



The Fate of Poetry: On the Interpretation of Rilke's Sonnet 'Giebt es wirklich die Zeit, die zerstörende?'

Christoph König
Universität Osnabrück
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Remark: Parts of this lecture originate from my book '»O komm und geh«. Skeptische Lektüren der »Sonette an Orpheus« von Rilke', published 2014 by Wallstein Verlag (Göttingen). Please don't quote without my permission.

Instead of beginning with a methodological consideration, I will start with the poem and the cycle in which it can be found straightaway. I will reveal the reasons behind this postponement only at the very end of the paper. Following our recent discussion in the Consortium on the question of whether philology can have a theoretical foundation, you will already have an idea of that reason. ¹

¹ IKGf, 9.5.2012, directed by Christoph König, on the theme 'Towards a theory of philology from inside – Friedrich Schlegel's notebooks'. The same questions were discussed in an 'interdisciplinary colloquium' IKGf,

'Giebt es wirklich die Zeit, die zerstörende?'

Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926) is one of the great German poets. In fact, he is, universally, the most well-known of German poets, more famous even than Goethe. His collection of poems 'Das Stundenbuch' brought him a huge readership; and with his 'Neue Gedichte' and the novel 'Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge' (1910), he laid the foundations for a modern, reflective kind of poetry, which reached its high point in 1922, when he wrote, within three weeks – a tempestuous flurry of inspiration, after ten years of waiting – the 'Duineser Elegien' and 'Die Sonette an Orpheus'.

'Die Sonette an Orpheus' form a double cycle of fifty-five poems. The title given to the sonnets includes a dedication ('to'): the sonnets are addressed 'to' Orpheus, the central figure of the orphic-mystic tradition of classical poetry. Rilke supplies another dedication. The subtitle of the sonnet collection is: 'Written as an epitaph / for Wera Ouckama Knoop'. The Wera addressed by Rilke was a young dancer with whom he had been friendly, who had died at nineteen years of age. The connection between the two dedications says much about the purpose of the cycle: Rilke's goal is to find wherein the foundations of his poetic inspiration, and of his creativity, lie. He assumes that he stands in the tradition of the godlike poet-singer Orpheus; yet, he realises that this god remains unknowable. Thus, he takes it upon himself to demonstrate all of the artistry necessary to drag Orpheus into the present. In the sonnets, dance becomes the art-form of choice for making Orpheus present. The poems are poems about the necessary preconditions for orphic poetry.

16.5.2012, on Peter Szondi's essay 'Schleiermachers Hermeneutik heute' (1970).

‘Giebt es wirklich die Zeit, die zerstörende?’

The Reading

In my paper I will, above all, concentrate on sonnet no. twenty-seven, from the second part of the ‘Sonnets to Orpheus’ cycle (II:27):

XXVII

*Giebt es wirklich die Zeit, die zerstörende?
Wann, auf dem ruhenden Berg, zerbricht sie die Burg?
Dieses Herz, das unendlich den Göttern gehörende,
wann vergewaltigts der Demiurg?*

*Sind wir wirklich so ängstlich Zerbrechliche,
wie das Schicksal uns wahr machen will?
Ist die Kindheit, die tiefe, versprechliche,
in den Wurzeln – später – still?*

*Ach, das Gespenst des Vergänglichen,
durch den arglos Empfänglichen
geht es, als wär es ein Rauch.*

*Als die, die wir sind, als die Treibenden,
gelten wir doch bei bleibenden
Kräften als göttlicher Brauch.²*

² Rainer Maria Rilke, Die Sonette an Orpheus, in his *Sämtliche Werke*, Vol. 1, ed. Ernst Zinn, Wiesbaden 1955, pp. 727-771, at p. 769.

*Does it really exist, time the destroyer?
When, on the mountain at rest, will it crumble the castle?
This heart, that belongs to the gods unendingly,
when will the demiurge overcome it by force?*

*Are we really so apprehensively fragile
as fate would have us believe?
Is childhood, so deep, so promissful,
at the roots of it – later – stilled?*

*Ah, the specter of transience,
through the simply receptive
it passes as though it were smoke.*

*As those that we are, with our driving,
we yet count among abiding
powers as a use of the gods.³*

The words 'fate', 'time', 'childhood', 'heart', 'still', 'gods', and 'drive' mark the rhythm of this sonnet. Each of these words carries its own history within the cycle. In order to analyse the poem, it is therefore necessary to transcend the limits of the individual poem within the cycle - which also stands as a work of its own - along the lines of the interdependency of the given words. Determining the whole of what is to be in-

³ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Sonnets to Orpheus*, transl. M. D. Herter Norton, New York 1942, p. 123.

terpreted (that is, the poem within the cycle) is part of classic philological criticism (I remind you of our reading session on Friedrich Schlegel's notebook 'Zur Philologie'). Philological critique in this sense determines what is to be regarded as part of the text.

In terms of the immediate context – with reference to Sonnet II:27 – we have here a small group of poems, whose deliberations serve to bring Sonnet II:27 to a higher level of abstraction, and thus have influence on its meaning. These deliberations take as their starting point 'early spring', mentioned two sonnets earlier (II:25), meaning the reawakening of nature, and the return to work in the fields. Such ideas of time come to be central to Sonnet II:27, as well as a longing for an (orphic) order among the sounds of early spring, *Vorfrühlingsakustik* (II:26). These sounds are carried over into a chronological, dynamic context in Sonnet II:27. How, the poem asks, does the poet stand in a transient world?

Going further back in the cycle, the connection between time/fate and song/poetry created in Sonnet II:27 answers to the sonnets going back to no. II:17, in which the cluster of thoughts concerning fate (first occurrence: Sonnet II:20), art/heart, and knowledge of the gods is formulated. Here, some poems emerge as summaries, which are then summarised in turn (II:21 – II:24 – II:27) – turning points, so to speak; other poems lay the ground for the transition between II:27 and the following dance-sonnet, no. II:28 (like II:18, almost a dancelike fulfilment of the dream about a tree in Sonnet II:17, or no. II:23, which first introduces the figure of the averted Orpheus). The meaning of dance is developed only in the sonnet following II:27, which takes its ideas further. In II:27 dance, as yet, has little meaning.

‘Giebt es wirklich die Zeit, die zerstörende?’

Four rhetorical questions demarcate the two quatrains of the sonnet (‘Giebt es wirklich...’, ‘Wann zerbrechen sie...’, ‘Sind wir wirklich...’, ‘Ist die Kindheit...’). The rhetorical aspect is in evidence in the repetition of the word ‘wirklich’ (ll. 1 and 5). This doubt, rhetorically articulated, concerns the legitimacy of time and fate. It is explained only in the second quatrain. The explanations are given in the form of two questions responding to the questions asked in the first quatrain. The insertion of ‘This heart, that belongs to the gods unendingly’, in l. 3 helps to build the necessary counterweight to the demiurges allied with time. The poet’s heart is the counterweight. Indeed, the word ‘heart’ carries a specific meaning since Sonnet II:21: it refers to the poet’s *creative power* (cf. Rilke’s correspondence with Merline).⁴

Thus, the power of time is cast into doubt through the means of rhetoric. But this is not ‘time’ as such, but time in a specific sense, as given in the poem. It is a *special kind of time* which is brought into question. The adjective ‘zerstörend’ (the translation has ‘time the destroyer’) is decisive here: there should be no ‘destructive’ time – instead, the poem takes on the task of redefining time, in what is to follow, from this instance. In the end, those ‘Treibende’ (l. 12, ‘those that we are, with our driving’) provide the solution. Those ‘Treibende’ both float *through* time (passively), and drive *time* (actively) – the German allows for both readings.

