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# The Eclipse of the Transcendent and the Poetics of Praise: Arendt's Rilke\*

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*ABSTRACT.* Literature has a central place in Hannah Arendt's writings. In particular, scholars continually discuss the implications of storytelling to her theory of action. This paper takes a different approach by drawing attention to an early literary essay, "Rilke's *Duino Elegies*", which Arendt co-authored with Günther Stern (later Anders) in 1930. The paper locates the essay in the early twentieth century intellectual response to the "break in tradition", arguing that the construction of a poetics dramatized in the *Duino Elegies* is crucial for judging the originality of Arendt's philosophical methodology, and the ontological significance of her poetic conception of praise. In this conception, meaning is to be found in things as they appear to human beings capable of using the language designating them poetically. I present my interpretation of the Arendt-Stern essay by contrasting it with Heidegger's comment on the eighth *Elegy* from 1942-43 and Blanchot's reading of Rilke from 1955.

*KEYWORDS.* Arendt; Rilke; Tradition; Transcendence; Poetry.

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*Jede dumpfe Umkehr der Welt hat solche Enterbte,  
denen das Frühere nicht und noch nicht das Nächste gehört.*

Die Siebende Elegie<sup>1</sup>

## 1.

When in 1964 the interviewer Günther Gaus asked Hannah Arendt what remained for her of the Germany she knew before fleeing in 1933, she replied «What remains? The language remains».<sup>2</sup> Explaining this statement, Arendt emphasizes the importance German poetry holds for her. She claims that she knows «a rather large part» of German poetry «by heart» and that this poetic knowledge is always in the back of her mind. Indeed, any reader of Arendt's work can testify to her deep familiarity with poetry, a familiarity that extends far beyond the German literary tradition. There is a clear literary dimension to many of her texts, expressing itself in the form of numerous poetic mottos, quotations, and references. Moreover, as several have recently shown, narrative and storytelling occupy an absolutely central place in her political thought.<sup>3</sup>

Poetry and literature were not only a vital linguistic resource for Arendt. Throughout her life, she remained a dedicated reader of poetry and literature, writing literary criticism and publishing intellectual portraits of such writers as Franz Kafka, W. H. Auden, and Bertolt Brecht. In a collection of Arendt's literary essays and reviews, editor Susannah Young Ah-Gottlieb argues that these texts evince a remarkable degree of consistency, despite the fact that they were written for very particular occasions.<sup>4</sup> As Young Ah-Gottlieb observes, Arendt's essays and reviews all approach, from a variety of angles, the

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1 RILKE 2000 [1923], 44. Each dull turn of the world leaves such disinherited, / to whom neither the past nor the coming life lends substance.

2 ARENDT 1994, 12.

3 See, e.g., BENHABIB 1990; CAVARERO 2000 [1997]; HERZOG 2001.

4 YOUNG AH-GOTTLIEB 2007, xi.

overarching phenomenon of loss: the loss of a divinely ordered hierarchy of things, and the loss of a continuous intellectual and cultural tradition that once served to bind successive generations together.

In this article I turn to one of Arendt's earliest literary essays, "Rilke's *Duino Elegies*", a text she co-authored with her first husband Günther Stern (later Anders) in 1930.<sup>5</sup> Published in 1923, Rilke's *Duino Elegies* are among the most famous cycles of poems in German. According to Kathleen L. Komar, the *Duino Elegies* «dramatise the construction of a poetics as well as an ontology».<sup>6</sup> On her reading, the ten elegies examine the changing interaction between the human and angelic realms, an examination that takes place against the backdrop of man's increasing alienation from the certainty and solidity of a divine order. Rilke traces the path that led us away from this order and the comfort it once provided. As the cycle progresses, and as the pathos of homelessness and meaninglessness increases, he brings the reader back to what is *humanly* possible: the reconstruction of the world through poetry.

Young ah-Gottlieb focuses on the religious or theological dimension of Rilke's text. According to her, Arendt's and Stern's interpretation concerns «the breakdown of any reliable relation to the divine order and the corresponding absence of a stable home that would shield both human beings and finite things from their constitutive transience».<sup>7</sup> While I in general agree with this reading, I think Arendt and Stern's essay also testifies to the power of poetry to transform the world, to accomplish what Arendt would later articulate as art's distinctive capacity to transform «sense-objects into thought-things»: tearing things out of context in order to «de-realize» them and (thus) prepare them for a new and different meaning.<sup>8</sup> Arendt's and Stern's early interpretation of the *Duino Elegies* investigates this possibility of

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5 The text was originally published as "Rilkes 'Duiniser Elegien'" in *Neue Schweizer Rundschau*, no. 23 (1930), 855-71.

6 KOMAR 2010, 83.

7 YOUNG AH-GOTTLIEB 2007, xiv.

8 ARENDT 1971a, 49. Cf. SJÖHOLM 2015.

poetic transformation in detail and its implication for the task of the poet. Their essay thus provides an under utilized horizon from which to approach a theme that would later become central to Arendt's political thought: the isolation and world-alienation fostered, in part, by the twentieth century "break in tradition".

Dana Villa has argued that Arendt, in confronting the break in tradition, follows Walter Benjamin's and Martin Heidegger's «destructive methods».<sup>9</sup> According to Villa, Arendt, like them, practices a form of radical or creative remembrance. The aim of such "remembrance" is not to restore the tradition – to "re-tie" the broken thread of tradition – but rather to uncover or recover something of its original spirit.

While there are places in Arendt's texts that appear to confirm this reading, I will argue that there are many passages that point in a quite different methodological direction. In *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt briefly turns to «some of this century's great poets» in order to illustrate how the notion of *praise* (Augustine) or *thanking* (Heidegger) emerges as a «solution to the apparent meaninglessness of a totally secularized world», fostering something like gratitude for being.<sup>10</sup> (In this regard, alongside the poetry of W. H. Auden and Osip Mandelstam, she quotes Rilke's *Duino Elegies*.) Arendt thinks that we can find an implicit notion of praise or gratitude for being in the early Greek conception of appearance, where «all appearances [...] demand recognition and praise».<sup>11</sup> However, she thinks that Stoic world-alienation and Christian otherworldliness finally obliterated this idea from our tradition of philosophical thought. The result is that it is only by turning to «the reflections of the poets» that we are able to find an attitude of praise in the modern context.

