida's writings on God and negative theology (whose reconstruction there is no space for here), one could, by contrast, conclude that in language the name 'God' functions not only as a proper name but also as the name of a witness who automatically — indeed, invisibly — validates and countersigns every utterance, insofar as all speech inevitably and necessarily invokes God's name and calls it as its witness. On the one hand, the name of God is that first and last instance which appears to bridge and justify the fracture that constitutes language or consciousness — the groundlessness of language, understanding, and all certainty — raising it, so to speak, into the calm of eternal presence and dissolving it there. On the other hand, this name is always also a proper name — the proper name of the other each time: The countersignature of the other who attests and validates my own irrevocable and unrepeatable mark or trace, my hand-signature. This does not, of course, exclude the possibility that I might become my own reader, my own absolute other. The trace is not merely singular, nor is it a singularity that could be pointed out; rather, it is a once-only *(ein Mal)*, temporal, finite existence.

Between God's metaphysical name and the proper name of the other — that is, between these two witness positions — there yawns a wide gulf. "Look: I am living", the I says to the Earth, the "most fleeting of all" to this all that is 'fleeting', mortal to mortal. A finite life, whose once-only character — its singularity — follows from its finitude, cannot be attested in God's infinitely general and eternal proper name. Death cannot be detached from life; there is no immortal life; death constitutes the innermost essence of every life. Either there is no God, or there is only a mortal God. This is

why Derrida insists that the absolute other (for example, God) is not an example or a mere figure but something fully real, undeniable in its existence. God is my own other, my most intimate, invisible secret, my witness, whom — precisely because of this immediacy — I cannot appropriate or behold face to face:

> God is the name of the possibility I have of keeping a secret that is visible from the interior but not from the exterior. As soon as such a structure of conscience exists, of being-with-oneself, of speaking, that is to say of producing invisible sense, as soon as I have within me, *thanks to the invisible word as such*, a witness that others cannot see, and who is therefore *at the same time other than me and more intimate with me than myself*, […] then there is what I call God, (there is) what I call God in me […].[35]

Derrida reads the notion of God in the sense that Martin Hägglund, following him, calls "a radically atheist conception of desire".[36] This desire is, paradoxically, a desire for death — more precisely, for mortality and at the same time for survival — for a separation from oneself, which in this elegy is not a loss but lends the feeling or beautiful semblance that I am here and alive, that being-there floods me, overflows me, overflows my heart *("Hiersein ist herrlich", "weil Hiersein viel ist", "Überzähliges Dasein / entspringt mir im Herzen")*. This feeling is elicited by the gaze of an Other whom I do not see seeing me, who sees me in secret, sees my secret, and before whom I am exposed, naked, without being able to objectify, observe, foresee, calculate, or master either my own response or the other's gaze.

The asymmetry and irreversibility of seeing and being seen are made reversible and communicable by voice — hence in Rilke the importance of determining when the divine-poetic technique of assembling sound and sense gains the upper hand, and when, instead, the asymmetry of seeing and being seen does. In this staging, what stands out is less the voice or voiced address than the act of a turning toward enacted by turning away — an act that, each time otherwise, arranges and differentiates seeing and being seen, witness and speaker.

Let us return, then, to the figure of the Angel — to the witness invoked by the *Elegies*, tasked with attesting to the speaker's finite, once-only life, to the poem's exemplary apostrophe, and to the poem's irrevocable and undeniable traces, its reality. As noted repeatedly, the address to the Earth is 'only' an example — exemplary and repeatable, not least because it is itself framed by address. What is this apostrophe an example of? Above all, of demonstrating compliance with the finitude of human being-there, with the must without a must — its imperative — the

[35] Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 108.
[36] Hägglund, *Radical Atheism*, 116.

purpose of human or poetic vocation on Earth, which is no longer a calling or address but a being-called that responds to a call. If you would fulfill your human, poetic vocation, then say and avow what touches you, what carries you away, what is itself final. The finite is referred to the most finite: "because, it seems, that all that is here needs us, / this fleeting-all, which strangely concerns us: / we, the most fleeting of all". Are we not already addressed by the Earth, the world, and things before we could have addressed them in the form of an apostrophe? — "Is this not the secret cunning of this world of silence, / when it so urges lovers that in their feelings / both should shudder with joy?" Because we are finite, we must leave traces; yet traces that seem irrevocable can be left only if we first allow the traces left in the earth, in being-there, to address us — if we address the Earth in such a way that, first or finally, it addresses us. My vocation is the Earth's vocation: "What, if not transformation, is your / pressing command?"