The redefinition of time has to begin with a more precise rendering of those two entities expressed in the two question-and-answer pairs of the two quatrains, which are said to be ex-

⁴ Cf. also Rainer Maria Rilke, Baladine Klossowska, Correspondance: 1920–1926, ed. Dieter Bassermann, Zürich 1954.

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posed to the powers of time. These two entities are the power of the world (Burg), and the poet, whose 'heart' is his poetical organ. As will become clear, the newly defined time in a traditional sense can wreak no destruction on either entity: neither on the outer (Burg), nor on the inner (Herz).

The lyrical subject speaks for a group, to whom it counts itself by the power of the 'heart'. It speaks for itself and for other poets like a chorus leader. This speech is directed towards a 'you', which remains veiled. Is it Orpheus, or is it the singer himself, who works in the tradition of Orpheus? In any case, Orpheus is his god, as follows from the sonnet immediately preceding this one: 'Ordne die Schreier, / singender Gott!' (II:26, ll. 12f, 'Array the criers, / singing god!').

This applies also in the case of a conversation of the poet with himself, which moves within an orphic system of argumentation (such as with the terms 'heart' and 'still'). This system includes also the gods, who appear throughout the poem. The I knows that it stands in an acoustic, and therefore also orphic, relation to the gods ('ge-hörend', cf. I. 3, in the sense of belonging to and listening). And towards the end the lyrical subject sees its own (poetic) activity in the light of the gods (as a 'use [in the sense of custom] of the gods', I. 14). Here, the opposition of the orphic to *fate* becomes decisive.

For the appeal to the authority of Orpheus effectively excludes an answer from fate, or better (and, maybe, even more precisely than Rilke put it): it excludes an answer from the *oracle of fate which emerges in the interpretation*. The I could have turned to fate – it would have been a potential speaker who could have made the lyrical subject believe, but who would inevitably prove deceptive. This is expressed through the double meaning of 'wahr machen'

in I. 6, which comes through also in the English translation: to make believe is also make-believe. ‘Wahr machen’ is a neologism of Rilke’s, from ‘weismachen’ (in the sense of ‘to disassemble truth’), and stands as a dismissive comment on all prophecy and every prediction (German ‘Weissagung’, cf. ‘weismachen’).

Fate has conspired with everyday time, and with the demiurge (from I. 4), who represents not ‘God in the highest position’, but rather ‘those inferior creators of the misguided material world, which gnostic tradition places in opposition to the pure spirit’⁵. The poetic speculation of the preceding sonnets, which is further developed here, has already prepared the word ‘fate’ (‘Schicksal’). In Sonnet II:19, its meaning was *sociological*: it referred to a social obligation, to which the hand of the *beggar* – audible to the gods – stands in opposition. Also *art* is opposed to fate (in II:21 art is distinguished from haste and obligation by ‘excesses’, ‘Überflüsse’, I. 1). Conversely, the gods, whom man creates and who answer his prayers, are threatened by fate in Sonnet II:24, which is particularly programmatic: ‘Götter, wir planen sie erst in erkühnten Entwürfen, / die uns das mürrische Schicksal wieder zerstört’ (II. 5f, ‘Gods, – we project them first in emboldened sketches / which crabbed fate destroys for us again.’). Here fate appears in a reflective function. Its sociological and anti-artistic reflection of the fragility due to time aims to confirm this very fragility.

The entities threatened by the worldly, destructive time associated with the ‘fate’ of society, that is, the mountain, the castle, and the heart, are then explicated, and the poem does away with all common prejudice associated with these con-

⁵ Jean Bollack, unpublished manuscript.

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cepts. ‘Crumbling’, fragility, is connected with the castle, but given its own specific meaning by the insertion of ‘ängstlich’ (‘apprehensive’) in l. 5 (‘apprehensively fragile’). Poets are certainly fragile, but in no way apprehensive – that is, in no way are they victims of an overpowering, fatal force. Also the interpretation of the ‘heart’ of the poets is elaborated. Rilke emphasises childhood. The heart in childhood is subject to, or at least threatened by, violation. As the heart in question is a speaking heart, such a violation would make it silent, would ‘still’ it. But the word ‘versprechliche’ (l. 7) explains the potential misunderstanding (German ‘Versprechen’ can mean both: a promise and a slip of the tongue) by calling attention to a genuine, prospective linguistic faculty, which functions as a promise (‘Versprechen’). The orphic ‘promise’ is contained in the slip of the tongue. The heart is conceptualized via a poetic faculty that has its roots in childhood (and in the purity of childhood – a notion to which many of the sonnets testify). Poetry means being silent, and therefore listening to a creative Orpheus (cf. l. 1), as the poetics of the cycle teaches us. The castle is a citadel of the poets who compose within their childhood and therefore on the *basis* of their childhood. They realise the promise of childhood.

Through the topos of transience, the sonnet resumes its reflection on the question of knowledge (‘Erkenntnis’), introduced in the poem’s discussion of the expression ‘make believe’/‘wahr machen’ (l. 6). The tercets are about the relationship between the knowing and the known. First, the transient, that is the destructed, is dismissed as a ghost, in the everyday sense of ‘seeing ghosts’. The childishly ‘simple’ (‘arglos’, l. 10) seems to take its sense from such a ghost. But the fact that Rilke goes through the subject can potentially also mean that

he argues in favor of an agreement between ghosts and subject. Is it about a ghost which every poet has already made his own? An occult experience, of the kind which one does not expect in empirical temporality (cf. Rilke's interest in occultism)? An adopted oracle of fate? Now we can see the reason behind the rhetorical questions of the beginning of the sonnet. It was illusory assumptions, oracular sayings in the form of 'smoke' (l. 11), like at Delphi, which could give the temporal its true, higher meaning. The smoke is more than it pretends to be. Perhaps even a breeze ('Hauch'), an inspiration, only going by the wrong name. Pneumatological conceptions of modernity invite this mixture of discourses (c.f. Hofmannsthal: "nichts als ein Hauch").

This is no lament. In fact, the 'Ach' of l. 9 is an expression of relief. It is the relief of the poets (one thinks of their heart, their speaking in promises, their childhood as place of pure poetry and the ensuing silence). The 'are' of l. 12 emphatically turns against fragility, scheming, and gossip. Paradoxically, it is the very instability of his premises that lends stability to the existence of poets: 'As those that we are, with our driving' (l. 12). However (and this is the reason most probably why Rilke chose to use the word 'treiben'), instability connects productivity and understanding with one another. The poet makes use of the two potential meanings of the verb 'treiben', to 'drive' and to 'drift', to place the active sense of the word next to the passive one, which might seem the more instinctive reading (Herter Norton in her translation of 1942 chooses 'our driving' and thus prefers the active meaning of the word).⁶ Of course, one sense of the word is to be related to the other. This is

⁶ Rilke, n. 3, p. 128.

the very purpose of Rilke’s characteristically idiomatic ambiguity. Thus, one word contains the condition of meaning for another, identical-sounding word. The passive (the imposition of change, the drivenness of the drifting) becomes a precondition for activity. The argument of the lyrical subject goes something like this: our own transience is actually accessible to us by poetic means, that is, we can listen to our own drive/urge (to write), or ‘hear’ it in the orphic sense, and find inspiration in it; and by doing so, we take the initiative.

