Duinesian Elegies

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THE EIGHTH ELEGY

The eighth elegy was written on 7 and 8 February 1922 and is dedicated to Rudolph Kassner, an Austrian poet and philosopher whose friendship with Rilke began in 1907. Rilke and Kassner were interested in similar philosophical problems, which accounts for the dedication of this elegy.

In the seventh elegy man’s sphere of activity and his meaning were found to lie in his world of physical reality, and the eighth elegy delineates man’s relationship to that sphere. Information is sought in the animal’s relationship to the universe and what this reveals by contrast about man’s dissimilar mode of life. A significant aspect of this problem is man’s subject-object division, which is usually experienced as an absolute barrier and which is present as long as man’s attention is directed toward the external world. Beginning with the first elegy, Rilke’s universe has been divided into the major fragments of the human world and the angel world. If the elegies are arranged around the fifth one as an axis, the eighth corresponds to the second. The second one elaborates the first major division of the universe as man sees it into absolute and physical reality, while the eighth continues the process of fracture into the world of physical reality so that in being separated from the remaining world of living creatures, man becomes a unique entity. Immediately there arises the question of what Rilke classifies as creature or animal. A letter to Lou Andreas-Salomé written 20 February 1914 is devoted to this theme and provides important information for this and other aspects of the elegies:

I have conceived of it beautifully, as I never imagined it before: transposition of the developing creature from the world further and further into the inner realm. Therefore the charming state of the bird on its way inward; its nest is after all almost an external womb provided for it by nature which it merely equips and covers over, instead of receiving it complete. So it is that one of the animals which has a very special sense of trust toward its external world, as if it knew that it shared a very deep secret with it. Therefore it sings in it as if it were singing in its inner being: therefore we take the sound of a bird so easily into our

61 Steiner, p. 185.
62 Karl-Heinz Fingerhut, Das Kreatürliche im Werke Rainer Maria Rilkes (Bonn: Bouvier, 1970). This work gives a very extensive treatment of this theme consonant with my ideas on the subject.

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being: it seems to us as if we transform it completely in our emotion; indeed, for a moment it can transform the entire world into inner space for us because we sense that the bird does not distinguish between its heart and that [of the world]. On the one hand now much is gained for the animal and human spheres by transposition of maturing life into a womb: for it becomes all the more world when externally the participation of the world in these processes is reduced (as if it had become more unsure, as if it had been taken away—), on the other hand (from my notebook, written last year in Spain—you will remember the question): “What is the source of the intimacy of the creature (of the others)? [It comes] from maturing outside the body, which means that it never leaves the sheltering body. (All its life is like a fetus.) . . .”

That which the plant shows so beautifully, the way it makes no secret of its secret as if having knowledge that it could not be otherwise than in security: it is exactly that, just imagine, which I experienced in Egypt before the sculptures and since then always experienced with things from Egypt: this baring of the secret which is so through and through, so all over secret that it does not need to be hidden. And perhaps everything phallic (as I sensed in the Temple of Karnak, for I still could not think it) is only a revelation of the human secretly secret in the sense of the openly secret in nature. I can never think of the smile of the Egyptian gods without the word “flower pollen” occurring to me.63

The creature world is separated on the one side from the world of man by subject-object division and on the other side from the world of things by the element of life. This segment of the universe covers a wide range from the flower which exists in pure harmony with nature, through the insects which being born directly into the world live their entire lives as if in a protective womb, the birds which combine the protective security of the womb (nest) with the ultimate insecurity of flight, the animal which senses its physical existence and by contrast a prior greater harmony, and finally the child. Although the range of living things within these borders is great, they are unified by their mode of existence in direct harmony with the universe, by their feeling of oneness with it in contrast to man’s separation from it by the self-awareness of the subject-object relationship. Yet man himself is not born with this self-awareness, so that as a child he, too, belongs to this creature world, as Rilke’s reference to the “other” creatures in the

63Rilke, Briefe, I, 489–90. [My own translation.]
letter to Lou Andreas-Salomé indicates. Since the opening lines state that
the animal or creature “sees” openness, the question arises concerning the
inclusion of the flower in the creature world. It does not have eyes as the
animals do, yet poetically both English and German speak of flowers seeing
and having eyes. It is important to remember that here we are not dealing
with scientific classification but with a poetic symbol. The proximity of the
flower to the creature world in both the letter just quoted and in the eighth
elegy with similar symbolism in both provides some justification for
including it in Rilke’s creature world.