The aim of this article is to trace a poetic and reconstructive (rather than destructive) response to the break in our tradition, one that utilizes Arendt and Stern's early reading of Rilke. I approach their

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9 VILLA 1996, 9.

10 ARENDT 1971a, 185.

11 ARENDT 1971a, 92.

interpretation through the lens of the phenomenological “renewal” of German academic philosophy in the 1920s, a renewal that exerted a shaping influence upon Arendt’s thought. I present my own interpretation of Arendt and Stern’s existential reading of the *Duino Elegies* by contrasting it with Heidegger’s early comment on Rilke in his lecture course on Parmenides and Maurice Blanchot’s more literary interpretation.

The article is divided into four sections. The first places the Arendt-Stern essay in the context of loss experienced and articulated by European intellectuals just before and after World War I. The second considers Rilke as a modernist writer. In the next section I turn to Arendt’s and Stern’s interpretation of Rilke’s conception of human existence in the *Duino Elegies*. I conclude by showing how this interpretation grounds their reading of the transformative power of poetry.

## 2.

In “Tradition and the Modern Age”, an essay published in 1954, Arendt borrows a metaphor from art and cultural historian Jacob Burckhardt in order to describe the loss of tradition: «The beginning [...] is like a ‘fundamental chord’ which sounds in its endless modulations through the whole history of Western thought». <sup>12</sup> As long as the beginning was kept alive, Arendt writes, the tradition could «keep all things» and create harmony between them. As the tradition approached its end in the various turning operations of Kierkegaard, Marx, and Nietzsche, it became destructive rather than preservative. What followed was a state of intellectual helplessness and confusion. This is the cultural situation we live in today. However, the final and most radical break in our tradition and history was caused by a profound *political* crisis. As Arendt starkly put it, «[t]otalitarian

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12 ARENDT 1968a, 18.

domination [...] has broken the continuity of Occidental history».<sup>13</sup> The unprecedented character of this form of domination cannot be comprehended through established categories of political thought. Nor can its crimes be judged in terms of traditional moral standards or adequately punished within the legal framework handed down by our civilization. The *fact* of totalitarian domination constitutes a radical historical and cultural break with all our traditions.

The thematic of a European crisis was a well-established one in the phenomenological thought of the 1930s.<sup>14</sup> Edmund Husserl saw the rise of the National Socialist Movement as a turn towards irrationalism, the most striking symptom of a crisis in modern philosophy, science, and European cultural life generally. For Heidegger, the origin of the crisis – the contemporary “darkening of the world” – was to be sought in the inception of Greek philosophy itself, which began with a “falling away” from a more primordial understanding of the nature of being. Arendt, a student of both Husserl and Heidegger, shared the conviction that Europe was facing a crisis more deeply rooted and frightening than most intellectuals of the time imagined. For her, however, the fulcrum of the crisis was essentially political, rather than scientific or metaphysical.

At root, it concerned the loss of our ability to fully grasp and appreciate experiences of human plurality, public freedom, and political action (*praxis*). These experiences had been undermined by the capitalist-technological civilization, one that fostered increasing estrangement from the world and of the human condition. In certain respects, the radical dehumanization performed by the concentration and extermination camps, in which human beings are transformed into “bundles of reflexes”, represents the most radical form of such estrangement and resentment, a form born of the totalitarian belief that “everything is possible”. The absolute evil performed in the camps confronts us not only with an abyss-like break in the tradition, but also with the possible loss of worldly permanence reliability.

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13 ARENDT 1968a, 26.

14 Cf. GASCHÉ 2009.

The break in tradition – in both its intellectual-cultural and political-historical senses – is a recurring theme in Arendt's thought. In the preface to *Between Past and Future* she illustrates the pathos of loss by quoting René Char («our inheritance was left to us by no testament») and Alexis de Tocqueville («[s]ince the past has ceased to throw its light upon the future, the mind of man wanders in obscurity».<sup>15</sup> In his reflections on the destruction of the *ancien regime* and the «world made new» by the French Revolution, Tocqueville anticipated Char's sentiment. Without a tradition – without a testament – that «selects and names [...] hands down and preserves» one risks losing the capacity to understand the present as well as the past.

In a portrait of Benjamin from 1955, Arendt claims that it was the insight of the «irreparable break» in tradition and the «irreplaceable loss» of authority that led him to discover that the past instead of being *transmitted* could be *cited*. Authority was replaced by the strange power to «settle down, piecemeal, in the present» and «deprive it of 'peace of mind'».<sup>16</sup> Despair of the present gave birth to the desire to destroy the present by tearing «thought fragments» in the form of quotations out of their context. As thought fragments, Arendt explains, «quotations have the double task of interrupting the flow of the presentation with 'transcendent force' [...] and at the same time of concentrating within themselves that which is presented».<sup>17</sup> She borrows a stanza from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* in order to characterize Benjamin's method:

Full fathom five thy father lies,  
Of his bones are coral made,

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15 ARENDT 1968a, 3, 6.

16 ARENDT, 1968b, 38. Arendt traces the meaning of the modern concept "authority" to the Roman word *auctoritas*, which derives from *augere*, "to augment" (ARENDT 1968a, 121). To be endowed with authority meant being tied back to the beginning (the founding of Rome), by descent or by transmission, that is, tradition. For her, history, tradition, and authority are thus interrelated: «Insofar as the past has been transmitted as tradition, it possesses authority; insofar as authority presents itself historically, it becomes tradition» (ARENDT 1968b, 38).