The simultaneously active and passive ‘treiben’ is poetical. The rituals, the convention, what persists – that is godlike. Insofar as poets can muster the power for continuous repetition (Rilke uses a colloquial expression: ‘bei Kräften bleiben’, ‘to keep your strength up’), then they can attain a higher, almost sacral recognition. The usual order has been reversed. Poetry becomes the origin from which religious practice is derived. The ordinary view, henceforth, allows for religious custom as an expression of poetry. This is also the meaning of the claim that poetical activity is ‘a use of the gods’ (l. 14). In the sonnets, religion provides an opportunity for Orpheus to manifest himself (the last sonnet, II:29, contains an extended reflection on this very topic). Those previously ‘*valid*’ religious or god-like customs will now be understood in a different sense *sub auspiciis poetarum*. Poetry is the *explicans* of the religious. Also mantic practices are defined by a fundamentally poetic *raison d’être*. The use, or – with reference to fate (l. 6) – the ritual of a mantic activity is a matter for the poet⁷. Thus Rilke

⁷ Also see Sophia Katz’s article about the poet and musician Shaoyong ‘Die Prophetie wurde den Toren gegeben’, in the IKGf-Newsletter, 01/2011. p.7. Rilke is not alone with his poetic lecture of mantics.

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connects fate with the stars (I will come back to this later). Rituals display a doubling of creative power and its (subsequent) explication. Poets explicate what they have already done (or are doing). The objects of analysis are their poetic productivity, rather than individual, created works. Their 'drifting', their 'Treiben' in the sense related to earthly transience, or, in the words of the philosophy of life of the age, their 'becoming' ('Werden'), is an almost sacral explication of their own creative powers, or better: of their own creative drive. 'Becoming', as is clear here, presumes a *dynamic* creativity.

There are few instances in the sonnets of generally recognised practices which combine both art and custom/use. Dance, itself a form of becoming, proves to be the *form* of the interpretation of the active drive – a ritual proper and peculiar to creativity. In dance, poets in a sense write down and explain their inspirations. In this sense, Sonnet II:28 continues the story. These are the first lines:

*O komm und geh. Du, fast noch Kind, ergänze
für einen Augenblick die Tanzfigur
zum reinen Sternbild einer jener Tänze,
darin wir die dumpf ordnende Natur*

*vergänglich übertreffen. Denn sie regte
sich völlig hörend nur, da Orpheus sang.*

*

'Giebt es wirklich die Zeit, die zerstörende?'

*O come and go. You, still half a child,
fill out the dance-figure for a moment
to the pure constellation of one of those
dances in which we fleetingly transcend*

*dumbly ordering Nature. For she roused
to full hearing only when Orpheus sang. (ll. 1-6)*

The orphic world can only be grasped in secular being. Poets explain their drivenness, their own dynamic existence. They do that through dance, and connect the progress of the dance ('Gang') with the dynamic of the orphic world, in the words of the 'fleeting' (vergänglich) dance (cf. l. 5). As a transient art (an art of progress), in this sense, dance can reach a degree of abstraction which can approach Orpheus. The strong thesis of the poem is that Orpheus could be grasped, in an abstraction. The relationship between dance and abstraction brings us to the relationship between abstraction and Orpheus. Stars become part of the game, as Rilke reads their constellations as forms. The wish is now to possess sidereal relationships with the same dynamic quality as dance, which aims to approach the constellations. Mobile constellations. Dance creates an abstract-sidereal explanation of an orphic world, understood in dynamic terms.

Counter-Reading⁸

In no language are there more translations of Rilke than in Chinese. Thanks to the first great mediator, Feng Zhi, the ‘Sonnets to Orpheus’ enjoy particular acclaim.⁹ A counter-reading of the translation helps to enrich and sharpen my earlier interpretation. I will place the translation by the great poet Li Kuixian 李魁賢 (Taiwan, born 1937), who wrote the first complete translation of ‘Sonnets to Orpheus’, taking into account English and French translations, at the centre of my analysis:¹⁰

8 Thanks to Yang Zhiyi, Na Schädlich and Song Xiaokun for their advise on the Chinese translation.

9 Cf. the entry on Feng Zhi in Internationales Germanistenlexikon 1800 – 1950, ed. Christoph König, 3 vols and one CD-ROM, Berlin, New York: de Gruyter 2003, vol. 1, 484–6.

10 Cf. Marián Gálik, Preliminary remarks on the reception of Rilke’s works in Chinese literature and criticism, in *Transkulturelle Rezeption und Konstruktion. Festschrift für Adrian Hsia*, ed. Monika Schmitz-Emans, Heidelberg 2004, pp. 145-152.

第廿七首

時間，這破壞者，真的存在嗎？
何時將搗毀立在靜謐山嶺上的城堡？
永屬於神的此心啊，
何時將受到造物的兇暴？

倘若命運願為我們作證，
我們真的是如此焦慮地脆弱？
深邃，滿懷承諾的童年
在根底——稍後——會平靜無波？

呵，無常的亡靈啣，
像是一陣煙，
通過毫無邪念的感受者。

正如我們這樣，漂泊者，
在永續的力量之間
我們值得神的使用。

(Translation by Li Kuixian)¹¹

11 The Sonnets to Orpheus, The Duino Elegies, translated in Li Er Ke 里爾克: Li Er Ke Shiji (I) 里爾克詩集(I) [Rilke: An Anthology of Rilke's Poems, vol. 1], with an introduction by Li Kuixian 李魁賢譯/導讀, Taipei: Guiguan 桂冠 1994. Cf. König 2014 for more information on the English and French mediations (see remark at the beginning).

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II.27

*Die Zeit, diese Zerstörerin, existiert sie wirklich?
Wann wird sie die auf dem stillen Berg stehende Burg
zerbrechen?*

*O das für immer den Göttern / dem Gott gehörende Herz,
wann wird (ihm) die Vergewaltigung des welterschöpfenden
Himmels widerfahren?*

*Würde das Schicksal für uns gern bezeugen wollen:
Sind wir wirklich so besorgt zerbrechlich?
Wird die tiefe, versprechungsvolle Kindheit
in den Wurzeln – ein wenig später – wellenlos-(be)ruhig(t)?*

*Ach, der Geist / die Totenseele ohne Beständigkeit
ist wie ein Rauch,
geht hindurch durch den den üblen Gedanken gänzlich
fremd Empfindenden.*

*Gerade wie wir sind, die ziellosen Wanderer,
zwischen den fortwährenden Kräften,
verdienen wir, von den Göttern
/ von Gott gebraucht zu werden.*

(Translated from the Chinese by Na Schädlich)

*First Quatrain:*¹² The threat of time is undeniable. In contrast to the original’s present tense, Li Kuixian writes in the future tense. This markedly diminishes the rhetorical aspect of the questions, and sets them up against the ‘really’ (‘wirklich’) of l. 1.¹³ This makes the opposition between time and the heart/castle insurmountable. It is only a matter of time, before the violation will occur.

(My contrasting interpretation) The German present tense signals in this poem a general statement, which can apply both to the past and to now. You could put it like this: when does the castle actually crumble? Li Kuixian thus excludes Rilke’s transformation of the powers hostile to the lyrical subject and their mutation into one of the lyrical subject’s poetical tasks.

Second quatrain: Fate is contrasted with time. A conditional clause determines the syntactical arrangement: if, the translation asks, fate attests for us, are we really so fragile – and, one must add, so exposed to time? (The Chinese translation makes no sense to the Chinese reader; only *superficially* so, you could say, if my hypothesis concerning the thrust of the

12 Here begins a fourth analysis of the poem, in the form of a commentary on the poem as retranslated into German from the Chinese (in itself a third form of the poem), which is followed by a fifth, in the form of my comments. This insistence on the poem asks, in all five analyses, for the conflicts engendered, in one way or another, by the meaning of Rilke’s poem. Thus, at the centre stands not a philosophically motivated aesthetics, exploring the possibility of translation, but rather translation as an explicative, philological activity. A *philological* aesthetics. This has also motivated the selection of the Chinese translation.