1 A second major problem of definition occurs within the first sentence:
openness. Openness is not to be equated with the absolute or angel world;
it is instead the creature’s view of the universe which is the opposite of man’s
object vision. In the letter to Hulewicz, Rilke speaks of a universe where
there is no here and no hereafter, but only a great unity in which the angel
is at home.64 Death is the element which divides our universe into a here
and a hereafter; our foreknowledge of it separates us from the remainder of
the creature world, limits our vision, and breaks our world into fragments.
Since the animal or creature does not perceive the demarcation of death, it
sees the world as a unity including both the world of man and that of the
angel. It is a part of its world, not separated from it as subject from object.65
Openness thus is an unbounded view where life and death are parts of the
same unity,66 where life is not bounded by death nor observation by sub-
ject-object barriers.

5 The vision which is the theme of the eighth elegy is essentially philo-
sophical rather than physical, although Steiner demonstrates interesting
correspondences between the physical and philosophical aspects.67 He says
the animal does not see perspectively, which means that the animal does not
order or arrange what it sees with reference to itself so that it does not sense
a separation from its world. In contrast, man with his sense of perspective
and self-awareness sees his world in relationship to himself. As the only
living being with self-awareness, he is also conscious of his inability to
escape from his imprisonment within his physical existence; he alone
recognizes the limiting, fracturing effect of physical reality. In not imposing

64Rilke, Briefe, II, 480–81. [My own translation.]
65Steiner, p. 198.
67Steiner, pp. 186–87.
a false order on what it sees, the animal beholds unbounded openness. But when man sees the animal, he sees it in relation to himself, fitting it into the world which he organizes from his perspective in its center as experiencing subject.

Since man exists in both time and space, his perception has implications for time as well as space. Man commonly perceives time as a continuum of past, present, and future. From the perspective of the present moment to which his physical existence limits him, he sees only the past; the future he can merely surmise. His vision is therefore reversed, turned to the past and spatially bounded. He looks back to the past, whereas the animal looks forward into an unbounded world.\(^6\) When he sees the animal, he adapts it to his own world of time and space, trapping it there and limiting or hindering its freedom. Yet from the countenance of the animal which seems not to see our world, we can infer the existence of a unified, harmoni­ous totality completely different from our own world view. Countenance is used to translate the German “Antlitz,” which Rilke uses differently from “Gesicht,” face. “Antlitz” or countenance signifies unity of inner and outer worlds, while “Gesicht” or face stands for the external world of reality as in the outside face of the doll in the fourth elegy. Only at the beginning and the end of life does man escape his view of life as segmented. The child, not being born with an awareness of death, sees the world initially as the animals do and thus belongs to the creature world. But experience, example, and normal development soon transform his mode of vision into the subject-object relationship of the adult world with its awareness of death cutting off the view of what lies beyond. Being unaware of death the animal looks not backward to the past as man does, but forward into an undivided totality where God or the angel exists. For this reason it goes not to death as man does, but to eternity wherein it merely undergoes transformation within the totality. The conclusion of this section compares the creature world to the fountain. For Rilke flowing water symbolizes the paradox of that which remains forever the same while continually changing, the paradox of man and angel, time and eternity, of change and permanence.

The creature world, like the fountain, is a paradoxical unity of physical reality and the angel absolute since the reality of the creature is unbounded like that of the angel. Beyond man’s imprisonment within physical reality

\(^6\)Steiner, p. 199.
he senses the existence of a comprehensive unity—pure space—which animals and the child experience directly.