17 ARENDT 1968b, 39.

Those are pearls that were his eyes,  
 Nothing of him that doth fade  
 But doth suffer a sea-change  
 Into something rich and strange.<sup>18</sup>

Like a pearl-diver descending to the bottom of the sea in order to bring up «the rich and the strange», Benjamin collects thought fragments from the past, all the time knowing that «the process of decay is at the same time a process of crystallization».<sup>19</sup>

As Seyla Benhabib observes, Arendt refers to the same Shakespeare passage in order to describe her own method at the end of the volume on thinking in *The Life of the Mind*.<sup>20</sup> Arendt sides with those who «for some time now» have attempted to dismantle metaphysics, as we have known it from its beginning in Greece.<sup>21</sup> According to her, such dismantling is only possible on the condition that «the thread of tradition is broken and that we will not be able to renew it».<sup>22</sup> What has been lost is the continuity of the past as it appeared to be handed down from one generation to the next; what remains is a «fragmented past».

In a parallel discussion, Villa warns against seeing Arendt's project as a «recovery of traditional concepts and distinctions for critical employment in the present».<sup>23</sup> While the “trope of remembrance” is hard to avoid when characterizing Arendt's theoretical project, he claims, it nevertheless blinds us to what is at once difficult and unquestionably original in her work. Indeed, the radical nature of Arendt's political ontology in *The Human Condition* lies in her attempt to «rethink action in an explicitly *anti-traditional* manner». In other words, her project is not essentially «an exercise in renewal, recovery or retrieval» of ancient concepts and categories (Aristotle's *praxis*, for example), but rather one designed «to deconstruct and overcome the

18 ARENDT 1968b, 38.

19 ARENDT 1968b, 50-1.

20 BENHABIB 1990, 338.

21 ARENDT 1971a, 212.

22 ARENDT 1971a, 212.

23 VILLA 1996, 8.

reifications of a dead tradition».<sup>24</sup>

In his characterization of Arendt's project, Villa draws on both Benjamin and Heidegger. Arendt's "method" of radical or creative remembrance apparently requires what Benjamin referred to as a «tiger's leap into the past».<sup>25</sup> The motive behind such interpretative violence is not historical preservation but «the destruction of the fossilized structures and contexts that deny access to the living kernel».<sup>26</sup> Like Benjamin's strategic interpretative violence, Heidegger's "destruction" also takes aim at passively inherited concepts and ideas. «On its negative side», Heidegger writes in *Being and Time*, «this destruction does not related itself towards the past; its criticism is directed at 'today'».<sup>27</sup> The goal of such destruction is to liberate tradition from what has become reified and dead. In this specific sense, Heidegger's goal is actually to *regain* the tradition – to save it from itself.

The affinity between Benjamin's and Heidegger's "methods of destruction" is indicated by Arendt herself. Acutely aware of «the irreparability of the break in tradition», she writes, their «poetic thinking» initiated a revival of classical culture in the twenties.<sup>28</sup> They did this, however, not by entering a dialogue with the past, but again (in the words of Heidegger) through «a listening to the tradition that does not give itself up to the past but thinks of the present».<sup>29</sup> Not only does this philosophical approach take the «gap between past and future» as its starting point; it even intensifies this «non-place» thus insisting on «the peculiar isolation of the present in a world from which authority, in the form of tradition, has vanished».<sup>30</sup>

As I remarked at the outset, while I think that Villa's characterization of Arendt's approach is generally accurate, there are scattered remarks

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24 VILLA 1996, 8-9.

25 VILLA 1996, 9; cf. BENJAMIN 1968 [1950], 261.

26 VILLA 1996, 9.

27 HEIDEGGER 1962 [1927], 44.

28 ARENDT 1968b, 49-50.

29 ARENDT 1968b, 46; HEIDEGGER 1973 [1962]; cf. VILLA 1996, 10.

30 VILLA 1996, 10. Cf. above note 17.

in her texts that suggest a different mode of thinking. In these remarks, the emphasis is not *destructive* so much as *reconstructive* or even *productive* – that is, poetic in the Greek sense of *poiesis*. In contrast to Benjamin's interpretative violence or Heidegger's "destruction of metaphysics", Arendt's reference to the "dismantling of metaphysics" in *The Life of the Mind* presents the destructive moment as a *fait accompli* wrought by our political and cultural history, rather than as a methodological program or directive. «The dismantling process itself», she writes, «is not destructive; it only draws conclusions from a loss which is a fact and as such no longer a part of the 'history of ideas' but of our political history, the history of our world».<sup>31</sup> As one possible response to this loss, Arendt recalls the rare notion of poetic praise in Rilke's ninth *Elegy*.

Earth, you darling, I will. Oh, believe me, you need  
your spring-times no longer to win me; a single one,  
just one, is already more than my blood can endure.  
I've now been unspeakably yours for ages and ages.  
You were always right [...]<sup>32</sup>

Following Heidegger's analysis of conscience – through which we accept our primordial indebtedness; that «human existence *owes* its existence to something that is not itself» – Arendt understands praise as a «thinking that expresses gratitude».<sup>33</sup> She identifies this thinking already in Augustine's conception of creation, according to which «no created being can will against creation, for this would be [...] a will directed not only against a counter-will but against the very existence of the willing or nilling subject».<sup>34</sup> From this «theory of Being», Arendt claims, Augustine infers *praise*: «'Give thanks that you are'; 'praise all things for the very fact that they are'».<sup>35</sup> And while, as I also noted above, the ancient Greek notion that appearances «in as much as they

31 ARENDT 1971a, 212.

32 ARENDT 1971b, 186; cf. RILKE 2000 [1923], 57.

33 ARENDT 1971b, 184-85; cf. HEIDEGGER 1962 [1927], §§54, 58.

34 ARENDT 1971b, 91.

35 ARENDT 1971b, 92.

*appear*» demand recognition and praise is already «a kind of philosophical justification of poetry and the arts», according to Arendt, this justification later fell into oblivion.<sup>36</sup> It was preserved, however, in the reflections of poets. I will show how Arendt's reading of Rilke as a poet who offers a modern "theory of praise" not only affirms this claim; it also testifies to Arendt's early engagement with the possibility of poetically reconstructing a disjointed world, one apparently devoid of meaning.

