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EXAMINING RILKE'S *DUINO ELEGIES*

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Abstract

An exploration of the ways in which the *Duino Elegies* manages to speak in a variety of voices and yet operate as a coherent poem which could have a great deal to say to contemporary writers who must deal with overcoming obstacles of expression. An English translation of the poem also offers opportunities to examine the complexities of expression and meaning, despite translation, thus illuminating different paths to lyric depths

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Preface

Of course, we know that not every translation of what is a masterpiece in its own native language keeps faith with the original. Regrettably, more often than not it lacks even common or garden accuracy (if this were impossible, teachers of languages and judges of translation would have no work), not to ask the dangerous question whether it reaches the “esthetic” level of the original, or gives us as much as a hint of sensibility embodied in it, its style, that is: and style is, after all, the very life of descriptions, of the portrayal of conflicts, and of moral perceptions. And yet, in what an impoverished state of mind would we live if, alarmed by the unavoidable shortcomings of all translations, we had ever asked whether there really was such a text...that undertook to acquaint us with the changing perspectives of the human mind.

--Erich Heller (235)

Rainer Maria Rilke’s *Duino Elegies* has whispered to me, over the years, during some of the most difficult times of my life. The poems, or poem (some argue that all ten of the poems may be read as one cohesive poem), have resonated in my mind and heart for nearly a decade, and Rilke’s words, translated, have taught me how to face life’s most difficult obstacle: acceptance of your own mortality and the mortality of those you love. The poems in the book deal with the conflict between the desire for some sort of immortality and the knowledge that life as we know it is merely a temporary state and that the only future for all of us is death. In the immortal continuum of the universe, all that precedes and follows life is oblivion. In my life, I have evaded thoughts of my own mortality as much as I could, except in those moments when I found I had to question the nature of life, such as when a loved one develops a terminal illness and/or passes away, and especially when a child dies.

Since Rilke's poetry has offered so much emotion, knowledge, questions, and varying forms of understanding to me over the years, I thought it was only appropriate to choose the book as the topic of my college swan song: the thesis. First, I had to overcome the obstacle of translation. Because I have no knowledge or understanding of the German language, I have decided to deal with one translation as its own unique work of art. The David Young translation was the one I read so many years ago that touched me so deeply, so I decided to use that specific translation for my analysis. With the understanding that my approach was somewhat limited, I began my thorough analysis of *Duino Elegies*.

I spent countless hours dissecting every word in the Young translation. Sometimes I spent an exorbitant amount of time on just one passage, trying to glean every little bit of understanding I could from it. Even with all that may be lost in translation, Young's version is very dense. After a couple of months of analysis, I thought I understood things well enough to write a somewhat informed and intelligent analysis, that is, except for the final elegy. The "Tenth Elegy" differed from the other elegies in so many ways in voice and tone, and my reaction to it was drastically different than to the previous nine. I would have argued that the last "Elegy" is the most problematic of them all, but then something happened which changed my perspective and understanding. Rilke's seeming preoccupation with death became strikingly apparent to me, and I started to understand why. William H. Gass, biographer and translator of Rilke's work, explains the man's obsessive conflict about his older sister who died which lead to a lifelong, somewhat, morbid interest with death and dying: "Not only did it seem that a girl had to die to make room in the world for him, but it also seemed that this

otherwise sad prematurity preserved the child's possibilities along with her innocence" (107). Rilke was conceived to replace his sister who died when she was 2, and he was aware of that fact. Death opened a door of understanding to Rilke which his native language, or any language, was not equipped to communicate fully, so manipulation of the language through poetic means was necessary to express a glimpse of that meaning.

The notion of death preserving life and all its possibilities had been foreign to me until I received a life-changing phone call. As I hung up the phone at 2:47 pm on Monday April 19, 2010, tears were pouring from my eyes. An emptiness took hold of my stomach immediately, and all I could say was "No, no, no, no, not her, no." Even writing this, I can feel that unhappy tingle in my sinuses which is always the precursor to a torrent of tears falling freely, uncontrollably. The obsessive conflict in me had begun. One of my closest and most dearly cherished friends had died of a massive coronary at the age of 32, driving her 13 year-old daughter to school. She was driving on the highway, and, in true Abbey style, she pulled over to the side of the road so her death would not cause any undue pain or accidents, and died there in front of her daughter. Abbey Atkinson dedicated her entire life to the greater good, and, though there is still need out there and work for her to do, her work in this world is now done, incomplete.