14 The second section continues the contrast between the creature world of flowers, animals, and children, and our human world. The space of the creature world is pure and unconstrained, a nowhere without a negative. As nowhere it is unbounded, lacking the ultimate negation of death. The plant knows perfectly—for it knows no contrast—that it exists in complete security in a universe where nothing is lost but only undergoes transformation. Knowing perfectly, it accepts perfectly without any desires of its own to separate it from the universe with which it is in complete harmony. Sometimes the child knows this world, but those who cannot follow it there force it to return to their world of imposed order and purposefulness. At the other end of life those who come face to face with death no longer see it as demarcation and limit but see beyond to the absolute world of the angel, just as lovers in the act of perfect love transcend the object to reach beyond the human world to the inner absolute. But these moments of transcendence are transitory, and we are always recalled to our human world of finite reality which is our normal mode of existence and from which we can escape permanently only in death.

35 Since the animal's world view is so different from ours, it cannot communicate its message to us; it cannot change our pattern of life or restore us to primal unity.69 Once again the contrast is stated: where our forward view is directed toward the future of continuous time with its final limit of death, the animal sees not time but eternity and pure, boundless space free from awareness of death.

43 The next section defines the place of the warm animal within the creature world, for even within the creature world there are degrees of security. The warm animal shares with man the memory of being more intimately one with the universe, more secure and protected in the womb, which makes its present abode less secure. Yet its mode of relation to life and to its world is still direct, unlike man, who only senses a unity from which he has become separated.

52 From the warm animal Rilke turns to the opposite end of the animal spectrum to the tiny creature, the insect. Unlike the warm animal, it does not develop within a womb but is born directly into the world so that

69Buddeberg, p. 129.
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having no memory of prior unity as the warm animal does, it experiences the world as womb. Since it never leaves the primal unity of the womb, it sees life within physical reality as the same unity with totality which it enjoyed before birth.

The bird bridges the world of the tiny creature and the warm animal. Like the insect it is born from eggs, but as the letter informed us, its nest is like a womb. Rilke compares this existence in both worlds to an Etruscan tomb with its sculpture of the dead on the cover. The dead figure within belongs to the angel world which man reaches perfectly in death, but the sculptured figure on the cover is man’s concept of the individual as physical reality and belongs to the human world. Like the double figures of the Etruscan tomb, the bird is at home both on the earth and in the air, seeming in this way also to combine both worlds, for air bridges the space between world and heaven and is the portion of our world which is most non-physical—even though we know scientifically that it is as real as solid matter. The bird finds existence in both worlds perplexing, for although it can fly and sing as ethereally as the lark in spring in the seventh elegy, it is still a living creature. This perplexing combination of security and insecurity is captured in the picture of the darting flight of the bat flashing through the sky like a crack appearing in a cup, a crack of insecurity through the security of the womb.⁷⁰ The bat is less secure than the bird for it is not a bird, but a mammal, a warm-blooded animal; it is the creature that must fly, yet comes from a womb.

The end of the section returns to man, the spectator locked within himself and doomed to relate to everything as external object.⁷¹ He relates to the object world by ordering and arranging it according to his own concepts from his subject perspective and for his use. But since he is an imperfect, limited creature, the world he makes is likewise imperfect and collapses, as he himself does in the end. Man has left the primal unity of the child behind, and his relation to the exterior world is determined by his imprisonment within time and space. He cannot overcome the subject–object barrier in an outward direction as the creature world does. Where the creature looks forward into boundless infinity, man looks backward at the finite past. As he travels through life, he is like the traveler who, standing on a hill, looks

⁷¹Guardini, pp. 322–23.
back for the last time at what he is leaving. Since man’s view is bounded by finiteness and death, he alone of all creation is aware of always parting from what has been, of always losing what he has known, and so he lingers and looks back. This picture combines the past temporal aspect with space orientation backward in a symbol for human finiteness.

Man is set apart from the rest of physical reality, even from the warm-blooded animals most nearly like himself, by self-awareness with its subject-object barrier, by a prior knowledge of death which limits his view to his own world of physical reality, and by perspective vision which relates the world to the subject-observer. By isolating man from the creature world, the eighth elegy delineates man’s unique position within the world, preparing for his unique function and value in the following elegy.