### 3.

The *Duino Elegies* belong to Rilke's last phase of writing, together with *The Sonnets to Orpheus*. If Rilke's aesthetics are placed within the context of European Modernism (understood as a range of internally contradictory aesthetic responses to modernity), this last phase of development might well be seen, as Andreas Kramer suggests, as representing a somewhat artificial "mythical modernism", one that stands in marked contrast to an initial *fin de siècle* "holistic modernism" and a middle period "metropolitan modernism".<sup>37</sup> While the first period was characterized by a Nietzschean wish to unify aestheticism and vitalism, art and life, the second period reconfigured holistic ambitions in confrontation with urban modernity.<sup>38</sup>

The existential shock of living in Paris expressed itself in Rilke's poems in terms of a suggested affinity between the poet and the socially marginalized, those deformed by urban life. This metropolitan modernism served to radicalize Rilke's critique of bourgeois individuality. It also extended his interest in intersubjectivity to encompass a renewed vitalist emphasis on things (*Dinge*) and their «internal life» or «living form».<sup>39</sup> Not only are the poems from this period called *Dinggedichte* ("thing poems" or "object poems"), but

36 ARENDT 1971b, 92.

37 KRAMER 2010, 113.

38 KRAMER 2010, 118, 120.

39 KRAMER 2010, 120.

“things” also call into question the boundaries between subject and object, exterior and interior, man and animal, beholder and work of art, and invert their relationship. In such inversion, the human (rational, modern) self constitutes itself *vis-a-vis* the object «only to become [...] displaced by it».<sup>40</sup>

The texts from Rilke’s mythical modernist period, to which the *Duino Elegies* belong, remain charged with the task to give form to a disintegrated world. They are hardly unique for literature after World War I, a period when many modernist writers felt called to defend the values of art, intensity, and difference against a decadent civilization.<sup>41</sup> Characteristic of such mythic modernism is the projection of an alternative, imaginary time-space in response to the compressed time-space created by modernity; a turn inwards, where the exterior is transformed to an interior landscape; and the introduction of mythic figures. For Rilke, “inner space” becomes an important trope, as does the perhaps most famous of his mythic figures, the “angel”. Another equally important trope in Rilke’s confrontation with modernity is the homelessness of “creaturely life”: «and the sly animals see at once / how little at home we are / in the interpreted world».<sup>42</sup>

Considering the influence of the *Duino Elegies* into the twenty-first century, Kathleen L. Komar gives two answers to the question why they continue to fascinate readers.<sup>43</sup> The first is the diverse cultural background Rilke draws on. As a world traveller and lover of other traditions, he was influenced not only by the cultural and literary traditions of the German speaking countries, but also by those of Russia, Scandinavia, and France, where he travelled and lived for periods of time. Religiously, as Christoph Hollender observes, while Rilke drew on Judeo-Christian sources he also read the *Qur’an*.

Perhaps more important than the poems’ cultural background are the themes and questions they suggest to the reader. In Komar’s view, these include the questions of time, death, and ontological uncertainty

40 KRAMER 2010, 121.

41 KRAMER 2010, 125.

42 Cf. KRAMER 2010, 126; RILKE 2000 [1923], 5.

43 KOMAR 2010, 80.

in a relativistic world, as well as questions concerning our relationship to physical objects. Most central, however, are questions concerning the relationship between our “limited, physical, human existence” and our search for “a more perfect state” (on the one hand) and the power of poetry to transform the external world through consciousness (on the other). Or, as she formulates it: «Living in a world of intensified disorientation for the individual human consciousness, Rilke must re-examine the problem of transcendence and rethink immanence. Can human consciousness find metaphysical wholeness without denying the limited human world?»<sup>44</sup>

Although rarely referred to in either the literature on Rilke or that on Arendt, the Arendt-Stern essay is of interest precisely because it is one of the earliest philosophical receptions of the *Duino Elegies*. Heidegger, for instance, only turned to Rilke in his lecture course on Parmenides in 1942-43, and then more extensively in the lecture “Why Poets?” [*Wozu Dichter?*] in 1946. Yet Arendt’s and Stern’s essay is historically as well as thematically associated with Heidegger’s by the fact that it was commonplace throughout the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s to read Rilke’s *Duino Elegies* «as a statement by the poet on the essence of human existence, a statement of theological or philosophical nature».<sup>45</sup> For this reason, I will read their essay with an eye to Heidegger’s early interpretation, where he criticizes Rilke’s conception of human existence through a close reading of the eighth *Elegy*. My argument is that Arendt’s and Stern’s reading of human existence in the *Duino Elegies*, and, consequently, their notion of “inner-worldly transcendence”, is far closer to Maurice Blanchot’s more sympathetic commentary in *The Space of Literature* [*L’espace littéraire*] from 1955.

#### 4.

«[T]he key to every understanding of the *Elegies* resides in the question

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44 KOMAR 2010, 80.