The central, exemplary apostrophe stages a mutual commitment and self-giving — a kind of marriage or covenant — between the 'I' and the Earth in their call and vocation, in their addressing and being addressed: "Earth, dearest one, I want this"; "I came from afar, already utterly resolved to be yours." In this act the 'I' binds itself and acknowledges the Earth's claim: "You were always right." This covenant is not natural but conventional in kind, and it is concluded in speech acts that presuppose publicity and a witness, such as avowal — "Speak out and bear witness" — or the act of commitment, which here must be uttered anonymously. The Earth's dream and will are realized in the 'I', becoming an invisible — or rather, undeniable — reality; in this sense the Angel, too, functions as that instance. Although feeling, desire, and will are invisible, absolutely interior, they are nonetheless real insofar as they must be declared before witnesses — for example, the Angel. The positions of the 'I', the Earth, and the Angel — the addresser, the addressee, and the witness — are inextricably interwoven, insofar as it cannot be determined precisely where the speech turns, to whom it turns, who translates whom, who speaks in whose name — the turn of 'transformation' is the 'command' of all three instances.

Although it is undecidable, in the exemplary apostrophe, who speaks to whom and in which direction the speech turns — who executes the turn and whether the turn is in fact carried through — these questions must nevertheless always already be decided by the witness. The name 'Angel', of course, is identical neither with the name of God nor with the name of the actual reader. Although, by the near-unanimous judgment of the reception, the Angel cannot be harmonized without further ado with Christian or other religious traditions, it is not independent of theological resonances, since the name indisputably evokes a context in which angels serve as God's messengers or translators — that is, those who 'turn' speech from one side to the other.

The indistinguishability of translator and translated — the one who turns and that which is turned — of addresser and addressee, and of confessor and witness, is produced by the relentless rotation of apostrophe; in a certain sense it is enabled by the absence of a center, of a self-identical 'I'. The 'I' can never be present to itself; it is always already excluded from itself, referred to its other — for example, to the Angel. We are excluded from our absolute interior and referred to something absolutely exterior, to an Other. The Angel is at once our absolute interior and our absolute exterior. My absolute interior — the nearest and most immediate 'space', that of feeling, will, and desire — is not mine, does not belong to me, cannot be appropriated. Only the other ever sees and attests it, and yet I do not see the other seeing. I cannot address the other directly or be confirmed in the other. Nor can I enter into dialogue with the Angel — my own translator / transformer — since I do not know who will translate — turn — me, transform me, who will transpose my interior into the outside world. The Angel translates — *ver-wandelt* — the absolute other (for example, God); the Angel translates — transforms — me. My own interior — and, for myself, my witness, my translator, my transformer — who am excluded from myself and cannot be present to myself, remains an inaccessible and irresolvable secret. This secret — my absolute interior — is always already something absolutely exterior: Always already shared, staged, public; everyone can see what plays out upon the stage. Of my own stage — both interior and exterior, absolutely secret and absolutely public — which Rilke names, among other things, *Weltinnenraum*, anyone can be the witness; yet the witness's position is just as singular and irreplaceable, just as once-only and evental, as every other position in the poem or upon the scene, in this placeless place. From this vantage, the Angel's name can, each time, call the reader, who in reading can at once confirm and falsify this testimony. The name 'Angel', of course, is not identical with the reader's name; yet, in the contingent coincidence of names, it may be exchanged for it.

Who, then, is the witness to the cited example, to the exemplary apostrophe? Who is the unique and irreplaceable witness who attests to the *Elegies'* undeniable reality, to their irrevocable, material traces — who countersigns them? In response one could only cite further interpretations, signatures, countersignatures, whose singularity would have to be analyzed each time. The witness is always the other, each time another other. Were space not finite here, the next witness would be Manfred Engel, who offers a structuralist interpretation of the Angel. Since Engel associates the Angel with undividedness, timelessness, and boundlessness[37] — that is, ultimately,

[37] "In qualitatively different ways, angels and animals alike 'are' 'real' […], that is, free from reflexive division and unthreatened by transience and death." Engel, *Rainer Maria Rilkes "Duineser Elegien,"* 126, [Translation is mine – H.H.]. In his editorial commentary on the *Duino Elegies*, discussing

with a divine position and with metaphysical conceptions — and since this would contribute only indirectly to the questions posed here, that discussion must be undertaken elsewhere. We close these preparations here — without knowing whether the event has taken place, will take place, or can ever be known to have taken place.

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parallels with the *Seventh Elegy*, Engel emphasizes "trans-temporal productivity of the heart" and "the heart's formative power that transcends transience". Rilke, *Werke*, 681–682, [Translation is mine – H.H.]. By contrast, as argued above, the *Duino Elegies* associate angels not with eternal life or undivided presence but, on the contrary, with death — more precisely, with finitude.

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