Her death is senseless to me. I cannot comprehend why she should be taken at such a young age, and accepting her loss was something I did not have the power to do. So Abbey became one of Rilke's young dead to me, and that theme from the book made more sense to me than ever before. Abbey is immortalized in my mind in every way; her goodness, ambitions, and even her faults have become endearing to me. She has been preserved, as she was on April 19, 2010, in the abyss of my mind and in the minds of all

who knew her. All of the things Abbey had planned to do with her life are now myths of what could have been. We will all construct the stories of what Abbey would have been capable of if only she had lived. These legends we are creating in our minds are what will make Abbey transcend death to achieve a touch of immortality. My act of writing this immortalizes her memory to those who read this. But I still cannot fathom what Abbey is going through at this very moment. Did she just cease to exist? Every logical part of me resists imagining what oblivion my dear friend is facing right now, but I have an indescribable desire to know, as well as a terror to know, the answer to the question: Where is she? I know her physical body is ashes in an urn. Where is the goodness that filled her? Where is that spirit for life that she contained while breathing? Where are all of the things that I simply cannot believe vanished in seconds with her breath? Her qualities live on in my mind, yet I know they cannot. Am I in denial that such goodness could not just simply disappear? I cannot fully express what my reaction to this situation was and continues to be. Death confounds me.

I received the news in the midst of working on this project. Until 2:30 pm on Monday April 19, I believed I understood the struggle and the central conflict of the book, except for the last elegy which felt incompatible somehow with the rest of the elegies, as I mentioned. But after I received the phone call, the totality of the *Elegies* took on an entirely different meaning to me, especially the last elegy. The “Tenth Elegy” was the most problematic point of *Duino Elegies* because I could not understand the transition. I continue to believe that the voice and nature of this poem is inextricably different than in all of the others; however, I now understand it has to be that way, because any mortal understanding of death is problematic and partial at best.

Death is not something we have a language for. Even through translation, the *Duino Elegies* resonates with the fundamental difficulty of any form of language to decipher what is felt. Emotions do not occur in language, nor does anything found in nature or made by man. Language is a code where a common ground has been established in an attempt to express meaning. To be human is to fumble our way through living, and we must come to terms with the fact that, as Young's translation states, "that we aren't especially/ at home/ in the deciphered world" (20).

Grief, especially when confronted by the death of a loved one, seems inexpressible, and we struggle with the symbols of language to carve out some morsel of understanding. We all muddle with the signs and symbols of communication to try to come close to the thing we are trying to express; even the most skilled writers slave over word choice. What the *Elegies* offer us—even through the loss of meaning that occurs in the act of translation—is a rung on the ladder of understanding the difficulties of accepting all human limitations, and the desire for immortality because of the fear of impending death.

It is through his use of the young dead, heroes, lovers, puppets, mothers, poets and, of course, the rose that Rilke was able to express a speck of understanding of the nature of life and death, so instead we must embrace the knowledge that death is the constant and life is a mere blip. The *Elegies* teach us that humans are the lucky ones, because we have been blessed with the gift of the awareness of our own mortality, and in Rilke's translated words, I am able to comprehend that death, as painful as it is for those still living, is a gift because it both creates and preserves everything that makes us

human. It is through my grief that I am able to understand a little more of the meaning of the *Elegies*.

I have not yet found the language to express the feelings evoked by my friend's sudden and tragic death, but have the desire, no, the need, to try to communicate them. This is what Rilke struggled with; death clearly affected him and his perception of life so that he wrapped himself in his grief and wore it like his clothes. Only through his obsession were the *Duino Elegies* possible. Everyone knows that confusion brought about when facing their own mortality, so people go to great lengths to avoid the thought. Because thinking too long on the inevitable loss of "self" makes it difficult to enjoy life, there is a very deep, or as Rilke would say, ancient, fear that manifests itself when we think too long on the meaning of life.

Language, any language, struggles to express exact meaning, and the difficulty of this makes the "self" seem completely isolate from everything in the universe, even while continuing to be a part of the universe; therein lies another human conflict—how to be an individual while being a part of the whole. How does one refrain from being lost? How does one continue to be significant in the sea of so many others? Why is there life if there is no significance to it beyond our always incomplete understanding? Ancient questions which can never be answered fully are what Rilke struggled with.

The *Duino Elegies* subtly communicates the need for the individual self to let go. If we let go of the distinctions that human kind is compelled to make, we will live more fully in the breaths we take. Every exhalation, despite the fact that as the air moves in and

out of our bodies we die a little more with each movement, is our opportunity to become more than just human, more than mortal.