45 HOLLENDER 1995, 305.

who the angels are», Hollender claims, as the angels are the addressee of the poems.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, at the beginning of their essay, Arendt and Stern quote the famous first lines of the first *Elegy*. «Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the angelic orders?»<sup>47</sup> In their view, the poem contains a “religious mood” but is not itself a “religious document”. The fact that “intermediate entities” are substituted for “God” (the “angels”, the “dead”, or “one”) indicate this, and signifies to them the recollection of the religious as such: «[t]he power of God is indeed felt», but who or where God is «remains in the form of a question that no longer hopes for an answer».<sup>48</sup> Whereas Heidegger characterizes Rilke’s position as secularized Christianity, Blanchot, in a reflection on death in the *Duino Elegies*, takes a more radical view: «Rilke rejects the Christian solution», Blanchot argues, quoting from Rilke’s correspondence: «it is here below, ‘in a purely earthly consciousness, profoundly, blessedly terrestrial,’ that death is a beyond to be learned by us, recognized and welcomed – perhaps furthered».<sup>49</sup>

Hannah Arendt and Günther Stern met in Berlin in January 1929 and married in September the same year. This biographical fact may not be insignificant for the rather extensive analysis of the lovers at the end of their essay. In the imaginary of the *Duino Elegies*, the “lovers” is an intermediate figure that has the possibility of transcending the isolation of human consciousness in a disorienting world. It appears already in the first *Elegy* – Is it easier for lovers? Ah, but they only use each other to hide what awaits them<sup>50</sup> – and comes to the fore in the second *Elegy*:

You lovers, secure in one another, I ask you  
about us. You hold each other. Have you assurance?<sup>51</sup>

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46 HOLLENDER 1995, 305.

47 RILKE 2000 [1923], 5.

48 ARENDT & STERN 2007, 2.

49 BLANCHOT 1982 [1955], 132.

50 RILKE 2000 [1923], 5.

51 RILKE 2000 [1923], 13.

As Komar notes, Rilke studied Hölderlin just before beginning the *Duino Elegies*, and was attracted to his development of a model of consciousness that «moves from the non-conscious state of objects through man's troubled and isolated self-conscious position to the all-conscious state of the angels».<sup>52</sup> On this reading, lovers, in comparison to other intermediate figures like the animal or the child, have moved beyond self-consciousness toward a larger unity with another consciousness (the beloved), or – if the love is unrequited – with consciousness at large. Unrequited love has a privileged status through three examples in the poem: the Italian and French Renaissance poets Gaspara Stampa and Louise Labé, and the Portuguese nun Mariana Alcoforado all turned their unrequited love into poetry and point Rilke towards “poetic transformation” as a means of becoming more than the isolated self.<sup>53</sup>

According to Arendt's biographer Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, the Rilke article demonstrates «the intellectual accord» Arendt and Stern felt.<sup>54</sup> They had both attended Heidegger's seminar in Marburg in 1925, and were dedicated to the “revolution in philosophy” promoted by him and Karl Jaspers in the 1920s. Arendt would testify to this “revolution” several years later, on the occasion of Heidegger's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, when she recalled the rumor circulating about his early teaching: «Thinking has come to life again; the cultural treasures of the past, believed to be dead, are being made to speak, in the course of which it turns out that they propose things altogether different from the familiar, worn-out trivialities they had been presumed to say».<sup>55</sup> The condition for this renewal is the experience of crisis: Heidegger discovered «the past anew» and his teaching reached those «who knew more or less explicitly about [...] the 'dark times' (Brecht) which had set in».<sup>56</sup>

The influence of Heidegger's teaching is obvious in the Arendt-Stern essay, with clear but implicit references to *Being and Time*, published in

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52 KOMAR 2010, 83.

53 KOMAR 2010, 86.

54 YOUNG-BRUEHL 1982, 79.

55 ARENDT 1978, 295.

56 ARENDT 1978, 295.

1927. As an embodiment of transience – one of the central concepts of their reading – the poet «stands tacitly for human existence and its situation in general».<sup>57</sup> Situation, we learn, «does not refer to an ephemeral position within *a* life, but, rather, to a specific life considered as a position in itself».<sup>58</sup> The poet is then placed alongside several other “situations”: the animal, the hero, the dying person, the child, and the lovers. Situation is not a technical term in Heidegger’s analysis of existence [*Dasein*], which is directed at the human mode of being, as distinguished from all other modes of being. Arendt and Stern, however, use situation interchangeably with being-in-the-world [*In-der-Welt-Sein*], which for Heidegger positions existence within a phenomenal unity or wholeness: existence is primarily something that is located within a world.<sup>59</sup> Human beings, moreover, are in the world in an engaged, not contemplative or distanced, way. “World” in Heidegger’s sense signifies the original (or “primordial”) context of meaning for all such engagements. In *Being and Time*, in other words, the world is a totality of relational contexts, and refers to the irreducibly relational character of human existence (*in* the world and *with* others).

Given Heidegger’s conception of being-in-the-world as the fundamental character of human being, Arendt and Stern somewhat surprisingly claim that, for Rilke, the animal represents «not a species of life, but a particular being-in-the-world».<sup>60</sup> That is, while rejecting the perspective of biology, where the animal would be categorized as objectified nature (species), the animal is not removed from an «anthropomorphic gaze and subjective interpretation», to paraphrase Andreas Kramer.<sup>61</sup> From Arendt’s and Stern’s existential perspective, the animal as “a particular being-in-the-world” ultimately and paradoxically represents a possible mode of (human) existence. In comparison to the situation of the poet, moreover, the situation of the

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57 ARENDT & STERN 2007, 10.

58 ARENDT & STERN 2007, 10.

59 HEIDEGGER 1962 [1927], §12.

60 ARENDT & STERN 2007, 10

61 Cf. KRAMER 2010, 120.

animal is genuine or authentic exactly in the sense of being «de-substantivized and de-objectified».<sup>62</sup>

If one looks to the other figures exemplified in the Arendt-Stern essay, genuine existence translates into «a pure presence free of opposition» or a «pure occurrence», without future and past, that is, existence neither bound to a personal destiny [*Schicksal*], nor delimited or «concealed» by an Other, whether through death or through the beloved.<sup>63</sup> Thus the hero is not «one who commits glorious deeds», but «the situation of ongoing dying», or being without death; the dying person is not «the human being whose life is ending», but «being-in-death», or «not having death before one as a terminus, and therefore being deathless and futureless»; the child does not refer to an early phase in a human being's existence, but the situation of «not-yet-having-a-future»; finally, the privileged lover, as we saw, is not «bound to another human being» but constitutes a situation «prior to every object of love, independent of it».<sup>64</sup> Rilke, the authors claim, opposes such “pure”, authentic existence to destiny, which, as temporal, is “always opposite”, that is, confronted by an Other and limited by death.