13 In contrast to Li Kuixian, Lü Yuan does not use the future tense. Cf. Li Er Ke 里尔克: Li Er Ke Shixuan 里尔克诗选 [A Selection of Rilke’s Poems], translated by Lü Yuan 绿原, illustrated edition (based on the first edition of 1996), Beijing: Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe 人民文学出版社 2006.

translation is correct). Fate belongs to a freer sphere than the heavens which create the world, which are bound to (physical) time (and hence affect the physical; see below, on the relevant distinction made by Thomas of Aquinas and known to Rilke). This positive view of fate seems to be decisive also in the translation of lines 7 and 8: childhood is read as threatened by time and destruction. Yet, it can still find peace. The translator seems to have chosen the image of the waveless rest with reference to the ‘apprehensive/worried’ (‘besorgt’) of l. 6. A tetrasyllabic word, a stylistic device from classical Chinese poetry, binds the characters for ‘flat’, ‘still’, and ‘wave’ together. A practically Buddhist sea appears before the eyes (but not the ears) of the reader. The word is not rendered acoustically.

Rilke, on the contrary, makes fate equivalent to time. In his poem fate reflects the fragility of the lyrical subject when exposed to time. This reflection, where fate appears as the one reflecting, serves to strengthen the blurted-out, yet ineffective, threat. It aims to make it believable. The contrast with the nurturing, saving childhood remains in place. This contrast is characterised by a means typical of the orphic poetics of the sonnets: the characterisation is indeed acoustic.

First tercet: Now exegesis clearly comes into play.¹⁴

¹⁴ Lü Yüan (see above, n. 13), renders this as ‘the ghost of the ephemeral’, in the sense of shortly-blooming flowers. Also in his case cultural appropriation sets in in the tercets. The pragmatic conviction (typical in Chinese communist ideology) not to give up trying to grasp the fleetingly good and fleetingly beautiful, determines the logic of the two last stanzas. This pragmatic attitude is turned against the artificial/artistic. Retranslated into German (by Na Schädlich) the passage goes like this:

*Aha, das Gespenst des Ephemeren,
aufgrund Leichtgläubigkeit und übermäßiger Gefühle,
geht gleichsam ein leichter Rauch verloren und unter.*

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The translator picks up on the Buddhist notion of impermanence (Pāli: *anicca*, Chin. *wuchang* 無常), which is said to be the reason behind all suffering, and perhaps the Chinese veneration of ancestors also plays a part. The word ‘Totenseele’ (‘soul of the dead’ (*wangling* 亡靈)), used to translate ‘Gespenst’/‘ghost’, could refer to such customs. The ‘spirit/soul of the dead without permanence’ goes straight through; that is, it does not affect him who is himself free from unclean thoughts. This refers to the renunciation of the right path implied by the Chinese word for ‘evil’ (*xie* 邪). Is this meant in a Confucian or in a Buddhist sense (cf. the comment by Confucius, that the ‘Book of Odes’, *Shijing* 詩經, is thinking free from any evil thoughts)?¹⁵ However that might be, the lyrical subject were himself (ethically) to blame if he strays from his destiny and is exposed to time. The tercet takes the form of an admonition.

Rilke’s use of everyday language must not be disdained, although this is effectively what the translator does. To ‘see ghosts’ means doubting the temporal, but, as a reality, the ghost (in the sense of sidereal spirits, or of an idea) refers

*Kraft unserer (wahren) Natur samt unserem Antreiben,
legen wir immer noch / dennoch Wert auf
die ausdauernden Kräfte der göttlichen Tradition.*

Lü Yuan fashions two sides into the tercets, one ephemeral and one lasting (‘andauernd’), and opts for the latter.

15 The translation makes use of the commentary of Zhu Xi 朱喜 (1130–1200) - the leading neo-Confucian intellectual (‘dao xue’, Learning of the Way) - on Confucius’s commentary on the ‘Book of Odes’: ‘The Three Hundred Odes’ are, in one word, “*si wu xie*” (Analects 2.2). This ‘*si wu xie*’ can be understood as ‘innocent thinking’ or ‘freedom from depraved thoughts.’ It is unclear, in this case, who is doing the thinking: the author of the Odes, the reader of the Odes, or the poems themselves.

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to a temporality, which is transient. Rilke writes in a poetic colloquial language, which he reshapes and reinterprets. The word ‘transient’ (‘vergänglich’) contains also the progress of the dancing (and to that extent, of the creative) poet. This is more than anywhere else made clear in Sonnet II:28. Thus the first tercet is a preparation, through the analogy between the purely accessible and the newly thought-out and formulated temporality. Rilke demonstrates how the admonition, which the translator Li Kuixian thinks of, can be taken seriously.

Second tercet: In the last stanza, a new world is constructed – a purer, higher world, close to the gods, perhaps even astrological. A world of constant, that is continually renewed powers. As long as the speakers travel in this world as wanderers, they deserve to be used or employed by God/the gods. Or even more directly: when they expose themselves to these powers, then they experience divine force.

In Rilke’s language passive drifting (‘Treiben’) is given an active meaning, and this in a poetic world. Not because they obey the stars, but rather because they construct them – that is, they create the stars as poetry, in order to be able to follow them – the authors can make mediatory use of sacral rituals. The divine world, which the translation only touches upon, is thought through down to its very poetic premises in the original.

Rilke’s Astrology

Poems such as Sonnet II:27, the sonnet of time and fate, are usually read as poetic (and thus, loftier) roads leading to that world with which the poem is concerned – that is, to time, to

fate, and eventually to the stars. However, the road taken by interpreters of the poem has often been too easy: they connect its themes with extra-textual matters, in order to supply the themes of the poem with a poetic structure. Rilke's involvement in the astronomy, astrology, and occultism of his day stands out as a convenient explanation for our poem. In this respect, an interpretative hierarchy of extra-poetic matters arises. Biography¹⁶ ends up below the history of discourses, and that, in turn, below ontology. Thus, Martina King (2005) rightly reconstructs Rilke's sidereal interests by looking at how a discourse common around 1900 made astrology and astronomy,¹⁷ and occultism¹⁸ and science, identical, by positing one as the imitation of the other. The most remarkable example was Baron Carl von du Prel, the founder of German spiritism and occultism. Rilke read his works, and du Prel was the *père spirituel* of the spiritist circle in Munich, in which Rilke participated. Du Prel defined occultism as the 'unknown natural science',¹⁹ which could justifiably be spoken of in scientific

16 Rilke's 'Briefe an einen jungen Dichter' (1904) is often cited on this subject: 'We must embrace our existence as fully as we possibly can; everything, also the unheard-of, must be possible within it' ('Wir müssen unser Dasein so weit, als es irgend geht, annehmen; alles, auch das Unerhörte, muß darin möglich sein': Kommentierte Ausgabe der Werke, vol. 4, p. 541).

17 Rainer Maria Rilke / Erwein von Aretin, *Der Dichter und sein Astronom. Der Briefwechsel zwischen Rainer Maria Rilke und Erwein von Aretin*, ed. Karl Otmar von Aretin and Martina King, Frankfurt am Main and Leipzig 2005.