It is in light of the desire to be more than human that I dedicate the work of my college swan song to the memory of Abbey Atkinson. May she live forever in my words, and penetrate the minds of all who read this. She *is* the angel, hero, mother, child, young, dead, lover, acrobat, and rose. And most of all, she *is* my friend.

Examining Rilke's *Duino Elegies*

Art affects people, in ways that nothing else can, and that is what makes it important, not because some authority tells you it is; rather, it's how art affects the "self" that makes it so significant. Since the first time I was exposed to the words of *Duino Elegies*, some eight or nine years ago, the power of Rainer Maria Rilke's poetry, translated by David Young, instilled in me a deeper understanding of my own existence with all of the joys, fears, sorrows, and delights that accompany life. Never before had I been so powerfully moved by a piece of literature, and I fell hopelessly in love.

Ever since I was a child, I have always written poetry. I did it to express things in different ways. It was natural to me. I don't really know why I started, but I know how much I enjoyed it. For the first time in my life, when I read Rilke, I started to understand why I was so driven to write poetry. This understanding, however, is not easily articulated. It was and continues to be a great gift which Rilke's ideas have so generously given to me.

Over the course of several years, Rilke's poetry whispered to me. Situations presented themselves to me where my limited insight as a human being needed something more to understand the natural occurrences of life that sometimes defied reasonable explanations. It was Rilke's profound explication of life, despite loss of meaning through translation, as presented in Young's *Duino Elegies*, which enabled me at a number of difficult times to come to grips with that which resisted my inadequate logic. It is that very human desire for explanation that Rilke's poetry speaks to, and no doubt every translation offers different clues to the profundity of Rilke's ideas. Since language itself is limited, and even Rilke couldn't articulate his ideas so everyone would come to precise shared meaning, I feel compelled to abandon all efforts to find the true

“meaning” or the “why” of *Duino Elegies*, and concentrate, instead, on what they do. As Toni Morrison said: “since why is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in how” (Morrison 6). My purpose here is to illustrate how the *Duino Elegies* is important, to me, as a paradigm for all forms of artistic expression and for our varied and various emotional responses to it.

When I was faced with the decision of what topic I was going to choose to base this project on, I did not hesitate to choose *Duino Elegies*, because of the powerful influence it has had on my life. I knew my choice was going to present inexplicable obstacles, simply because of the nature of working with translations. However, I realized very quickly in my research that I needed to choose one translation and deal with it as an independent and unique work of art. Instead of troubling myself with the problems of translation, I am going to examine David Young’s translation as an autonomous work. I am going to assume the Deconstructionists are correct, that meaning is boundless, and move forward with examining how the translated words do what they do so profoundly.

Duino Elegies is written as ten separate and distinct poems; however, to read the *Elegies* consecutively is to go through a process of human transformation. Indeed, if you read the book with a critical eye, you will end up a person altered in one way or another, and I suspect that even the worst of translations has much to offer the critical reader. Perhaps my decision is limited in its approach; nonetheless, my hope is that my decision will operate as a focusing agent rather than as a blinder. My reason for choosing the Young translation over any other is the fact that it is the first translation I read of *Duino Elegies*, and it is my desire to use the writing of this thesis as an attempt to understand what it is about this translation that touches me so intensely. There is a struggle in the

Elegies to bring the internal that has no precise language out to the world of the reader, so to somehow unify a complex existence. And reading this poem has made me feel closer to my own life and to understanding how to celebrate the lives of those I love.

Many people find poetry inaccessible and elitist, I know. While I concede that poetry does present a unique obstacle in comprehension—the line is, of course, one of the main reasons for resistance and apprehension toward the art form—I hope that my work on Young’s translation of *Duino Elegies* will help make the poem more accessible to the average reader, so that the wisdom the poem comes to might be made more available.

Young’s decision to utilize William Carlos Williams’s triadic line creates an additional level to the creation of meaning otherwise unavailable. Through my explication, I trust I will illuminate how the many levels of communication are functioning.

As a novice writer, I have come to understand that one of the central goals of any good work of literature is to develop a keen insight which may be communicated in spite of the limitations of language, and to develop a way to manipulate those limitations in ways that they actually facilitate higher levels of meaning and understanding. I realize that no one will ever know what it is that I truly mean, but that is the nature of the art—to struggle with language to find some new combination of words which may help others to come a little closer to understanding what might be being said.