Only we see death; the free animal has its demise  
perpetually behind it and before it always  
God, and when it moves, it moves into eternity,  
the way brooks and running springs move.

We, though: never, not for a single day, do we  
have that pure space ahead of us into which flowers  
endlessly open. What we have is World  
and always World and never Nowhere-Without-Not:  
that pure unguarded element one breathes  
and knows endlessly and never craves. As child  
one gets lost there in the quiet, only to be  
jostled back. Or someone dying is it.

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62 ARENDT & STERN 2007, 11.

63 Young ah-Gottlieb translates *Schicksal* into “fate”, but I here follow the English translation of Rilke's text.

64 ARENDT & STERN 2007, 10.

For close to death one sees death no longer  
 and stares out instead, perhaps with the wide gaze of animals.  
 [...]
   
 That's what destiny is: being opposite  
 and nothing else but that and always opposite.<sup>65</sup>

Recalling Heidegger's description of existence, genuine or authentic existence in Rilke – as articulated by Arendt and Stern – seems directly opposed to the perspective in *Being and Time*. To summarize Heidegger's position briefly, authenticity is an existential possibility to «become oneself», or bring oneself back from a state of being lost or taken over by an abstract “who” that Heidegger calls the “they-self”.<sup>66</sup> Authentic existence is the possibility of individuation from the everyday or “absorbed” mode of being characteristic of the “they-self” to a mode of being characterized by freedom in the face of the finitude of one's own existence.<sup>67</sup> Authenticity in Heidegger's sense is not limited to the being-in-the-world of the singular individual; it also encompasses *Dasein's* being-with-others. Considered in this light, authenticity is related to destiny [*Schicksal*], which refers to the historicity of the individual. The past then appears primarily in the mode of the tradition – the historical world – in which the individual finds itself thrown.<sup>68</sup>

Viewed from this angle, tradition harbors a specific set of existential possibilities, possibilities that can be taken up or creatively appropriated. Authentic existence, therefore, is not just the empty being of a *Dasein* confronting an abstract set of possibilities, but the forceful *resolvē* to choose among the specific possibilities opened by a particular past.<sup>69</sup> Authentic existence, in other words, requires a radical

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65 RILKE 2000 [1923], 47, 49.

66 HEIDEGGER 1962 [1927], §§54-5.

67 Cf. HEIDEGGER 1962 [1927], §74.

68 In the same paragraph, Heidegger uses the German word *Geschick* for the destiny of a people. In English, the Heideggerian *Schicksal* and *Geschick* are usually translated into “fate” and “destiny”, respectively. However, in order to be consistent with the English translation of the *Duino Elegies*, I have chosen the word destiny for *Schicksal*.

69 HEIDEGGER 1962 [1927], §74; cf. RUIN 2005, 102-3.

and not transmitted experience of the past. The moment of choice, however, can only be authentic if it is made with the awareness that one's existence will come to an end (even if this awareness may remain a formal condition that can only be indirectly "experienced"). When this awareness is neglected, the possibility of resolved choice in the face of death is lost, and existence once again becomes inauthentic. "Seeing death", for Heidegger, would thus not be an obstacle for authentic existence, but – on the contrary – its very condition.

This opposite view of authenticity is implicitly reinforced in Heidegger's own reading of Rilke. Contrary to Arendt and Stern, this reading leads him to position the *Duino Elegies* within modern biologist metaphysics.

## 5.

In his lecture course on Parmenides in 1942-43, Heidegger turns to Rilke's eighth *Elegy*, with the aim of understanding the meaning of "the open" within the domain of *aletheia* (truth) as it occurs in Parmenides' pre-Socratic "doctrinal poem" (which is the primary topic of the lecture course). Heidegger's interpretation is guided by the ontological question of Being considered as a primordial event, an «opening open» that has withdrawn from our memory and, indeed, from the realm of appearance.<sup>70</sup> In the eighth *Elegy*, Heidegger observes, the poet understands the open as «the constant progression by beings themselves from beings to beings within beings».<sup>71</sup> More precisely, this progression refers to the open «in the sense in which we speak of 'open waters' when we are on the high seas and all borders of land disappears».<sup>72</sup> According to Heidegger, then, the word "open" for Rilke means «the limitless, the infinite, wherein living beings breathe and unrestrainedly dissolve into the irresistible causal nexuses of

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70 HEIDEGGER 1992 [1982], 152.

71 HEIDEGGER 1992 [1982], 152.

72 HEIDEGGER 1992 [1982], 151-52.

nature, in order to float in this infinity».<sup>73</sup>

Heidegger contrasts this notion of the open, where beings “merge” into one another, with the open in the sense of «what first lets beings emerge and come to presence as beings».<sup>74</sup> The latter “open” is not to be identified with beings, nor is it bound in any way to modern metaphysics (which Heidegger understands as «the complete oblivion of Being», a form of ontological forgetfulness that provides the basis for the biologism of the nineteenth century). According to Heidegger, Rilke’s ranking of the «free animal over the imprisoned essence of man» testifies to this biologism and to the tendency to prioritize the unconscious over consciousness. Thus, while poetized, Schopenhauer’s philosophy (mediated through Nietzsche and psychoanalysis) nevertheless «looms behind» Rilke’s poetry, and in such a way that «the essence of man is conceived on the basis of the essence of the animal».<sup>75</sup>

With all its eyes the animal world  
 beholds the Open. Only our eyes  
 are as if inverted and set all around it  
 like traps at its portals to freedom.  
 What’s outside we know only from the animal’s  
 countenance; for almost from the first we take a child  
 and twist him round and force him to gaze  
 backwards and take in structure, not the Open  
 that lies so deep in an animal’s face. Free from death.  
 [...]  
 And we: Spectators, always, everywhere,  
 looking at, never out of, everything!  
 It overfills us. We arrange it. It falls apart.  
 We rearrange it, and fall apart ourselves.<sup>76</sup>