18 Cf. Rainer Maria Rilke / Waldemar von Wasielewski, *Ein Briefwechsel, mit einer Einleitung von Michael von Wasielewski*, in: *Blätter der Rilke-Gesellschaft* 24, 2002, Frankfurt am Main and Leipzig 2002, S. 186-195.

19 'Unbekannte Naturwissenschaft', quoted from Martina King, *Nachwort. Astronomie und Dichtung*, in: King 2005 (see above, n. 17), pp. 154-204, at p. 175.

terms. The parallels of discourse detected by King are as follows: just like astrology, poetry takes the science of astronomy for granted. These parallels are taken as evidence that Rilke was in a better position to attain astrological goals by poetic means, 'as only he [the poet] can burst the limits of perception – whether magically or empirically communicated'.²⁰ This associative extension is governed by the indicative mood. The indicative forms the basis for widespread notions in German Studies about the deep-hermeneutic function of poetry. In this scholarly tradition, poetry becomes a privileged understanding of the deeper layers of humanity. From Dilthey to Heidegger and Gadamer, this is the kind of understanding that protagonists can reach. Also the Rilke expert Manfred Engel, editor of the annotated edition and the Rilke Compendium, is part of this tradition. Martina King's astrological analysis relies on him in one central aspect. Engel relates Rilke's sidereal efforts to anthropological objectives. Rilke's poetic astrology, so Engel argues, would allow insights into the deeper, 'mythopoietical' dimensions of man. 'The signifying function of the "sidereal"', writes Martina King, 'is changeable, and reaches from the frame of orientation of the possible relations between the subject and space [discourse is transferred into poetry] beyond the application of "constellations" as', and here King quotes Manfred Engel and Gadamer respectively, 'archetypically valid basic metaphors of the *condition humaine*'.²¹ So,

20 Ibid., p. 204: 'da nur er [der Dichter] die physiologischen Grenzen der Wahrnehmung – sei sie magisch oder empirisch vermittelt – sprengen kann'.

21 Ibid., p. 198: 'Die Zeichenfunktion des "Sternischen" ist wandelbar und reicht vom Orientierungsrahmen der möglichen Beziehungen zwischen Subjekt und Weltraum über den Einsatz von "Sterbildern" als archetypisch

poetry should have privileged access beyond the world, or beyond existence, or even both – you cannot get deeper or higher. Poetry has been made serviceable.²²

This way of applying ontological thought to Rilke’s sonnet can only work when it neglects the fact that the poetic argument conceives of itself as a *critical* argument, that is to say, as an argument confined to as radically shaped a poetic world as possible. In fact, three distinctions, current since Thomas of Aquinas’s treatises ‘De sortibus’ and ‘De iudiciis astrorum’, have influenced Sonnet II:27. This is a gradation between a) fate exerted on the body; b) the freedom of the spirit in the face of fate (related to Ptolemy’s dictum ‘sapiens homo dominatur astri’); and c) angels and demons, who can only be sensed through the stars, which they govern.²³ Thus, the celestial bodies function as higher, but still natural causes, and the constellations function not as forms, but are instrumentalised by separate, demonic substances. This is, however, radically transformed by Rilke in his sonnet. He turns this system into a poetic system: within his poetry, all effects are natural – also by the standards of modern critical consciousness. The stars figure in Rilke’s poems as abstract forms, which form the basis for art (be it dance or song), and which can approach those orphic powers (like demons or angels), which have been made

gültigen Basismetaphern der *condition humaine* hinaus’.

22 On the relationship between exegesis, interpretation, and reading, as well as insights which can even be found in the exegesis cf. Ch.: König, Hintergedanken. Zu einer Wissenschaftsgeschichte der Textlektüre, in: Geschichte der Germanistik. Mitteilungen 39/40, 2011, p. 38-42.

23 Cf. Loris Sturlese, Thomas von Aquin und die Mantik, Cologne 2011; on this structure of belief in the stars in poetry, cf. Hellmuth Reitz, Sternenglaube in der Dichtung, in: Welt und Wort 7, 1952, pp. 1-4.

possible in the poetry. He claims no less, but also no more.

Rilke's astrology flows into his poetry, and in that sense forms an analysis of the necessary conditions for astrology. Rilke was disappointed by the occult experiments in which he partook at the Duino Castle of Marie von Thurn und Taxis in 1912. Later he recalled the 'fatal clumsiness, half measures and ... countless misunderstandings' of the séances.²⁴ Rilke was less oriented towards the occult of his day, whose centre was in Munich, than towards the 'historical tradition of astrological astronomy', whose hero was Tycho Brahe, and whose mediator the astronomer and astrologer Erwein von Aretin.²⁵ Erwein von Aretin and Rilke corresponded between 1915 and 1922. Aretin had written his doctoral thesis in 1912 at the University of Göttingen, concerning his discovery of the 'Lambda Tauri' star in the constellation Taurus. He then worked at the Vienna observatory, and ended up abandoning astrology for contemporary history and political journalism. He was one of the early outspoken opponents of Hitler, and adopted a monarchist position. In line with the double-discourse pairing of astrology and astronomy, Aretin also prepared horoscopes (in 1922 also for Rilke's daughter Ruth).

Rilke analyses the necessary preconditions for astrology. He tests the extent to which he can recognise astrology as a science, and, thus, as a basis for his art. He would be able to recognise it as a science for his poetry, if the latter were also

²⁴ 'fatale Unbeholfenheiten, Halbheiten und [...] zahllosen Mißverständnisse': Rilke to Nora Purtscher-Wydenbruck, in his *Briefe*, ed. Rilke-Archiv in Weimar with Ruth Sieber-Rilke and Karl Altheim, 3 vols, Frankfurt am Main 1987, vol. 3, p. 872.

²⁵ King 2005 (see above, n. 17), p. 192.

scientific, that is if it involves reading in the sense of reading a text. Aretin presented him with this reading, when he read the starry sky as a book. In the middle of the First World War, of which he was beginning to despair, Aretin wrote to Rilke: 'when our ignorance of this oldest, gigantic book has closed as worthless, might an attempt to reopen it not seem inappropriate, now that our wisdom has reached its limits'.²⁶ When the stars are legible, then Rilke can make use of the resulting lore of interpretation. But to what extent is it a science?

Rilke's attempt to make astrology functional is predicated on the relationship between astrology and poetry as the relationship between science and art. He first set out, with the help of Aretin, to acquire the necessary basic knowledge in astronomy and mathematics. His textbook was to be the 'Accomplishments of Modern Astronomy based on the Original Research of Leading Scholars' by Hans Hermann Kritzinger, both an astrologer and an astronomer himself: 'clearly I have gone too far from disciplined understanding internally, so I will have to turn myself small and into a schoolboy for some time, and, frankly, I've been thirsting for that. I would find it quite useful if I could find a student, somewhat well taught, who might simply read through a book such as Kritzinger's with me, and not let me leave a single line which I have only half understood'.²⁷ Yet, all too quickly, it seems, Rilke subjects astrology

²⁶ Ibid., p. 68: 'wenn unsere Unwissenheit dieses riesenhafte und älteste Buch einmal als wertlos zugeklappt hat, so mag ein Versuch es wieder zu öffnen zu einer Zeit nicht unangemessen erscheinen, wo unsere Weisheit an ihrem Ende steht'.