The Young translation actualizes a keen awareness despite its limitations. Young’s introduction discusses the nature of poetic composition: “a heightened awareness in which a voice that is and is not the poet’s begins to speak, almost as if a dramatic character were reciting a ‘part,’ speaking both for himself and for all of us, as

Hamlet and Lear seem to” (7). It is the poetic voice of *Duino Elegies* that struck that chord in my being that inspired my great love affair with the book. The *Elegies* spoke for me in ways that I could not articulate. The voice of *Duino Elegies* functions like no other poem or poems I have ever encountered. At times, the voice is very familiar and intimate and then, seamlessly, without any typical transition, the voice transcends into an existential voice which speaks for all earthly and heavenly beings.

It is only with the acute eye of a skilled reader that one can articulate the shifts in the voice. Young declares: “We cannot read this great poem until we realize that it speaks in a voice at once deeply personal and piercingly impersonal: Rilke’s voice, Lear’s voice, the voice of the wind, my voice, your voice too” (7-8). It is the voice of *Duino Elegies*, as translated by Young, which I will first attempt take on in the effort to gain entrance to the complexities of meaning within the poem.

Voice

The most striking attributes of *Duino Elegies* are arguably its voice and its use of metaphor which allows for the complexities of meaning to reverberate within the text. This is a voice which struggles with the complex nature of human consciousness in the context of the metaphysical and the vastness of the universe. I would argue that the voice applies even more in this electronic, contemporary milieu than it did when it was first penned. The “self” is in crisis in the twenty-first century (I wager to guess that the crisis of the “self” has always been present in some shape or form throughout history) and the *Elegies* strive to balance the temporal life with the metaphysical.

The central struggle of the voice is to unify the opposing forces of life in order to attain a fuller existence. It’s not clear if the voice ever comes to any solid conclusions about how to do this, but it illuminates the fundamental human struggles: how to be an

individual while being a part of something so enormous and unfathomable. There is so much that we do not know about existence, but it is the human condition to struggle to find a place for the “self” in the grand scheme.

Language and Limits

Because of the complex and difficult nature of language, I implore my reader to be open minded with my choice to utilize a single translation rather than dealing with multiple translations. Meaning requires some agreement between more than one person. Language is a sort of cultural agreement to be one of the few vehicles through which meaning can be expressed. It is through the mastery of language, specifically in its use in poetry, that that which cannot be expressed readily may come close to being conveyed. There is a fundamental problem, though, with language—it is a set of signs and symbols through which things, ideas, and emotions are given names. Words are linguistic signs and so cannot be that which is being “named.” Language is, therefore, to some extent variable. Had the word dog been ascribed to the idea of angels, we would never know any different. Ferdinand de Saussure’s explanation of linguistic signs is applicable to all linguistic methods of communication:

The linguistic sign unites, not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound-image. The latter is not the material sound, a purely physical thing, but the psychological imprint of the sound, the impression that it makes on our sense. The sound image is sensory, and if I happen to call it “material” it is only in that sense, and by way of opposing it to the other term of the association, the concept, which is generally more abstract.
(833)

It is only through the repetition of use that language becomes suffused with “a concept and a sound-image.” Nonetheless, the sound-image is experienced differently by every

single person, hence, the difficulty. Language is a man-made device, and it is far from static. Over the course of just a couple of years, words can morph in meaning.

The linguistic sign, the word itself, is arbitrary in the sense that is artificial agreement to convey certain aspects of meaning. The word arbitrary invokes the notion that whatever is “arbitrary” is not fixed and can easily be changed by choice. However, according to *Webster’s New World College Dictionary*, arbitrary has a couple of different meanings: “not fixed by rules, but left to one’s judgment or choice; based on one’s preference, notion, whim; absolute; despotic.” The last two possible definitions clearly reveal that the arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign is resistant to change. It is absolute and despotic (tyrannical). It functions like ideology. The idea that something is arbitrary and is resistant to change is similar to the way ideologies become so ingrained in culture that they become “truths” of sorts, even if they are, in fact, illusions. Language is a cultural or social system of meaning; it is manmade and, therefore, is not natural. Jeffrey Nealon and Susan Searls Giroux in *The Theory Toolbox* expound on Saussure’s theory on the nature of language:

Saussure might answer, to say the signifier/signified relation is ‘arbitrary’ is certainly not to say that ‘tree’ or ‘difference means just anything you decide it to mean. Rather, the point is that the relation between the word and its meaning—between a signifier and a signified—is *historical* or *social*. (25)

Since society and culture evolve, language evolves with them, but that’s not to say that one can choose the evolution. Because language is very much ingrained in the culture it is used in it represents the agreed cultural meaning, so to read a translation such as the *Duino Elegies* and have it be so meaningful in English is very significant.