Nothing could be further from Heidegger’s position, for whom human being alone “sees into the open” and has the capacity to disclose or

73 HEIDEGGER 1992 [1982], 157.

74 HEIDEGGER 1992 [1982], 159.

75 HEIDEGGER 1992 [1982], 158.

76 RILKE 2000 [1923], 47, 49.

reveal what is. It is true, Heidegger remarks, that the «primordial form» of the distinction Rilke makes when he opposes «animal and man, a-rational and rational being» goes back to the Greek distinction between man as «that which emerges out of itself and in this emerging 'has the word'» (on the one hand) and the animal as «that self-emergent to which the word is denied» (on the other).<sup>77</sup> However, if, as Heidegger argues, the essence of speech is what the Greeks thought it was – namely, «the letting appear of the unconcealed as such», «the revealing of the open» – then a living being to whom speech is denied, such as an animal or a plant, can never see or participate in the open.<sup>78</sup> In taking up the determination of human being as «rational living being» – as «the 'animal' that calculates, plans, turns to beings as objects, represents what is objective and orders it» – Rilke, Heidegger concludes, remains bound to modern biological metaphysics.<sup>79</sup>

At this point it is illuminating to turn to Blanchot, who views the eighth *Elegy* as a confrontation with the modern (broadly Cartesian) idea of human being, one characterized by a «consciousness closed upon itself».<sup>80</sup> In contrast to this modern subject, «inhabited by images», the animal «is where it looks, and its look does not reflect it, nor does it reflect the thing», but rather «opens the animal onto the thing» in a pure relation: «One might suppose», Blanchot writes, «that consciousness is seeking unconsciousness as its solution» in this pure relation, and that Rilke's poem expresses consciousness' dream of «dissolving in an instinctive blindness where it would regain the great unknowing purity of the animal».<sup>81</sup>

Unlike Heidegger, however, Blanchot dismisses this interpretative possibility. What the eighth *Elegy* expresses is instead an «interiorization» that «reverses» the destiny of consciousness by «purifying it of everything it represents and produces, of everything that makes it a substitute for the objective real which we call the

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77 HEIDEGGER 1992 [1982], 155.

78 HEIDEGGER 1992 [1982], 155.

79 HEIDEGGER 1992 [1982], 156.

80 BLANCHOT 1982 [1955], 134.

81 BLANCHOT 1982 [1955], 138.

world». <sup>82</sup> Quoting one of Rilke's letters, Blanchot observes that «it is a matter of 'becoming as fully conscious as possible of our existence' such that '[a]ll the configurations of the here and now are to be used not in a time-bound way, but, as far as we are able, to be placed in those superior significances in which we have a share'». <sup>83</sup> The words "superior significances" suggests to Blanchot that interiorization «does not go toward the void of unknowing, but toward higher or more demanding meanings – closer too, perhaps, to their source». This "more inner consciousness" is at the same time "more conscious", meaning "more pure" in the sense of opening consciousness to the outside, rather than closing it in.

Arendt's and Stern's interpretation is closer to Blanchot's because they think that destiny – "being opposite [...] and always opposite" – possesses an ambiguous status for Rilke. As the precondition for the poet's limited human existence, destiny is nevertheless what enables the poet to get involved with things, «the praise of which opens the door for us to the 'other relation'», and thus to a relative transcendence. As Arendt and Stern observe, in the ordered world that discloses itself to the lovers in their pure being – or to the animal or the child – there is no «true transcendence» that absolves us of everything *this-worldly*. <sup>84</sup> In other words, although this «cosmological-hierarchical world» is fundamentally different from the world in which we live our daily lives, it is not *otherworldly*. This suggests an affinity between the estrangement of the poet and the lovers' pure cognition. «In contrast to every other historically recorded estrangement from the world», Arendt and Stern conclude, the estrangement of the poet is «not directly or originally determined as transcendence, nor does it escape into transcendence». <sup>85</sup> The poet's estrangement is rather characterized by a detour it makes, a detour Rilke understands as a "rescue" [*Rettung*].

Given Arendt's and Stern's philosophical training, it is tempting here

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<sup>82</sup> BLANCHOT 1982 [1955], 138.

<sup>83</sup> BLANCHOT 1982 [1955], 138.

<sup>84</sup> ARENDT & STERN 2007, 13.

<sup>85</sup> ARENDT & STERN 2007, 6.

to think of what Arendt in a later essay refers to as the «detour of consciousness» in the phenomenological attempt to reconstitute the broken unity between «Being and thought».<sup>86</sup> In Arendt's narrative of "existential philosophy", Husserlian phenomenology seemed to solve the modern problem of contingent existence – «the perception that individual things have been torn out of their functional context» – by reintegrating them into human life:

[B]y means of [a] detour via consciousness [...] [Husserl] would be capable of reconstituting this world now shattered into pieces. Such a reconstituting of the world by consciousness would amount to a second creation in the sense that [...] the world would lose its contingent character, which is to say its character of reality, and it would no longer appear to man as a world given, but a world created by him.<sup>87</sup>

However, rescuing in the context of the *Duino Elegies*, we read, «is not simply a spontaneously human act, but a task and an urge imparted by things».<sup>88</sup>

– And these things  
that keep alive on departure know that you praise them; transient,  
they look to us, the most transient, to be their rescue.  
They want us to change them completely, in our invisible hearts,  
into– O endlessly– us! Whoever, finally, we may be.<sup>89</sup>

Moreover, the poet's detour, as compared to the philosopher's, is not merely an act of consciousness, since it depends on "the sayable", to use Rilke's poetic language, and thus belongs to the sensible realm.

Praise the world to the Angel, not what's unsayable.  
You can't impress him with lofty emotions; in the cosmos  
that shapes *his* feelings, you're a mere novice. Therefore show him

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86 ARENDT 1994, 164.