²⁷ Rilke/Aretin (see above, n. 17), 14.3.1915, p. 36: 'ich bin offenbar von diszipliniertem Einsehen zu weit abgekommen innerlich, da muss ich mich schon klein machen und Schüler werden für eine Zeit und, offengestanden,

to his poetic interests – and tries to widen its scope of application for his own purposes. Two weeks later he writes to Aretin, interpreting his scientific impulses: ‘No matter if this leads to astronomy or not. Somehow (it seems to me) it is in play anyway, also where we apparently leave it out (after all, it is properly an art of relations)’.²⁸ As a science of forms, astrology contains the promise of a – to use a term from Schlegel – ‘totalisable’ (‘totalisierbare’) science, and thereby of art (cf. Rilke’s proposed experiment with the *satura coronalis*, the coronal suture).

Rilke tries to put natural sciences into use in a ‘philologising’ activity, that is as textual scholarship (this helps to explain the extraordinary explanatory power of Schlegel’s project of a ‘philosophy of philology’). To ‘philologise’ means to construe the object of study (in this case, the stars) from the points of view of the whole, necessity, and self-reflection.²⁹ His ‘Reiter-Sonett’ (‘Reiter’: sagittarius) is based on a reality, an astronomic-astrological phenomenon, but takes its name as its starting-point. Thus, seeing becomes reading. And both are productive in his view, to the extent that both express an inner experience. This is how the Reiter-Sonett begins:

ich bin ganz durstig danach. Ich stelle es mir schon ganz nützlich vor, wenn sich etwa ein einigermaßen unterrichteter Student fände, der mit mir ein Buch wie das Kritzinger’sche einfach gemeinsam läse und mir keine Zeile durchgehen ließe, die nur halb begriffen bleibt.’

28 Ibid., 1.4.1915, p. 37: ‘Gleichviel ob es hernach noch zur Astronomie kommen mag oder nicht. Irgendwie (will mir scheinen) ist sie im Spiel, auch wo wir sie scheinbar daraus lassen (ist sie doch recht eigentlich die Kunst der Verhältnisse)’.

29 Cf. Christoph König, Grenzen der Cyklisation. Friedrich Schlegels Notate ›Zur Philologie‹ als Sehepunkt für den Roman ›Lucinde‹, in his *Philologie der Poesie*, Berlin: Akademie-Verlag (forthcoming in 2013).

'Giebt es wirklich die Zeit, die zerstörende?'

*Sieh den Himmel. Heißt kein Sternbild ›Reiter‹?
Denn dies ist uns seltsam eingepägt:
dieser Stolz aus Erde. Und ein Zweiter,
der ihn treibt und hält und den er trägt.*

*Ist nicht so, gejagt und dann gebändigt,
diese sehnige Natur des Seins? (ll. 37)*

*

*See the sky. Is there no constellation
called "Rider"? For this is strangely impressed
on us: this earthly pride. And a second,
who drives and holds it and whom it bears.*

*Is not the sinewy nature of our being
just like this, spurred on and then reined in?*

(transl. Herter Norton, p. 37)

What Rilke tries to grasp in his reading, is the meaning of the constellations. This meaning, in his skies, is equivalent to the power which urges him to write. It is an inner power ('eingepägt'). This process becomes particularly clear in times of crisis. On 7 August 1915 Rilke writes to Erwein von Aretin: 'under the circumstances, I am free, idle, if you want to put it in harsh terms. The reasons for my gloominess, which you're lovely enough to care about, is surely fundamentally to be attributed to this sense of "being free", in this lack of

an inner command or calling, to which our hopeless kind is destined. Pathmos [the island of John the apocalyptic seer] is an arid island, and its aspect dreary, when one isn't struck with that most monstrous dictate, and can take it down with both hands...'.³⁰ The lore of the stars was to open up that road. But 'the attempts at astronomy surely came from an instinct for an antidote [against that sense of being free]. But we aimed too high, that drove us into the vague and limitless'.³¹ Rilke could not achieve with astronomy what had seemed possible in astrology without giving up astronomy.

Eventually, Rilke gave up studying astrology. He was no longer convinced that it could be justified scientifically, that is astronomically. Instead, he sought to legitimate it by other means, that is in a poetic form, which is necessary to man.³²

30 Rilke/Aretin (see above, n. 17), p. 47: 'ich bin verhältnismäßig frei, unbeschäftigt, wenn man es streng ausdrücken will. Die Gründe meiner Bedrücktheit, um die Sie sich so liebenwürdig besorgen, liegen wohl am Tiefsten in diesem ›Freisein‹, in diesem Ausbleiben des inneren Befehls und Berufs, auf den unsereiner hoffnungslos angewiesen ist. Pathmos ist eine dürre Insel, und es ist ein trübes Ansehen auf ihr, wenn einen nicht das ungeheuerste Diktat überstürzt, dass man ihm mit beiden Händen nachschreibe ...'.

31 Ibid.: 'Die Versuche nach der Astronomie hin mögen indessen wirklich aus einem antidotischen Instinkte hervorgegangen sein. Wir haben zu hoch angefangen, das trieb uns dann auch ins Vague und Grenzenlose.'

32 Rilke held Waldemar von Wasielewski's book 'Telepathie und Hellsehen. Versuche und Betrachtungen über ungewöhnliche seelische Fähigkeiten' (1921) in high regard. He expressed his admiration in a letter to the author from between March and June 1922, that is immediately after the composition of the 'Sonnets to Orpheus'. His reading of the book was directed towards a particular goal: he wished to integrate the inexplicable ('das Unerklärliche') into his (poetic) world. This, in the end, had 'obliged him to an artistic effort' (Rilke/Wasielewski, see above n. 18, p. 191). He recognised three phases in the apprehension of occult knowledge: ambi-

Rilke writes on 19 August 1915 to Aretin: 'For all that the error of man has always been crude and even pretentious, whenever he took the acts and dreams of nature as a reason for terror or as a warning, this error somehow corrects the aimlessness of our mind, and strengthens those circumstances, to which we have been assigned, no matter how temporary they might be'.³³ Thus, astrology serves to strengthen some of the formal constitution (if on a different plane) of man, for all that its character is mutable. It is mutable, Rilke says, because our knowledge still stands in a process of acquiring knowledge.³⁴ For him, as a creator, astrology has no power of persuasion

guity, inexplicability, and scientific illumination. Wasielewski had succeeded in bringing occult phenomena from the plane of the ambiguous to the plane of the inexplicable. Should science be unreachable, Wasielewski at least recognised that such phenomena possessed poetic meaning, and could at least attain validity in poetry. Rilke was particularly impressed by Wasielewski's view that telepathy and clairvoyance were the 'two great and beautiful powers of the human soul' (ibid., p. 188: 'beiden großen und schönen Kräften der menschlichen Seele'). Aesthetics and meaning/reality are characterised by the heavy word 'power' ('Kraft'). 'Philologising' forms the basis also for the occult. Cf. however Gisli Magnusson, Rilke und der Okkultismus, in: *Metaphysik und Moderne. Von Wilhelm Raabe bis Thomas Mann; Festschrift für Børge Kristiansen*, ed. Andreas Blödorn and Søren R. Fauth, Wuppertal 2006, S. 144-172, who counts Rilke as one of the occultists.

³³ Rilke / Aretin (see above, n. 17), p. 65: 'So grob und schließlich anmaßend der Fehler des Menschen seit jeher war, wenn er Erscheinungen der über ihn fort handelnden und träumenden Natur sich zum Schrecken oder zur Warnung nahm, irgendwie korrigiert dieser Fehler diese Ziellosigkeit unseres Gemüths und bestärkt die Zusammenhänge, auf die wir nun einmal hier angewiesen sind, so vorläufig sie sonst auch sein mögen'.