87 ARENDT 1994, 165.

88 ARENDT & STERN 2007, 6.

89 RILKE 2000 [1923], 57.

some simple object, formed from generation to generation  
 until it's truly our own, dwelling near our hands and in our eyes.  
 Tell him of *things*. He'll stand more amazed; as you stood  
 beside the ropemaker in Rome or by the potter along the Nile.<sup>90</sup>

Rilke's rescuing preserves from destruction through *naming*, according to Arendt and Stern. This is an interesting remark if one recalls one of Arendt's later comments on the philosophical implications of Benjamin's method of citation – a comment that is at once a critique of the contemplative ideal that has dominated the tradition of Western philosophy, and an implicit reference to poetry. To cite is to name, Arendt states, and (following Benjamin in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*) distinguishes “naming” from “speaking”, “the word” from “the sentence”.<sup>91</sup> She then claims that naming/the word «brings truth to light», which makes truth an acoustic phenomenon: Adam, «who gave things their names», rather than Plato, was the «father of philosophy».

As if echoing Benjamin (whose study of baroque drama was first published in 1928), Arendt and Stern goes on to argue that «naming is extolling». But being extolled does not mean being left in its unaltered state and being praised for this reason: «It is not enough for the transformation simply to say the sayable to the angel; it endures only in repeated retelling».<sup>92</sup>

What if we're here just for saying: *house*,  
*bridge, fountain, gate, jug, fruit tree, window*, –  
 at most: *column, tower* [...] but for saying, understand,  
 oh for such saying as the things themselves  
 never hoped so intensely to be.<sup>93</sup>

Praising, that is, transforming “the visible into the invisible” through poetic language, is a task which springs from our contemporary

90 RILKE 2000 [1923], 55.

91 ARENDT 1968b, 49; cf. BENJAMIN 1998 [1928], 37.

92 ARENDT & STERN 2007, 7.

93 RILKE 2000 [1923], 55.

situation, wherein life has become an “imageless act” that leaves the exterior world in ruins while preventing the new from appearing. This fact, Arendt and Stern suggest, should lead us «to understand interiority itself as a determination of transcendence».<sup>94</sup> As long as the interior was manifest in an exterior, they explain, a non-questioning relationship to transcendence was secured, «and a handing-over, like praise and rescue, superfluous».<sup>95</sup> Today, however, as such an exterior is vanishing, «we ‘disinherited ones’ need things as our last possibility for praising and reaching out into the other order».<sup>96</sup> Regardless of its religious overtones, this “other order” should not be understood in terms of (Christian) otherworldly transcendence, but rather in terms of what Rilke calls “the world’s inner space” (*Weltinnenraum*) – a space which is at once intimate and exterior, and which his poetic experience led him to recognize and express.<sup>97</sup>

We can here grasp the ontological significance of Arendt’s laconic references to a poetic conception of praise in *The Life of the Mind*. There she presents Augustine’s *praise* and Heidegger’s *thanking* as perhaps pointing to a solution for the apparent meaninglessness of a totally secularized world. The early Rilke essay details how praise in the modern form of poetic “rescue and transformation” is needed in order to establish a different – genuine or authentic – relation between human existence and a world denuded of transcendent sources of meaning. Arendt’s recurring references to “thought-things” (which evoke Rilke’s “thing poems” [*Dichtgedinge*]) affirm this reconstructive capacity of poetry: by transforming “sense-objects” into “thought-things”, the poet – like the philosopher – tears things out of their context in order to “de-realize” them and, so to speak, poetically “interiorize” them.

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94 ARENDT & STERN 2007, 8.

95 ARENDT & STERN 2007, 8.

96 ARENDT & STERN 2007, 8. This early, poetic, emphasis on “things” is interesting in relation to Arendt’s later existential argument on the conditional role of things for worldly permanence. See ARENDT 1958; cf. HONIG 2017.

97 BLANCHOT 1982 [1955], 137.

## 6.

In this essay I have presented the eclipse of the transcendent (what Nietzsche metaphorically referred to as the “Death of God”) as both background and point of departure for Heidegger’s existential philosophy, Arendt’s political-theoretical project of critical remembrance, and Rilke’s *Duino Elegies*. Heidegger and – to a lesser extent – Arendt respond to this eclipse, and the feeling of cultural-existential meaninglessness it generates, by dismantling the Platonic-Christian-metaphysical model of a transcendent source of meaning. As an alternative to this no longer credible model, they point to sources of meaning the Western tradition has covered over or obscured. For Heidegger, such a source is to be found through the recovery of pre-Socratic understandings of Being and the pursuit of authentic existence; for Arendt, it is to be found through the recovery of political phenomena (action, freedom, plurality) highlighted by the ancient Greek democratic experience.

Seen from this angle, Heidegger and Arendt can be counted among those figures (such as Benjamin and Rosenzweig) who pursue a model of “transcendence-in-the-world”. However, their joint turn to more “primordial” sources of meaning behind or before the encrustations of the tradition has the effect of devaluing the things of this world. Thus, to take one obvious example, for Heidegger *beings* (the “ontic”) serve to conceal or obscure *Being* (the ontological), as in his commentary on Rilke’s eighth *Elegy*.

My reading of the Arendt-Stern essay has presented an alternative conception of where meaning might be discovered after the eclipse of the transcendent. That alternative conception is poetically expressed by Rilke’s *Duino Elegies* and by the “poetics of praise” articulated by the young Arendt in her Rilke essay and by the mature Arendt in reflections found in her last work, *The Life of the Mind*. In this alternative conception, meaning is to be found not behind, beneath, or above things, but precisely *in* them as they appear to, and are

experienced by, human beings who are capable of using the language designating them poetically. In this conception, things are not signs directing us to some other realm, but the *raison d'être* for a poetic meaning creation that finds the wonder of existence in them and in this world.

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