³⁴ Cf. the lines critical of the acquisition of knowledge in the Reiter-Sonett: 'Doch freue uns eine Weile nun, / der Figur zu glauben' (ll.11, ll. 13-14; transl. Herter Norton, see above n. 3, p. 37: 'But let us now be glad a while / to believe the figure').

on a scientific plane, but its underlying principle is important, because it is poetic. Rilke's analysis ends in two results: first, astrology can only be written poetically. Given his condition, that it should be a textual science, this is consistent. Second, the principle behind a poetic astrology must be dynamic, as implied already by Rilke's quest for moving constellations.

A poetic astrology is no such thing anymore. Rilke has turned the referents of fate and star inward. In the sonnet, the poet is driven by an Orpheus who forms stars. Orpheus is impossible to grasp, but this quality is not indicative of a transcendent reality. Rather, it has a transcendental, critical function. It is in this sense that Rilke makes use of astrological knowledge in the sonnets and letters. Quite how radical this transformation is, can only become clear to the reader who follows closely the permutation of the meanings of words throughout the poems. Commonly, however, interpreters impose their own opinions on the meaning of words, to achieve clarity. They argue as follows: the poem opens a door to the depths of those notions which are contained in the words used by Rilke. Words are understood as concepts, which the poem in turn explores. This, however, can only occur at the cost of the linguistic materiality of the works, that is, their syntax.

Critique of Interpretations: Or, How Gadamer Cures Rilke with a Comma

Gadamer's view of Rilke can be studied from the vantage point of a single comma. He proposed to introduce a comma to the poem, in a place where there is none. This sugges-

tion disregards the poem's syntax, and therefore acts contrary to material hermeneutics. Gadamer's considerations on the subject of 'Poetry and Punctuation' ('Poesie und Interpunktion', 1961)³⁵ bring the provocation that his hermeneutics imply to the word-for-word fidelity of philological hermeneutics to a point. This occurs in an exercise which illustrates his classic 'Truth and Method', which had been published in the previous year (1960).

In 'Truth and Method' Gadamer developed the position that transmission and tradition are more important than the written text.³⁶ By 'transmission', Gadamer does not mean the text as transmitted in material terms, but rather the sphere of meaning, in which a word acquires its true meaning and ideality. This sphere is constituted by the 'continuity of memory'.³⁷ The reality of a given meaning, freed from the 'manuscript as a piece of the past',³⁸ is argued for within a dialogue-oriented model of understanding. Thus, the 'written transmission' which is embedded in a tradition of memory, is associated with the spoken. Just like dialogue, a reading can cancel out that alienation or reduction, which a written text adds to what is being said in it – translation is a case in point, a deterring example of this kind of rational

35 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. 9: *Ästhetik und Poetik. Hermeneutik im Vollzug*, Tübingen 1993, pp. 282-288.

36 Cf. above all the chapter on 'Sprache als Medium der hermeneutischen Erfahrung', in: Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 1: *Hermeneutik I. Wahrheit und Methode. Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*, Tübingen 1990, pp. 387-400 (see also id., 'Language as the Medium of Hermeneutic Experience', in his: *Truth and Method*, transl. J. Weinsheimer and D. G. Marshall, 2nd rev. ed., New York and London 1994, pp. 385-406.

37 Gadamer 1990 (see above n. 36), p. 394.

38 Ibid.

‘highlighting’ (‘Überhellung’).³⁹ Gadamer formulates his argument as follows: ‘Thus written texts present the real hermeneutical task. Writing (‘Schriftlichkeit’) is self-alienation. Overcoming it, reading the text, is thus the highest task of understanding. Even the pure signs of an inscription can be seen properly and articulated correctly only if the text can be transformed back into language. As we have said, however, this transformation always establishes a relationship to what is meant, to the subject matter being discussed. Here the process of understanding moves entirely in a sphere of meaning mediated by the verbal tradition.’⁴⁰

Gadamer – with explicit reference to his book ‘Truth and Method’ – brings up the second line of Rilke’s Sonnet II:27 from the ‘Sonnets to Orpheus’:

39 On the philosophical preconditions and the consequences for textual analysis of historical distance, cf. Jean Bollack, *Sinn wider Sinn. Wie liest man? Gespräche mit Patrick Llored*, transl. Renate Schlesier, Göttingen 2003, pp. 86–89.

40 Gadamer 1994 (transl. Weinsheimer and Marshall, see above n. 36), p. 392. Original in Gadamer 1990 (see above n. 36), p. 394: ‘So ist fixierten Texten gegenüber die eigentliche hermeneutische Aufgabe gestellt. Schriftlichkeit ist Selbstentfremdung. Ihre Überwindung, das Lesen des Textes, ist also die höchste Aufgabe des Verstehens. Selbst den reinen Zeichenbestand einer Inschrift etwa vermag man nur richtig zu sehen und zu artikulieren, wenn man den Text in Sprache zurückzuverwandeln vermag. Solche Rückverwandlung in Sprache [...] stellt aber immer zugleich ein Verhältnis zum Gemeinten, zu der Sache her, von der da die Rede ist. Hier bewegt sich der Vorgang des Verstehens ganz in der Sinnsphäre, die durch die sprachliche Überlieferung vermittelt wird’.

‘Giebt es wirklich die Zeit, die zerstörende?’

*Giebt es wirklich die Zeit, die zerstörende
Wann, auf dem ruhenden Berg, zerbricht sie die Burg?
(Il. 1f)*

*

*Does it really exist, time the destroyer?
When, on the mountain at rest, will it crumble the castle?*

Gadamer’s proposal is as follows: to insert a comma before the accusative ‘die Burg’, and in that way turn it into a nominative, which in turn changes the transitive verb ‘zerbrechen’ (whose object is ‘die Burg’) into an intransitive verb (with ‘die Burg’ as the subject). Thus, in translation, the resulting line is ‘When, on the mountain at rest, will it crumble, the castle?’. The proposed emendation is in line with Gadamer’s philosophy, which gives preference to speech and dialogue in understanding. For Gadamer, sonority and rhythm belong to the category of dialogue, which leads to the meaning of a text. Gadamer takes his impression of the sonority and rhythm of these lines as his starting point. They take priority over punctuation, which he counts among ‘the conventions of *Schriftlichkeit*’⁴¹ – it is a reading-aid provided by the author, no more. Gadamer perceives the second line to be ‘chanted to the point of breathlessness’,⁴² and in need of a rhythmic break before the phrase ‘die Burg’.

Thus, the faculty of perceiving a rhythm is immediately connected to the discovery of meaning – for Gadamer, they be-

41 Gadamer 1993 (see above, n. 35), p. 282.

42 Ibid., p. 285.

long to the same sphere. Through the insertion of a comma, Gadamer creates an optional reading out of two, an option within which Rilke himself has already decided. By insisting on contradictory options for reading the phrase, Gadamer invalidates Rilke's choice. These two options refer to time, 'die Zeit'. The first option (a) sees time as the actor in the 'zerbrechen', the crumbling of l. 2, whereas the second option (b) begins with 'zerbrechen' as an intransitive verb. Gadamer chooses the second option, and claims to follow Rilke's intention by doing so. He justifies his choice by arguing that time and transience are not violent and destructive, but rather signify the normality of the fleeting and of decay. This is also what I mean in my discussion of the word 'Treibenden' (l. 11, 'the driving'/'the drifting') in the last tercet. For Gadamer – who adduces a general, not just a philosophical judgment here – the transience of man is not a violent act on the part of time (which would then crumble things). In fact, this violence is non-existent, if the transient is normal, as the last tercet implies. Gadamer proposes to follow his experience: 'Is our transience, in the end, of a quite different kind: not a destruction, which occurs when an exhausted resistance finally succumbs, but rather a "regular" process, more like a custom, that is something nourished and cultivated, in any case something without a culprit or an originator, also not "time"?'

The irony is that this argumentation annuls Gadamer's earlier defence of the priority of rhythm, and indeed the need for his imaginary comma. Actually, Gadamer's account (his perception of the sound of the poem) is based on a reading of the poem which ignores all punctuation – in conjunction with the whole poem. The rhetorical question of the first line applies also to the second, and the question is continued in the

next quatrain ('Are we really so apprehensively fragile / as fate would have us believe?', ll. 5f). Even without a comma, the rhetorical question of l. 2 still manages to achieve the conditions for that comma, when Gadamer's philosophy of time is applied. The castle does not crumble, because time the destroyer does not really exist. The milder view of time as proposed by Gadamer is rhetorically confirmed. The comma was supposed to demonstrate the understanding which follows from the rhetorical question of l. 1 (and also in l. 2) anyway – there was no need for Gadamer to insert it.

Nonetheless, by not including a comma, the poem disdains this consequence. For all that Gadamer's reading would have been better, if he had refrained from the addition of a comma (if he had recognised the rhetorical question), it would still not have taken his interpretation far enough. This is precisely the point I have been investigating: at what point, does the prejudice of discourse, philosophy, or indeed theology, set in?

For the poem, in rejecting 'destruction', develops a new sense of time, which Gadamer cannot reach by means of the general (philosophical) prejudice of his argument. He cannot conceive of a time, which, so the poems says, should be in harmony with the poet's 'Treiben' ('driving'/'drifting'). This reveals the methodological premises of the dialogue-model: if a work is preceded by an oral agreement with tradition (so the model goes), then the work itself contains a deficit. It is up to the interpreter to correct this deficit. Gadamer's theory does not account for the possibility that a work, by taking up a position with respect to the traditions of time and fate, that is by the author's decision to break up with a common sense position, acquires its meaning. This productive rupture also concerns views the poem first presents (to, later, overcome

them).

But this is exactly what my reading shows: Sonnet II:27 brings the debate about time and fate into a poetic sphere, which is in turn opposed to fate and its 'time', and serves to overcome them. The castle proves to be the citadel of the writing poet, protected from time (in its new sense).⁴³

But what purpose does the ideology of the reading based on sonority serve? What is the purpose of restricting one's own (that is Gadamer's own) reading? Sonority and prosody are stations on the road to *common sense*, which is the very foundation of Gadamer's reading. They are in agreement with the broader thesis about human connections ('im Einklang', *sit venia verbo*), and open up the door to it. Sonority and prosody entail a philosophical depth-structure. The psychological medium should be 'feeling' (which Gadamer takes as his starting point in the essay 'Mythopoetische Umkehrung in Rilkes Duineser Elegien'). By this, Gadamer means a textual quality, which Rilke purportedly aims for. The 'sonority', which is understood only in its technical, prosodic sense, embodies a kind of atmosphere of the text, which is made possible by 'feeling'. And this results in the decisive jump of thought: feeling itself is the sum of judgments of perception. Such judgments can go like this in Gadamer: 'But everyone knows that pain strives inwards, and thereby goes deeper'.⁴⁴ The sentence refers to the connection between 'night' and 'pain' in the fourth elegy.⁴⁵ Or 'A child refuses to hand over that

⁴³ Ibid., p. 285.

⁴⁴ Mythopoetische Umkehrung in Rilkes Duineser Elegien in *ibid.*, 289–305.

⁴⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 299.

which chokes it'⁴⁶ – this is meant to explain the following lines from the same elegy: 'Who makes his death / from gray bread that grows hard, - or leaves / it there inside his rounded mouth, jagged as the core / of a sweet apple?' [Translation by Albert Ernest Flemming].⁴⁷ Common experience, so Gadamer thinks, enters the feelings of the poem, which are transformed, and expressed in sounds (and in poetic language in general). The poet confirms that which he says in the depth of experience, immediately – by appealing to feelings. Experience confirmed in this way turns into mythical experience, and because this confirmation takes poetic form, Gadamer speaks of 'mythopoetics', Mythopoiesie. By a sweeping judgment, certain of Rilke's stylistic mannerisms observed by Gadamer are made to serve this function. But they basically remain unknown to him, and he does not feel the need to go into detail. In the end, Gadamer bases himself on a particular educational and cultural tradition, and to the particular taste developed within this tradition.

The purpose of a hermeneutic interpretation, should therefore, according to Gadamer, be a reversal of the mythopoietic transformation by Rilke, as the experience present in the feeling of the poetic object, a recovery of the now ennobled cultivated learning and experience. The concept of 'presence' is central to this conception, because it provides a means of avoiding the analysis of the evidence by which the written purportedly expresses the felt. In order to explicate difficult passages, reference should be made to colloquial sentences, in-

46 Ibid., p. 298.

47 Rainer Maria Rilke, *Sämtliche Werke*, Frankfurt am Main, vol. 1, 1955, pp. 697–700, at p. 699.

stead of trying to reconstruct the work in a historical sense. A literally non-committal project.

The Philosophy of Philology

So, what authority can decide whether a work lies before us as a textual whole; whether we have actually grasped the meaning of the work correctly; and whether the work is really great, and important enough to be interpreted in the first place? We decided here to, first, broaden our spectrum beyond the poem itself to include the whole cycle of sonnets (critique); second, to find out the meaning of a poetic critique of fate (hermeneutics); and third, judged the work to be great, and therefore capable of generating idiomatic subtleties (value judgment, rhetoric). Which is the critical capacity, who considers the whole, the hermeneutic which looks towards the meaning, the judgement, which can legitimate the work rhetorically? Which is, if one were to summarise the three activities of critique, hermeneutics, and rhetoric into one, the interpretative authority? Or, to use a term from Schlegel, the ‘philologising’ capacity? Again, after mentioning Friedrich Schlegel and his notes ‘On Philology’, I refer back to our reading session and to our colloquium at the Consortium.⁴⁸ We noted there a philological paradox: a philology which is handled artistically, annihilates itself. Hope rests in an intelligence, which is inherent to the reading. Schlegel already alluded to this in one of his notes, which is now familiar to us: ‘But when it [philology] does not take its purpose as to lie

48 Cf. above n. 1.

in itself as an activity: then all artistry, that yet remains in it, will be lost'. Schlegel's fragment means that all artistry, which (still) is in us in the reading, can only be realised, when we do not aim towards a particular purpose. This excludes also purposes of argumentation. That is why I have not pursued a theoretical consideration of whether you can learn about the mantic from philological divination. Instead, I put a reading at the beginning, and thereafter thought about it. So my answer to the question about the interpretative authority will be as follows: *the authority in question is an insisting reading*. The insistent part is necessary, because only by insisting can we insure that the reading proves an improvement. In such a reading, the discourse with other interpreters becomes central, because a critique of the conditions behind the readings of others serves to sharpen one's own intuition, in the long run. The argument with positions in the history of how a poem has been read therefore forms part of an insisting reading. It takes the place of a preconceived theory of literature or culture. My examples were the translation by Li Kuixian, as well as historians of astrology among Rilke scholars and Gadamer's speculations. And also this concluding reflection, which proposes a theory of practice, must itself become an element of the insistent reading. I have left this answer unsaid until now, because even insisting must not become the conceptual purpose of a reading.