There is a shared cultural understanding of what a signifier means that is as unconscious as ideology; and since it is not a conscious understanding it is far more difficult to change. To prove the point, consider that the English language does not have a gender neutral pronoun and there have been several attempts over the years to create or adopt a gender neutral pronoun in “standard” English, but the endeavor has not been universally successful. Language is not easily changed because it is a cultural construct and represents an absolute knowledge. Google is another example; very few people knew the name of the Google search engine ten years ago, but over the course of a decade the name of that search engine has become a verb that is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as a transitive verb meaning: “To search for information about (a person or thing) using the Google search engine” (OED online). I wager to say that Google is probably one of the most frequently used verbs in the English language now. So given the vast variety of languages in the world, it is irrelevant which language is utilized because they are nothing more than regionally accepted names, not meaning. English and German are simply two of the many different sets of signs.

With that said, I hope to establish a sound explication of an arbitrarily chosen translation of Rainer Maria Rilke’s *Duino Elegies*. As a deconstructionist might argue, there are infinite possibilities for meaning, and I am going to try to glean what I can from every sign and symbol presented to me.

The Fundamental Manifestations of Terror

Human existence is, in fact, merely a fragment of all eternity marked by a birth which is the very beginning of death. This idea is present throughout the *Elegies*, and this knowledge drives the existential questions of the meaning of life and what it means to exist in this world. The manifestation of the most fundamental human terror is the

actualization that life is not a constant state, and that living one's life is actually a continual process for the preparation of death. Knowing that the eternal state is non-life, consciously or unconsciously, terrifies us; therefore, we are in constant fear of the unknown that could arrive at any time. We find ourselves stuck in between two realms: one of experiencing sensation and another of the absence of sensation—death. It is in this interstice that the *Elegies* begin.

“First Elegy”

The legendary first line of the *Duino Elegies* is a cry to the heavens, and evokes the impression of an epic poem: “If I cried out/ who would hear me up there/ among the angelic orders?” is the beginning of human terror (19). Like every epic poem, the “First Elegy” begins with the isolated poetic voice of the speaker calling out to the heavenly realms; however, instead of invoking the Muses, the voice rejects the angelic orders with the assumption that if one actually answered the call and embraced it that “I would shrivel/ I couldn't survive / next to his greater existence” (19). The speaker realizes that the ‘self’ would be lost in the abstractions of the angelic orders, and without isolation, the ‘self’ cannot exist, and so: “I choke back my own/ dark birdcall” (19). This is not only alienation from the angelic orders, but from God as well. One question this evokes is: Do the mortal and immortal realms coexist or are they two sides of the same binary?

Humans are drawn to abstractions such as love, beauty, Heaven, God, and so on, to make sense of their lives, and the voice immediately acknowledges the exquisite pain associated with these human attractions: “Beauty is only/ the first touch of terror/ we can still bear/ and it awes us so much/ because it so coolly/ distains to destroy us” (19). Beauty is, like angels, an abstract idea. Humans, though, strive to understand and possess abstractions, but because, by nature, abstractions are intangible, elusive, and somewhat

incomprehensible, the pursuit of them will inevitably destroy us, as no one can ever obtain the goal. That is the exquisite pain of beauty.

It is the distinction of the 'self' which enables the speaker's identity and understanding of the tangible world to develop, and it becomes apparent that without isolation from the vast abstractions of life, the 'self' will inevitably be destroyed— hence "I couldn't survive" (19). However, isolation from abstraction is virtually impossible. This is where the poetic voice shifts from an existential voice to a very intimate, temporal one in an effort to find some sort of unification between two binaries: mortal and immortal, womb and death, life and legend, inner and external, and possibly reality and fiction. The central conflict of the poem is that of balance between isolation and being a part of the whole, to master existence and develop an understanding of non-existence— death.

The poet's desire to understand the relationship between mortality and the eternal and the internal and external is reflected upon from the onset of the poem. "Every single angel/ is terrible," reminds the reader that Rilke's angels are not the angels of contemporary Christian discourse; they are something far more frightening. Because the angels are abstractions, like beauty, the poet is conflicted with the knowledge of losing the 'self' in the abstraction of the angels, but he is also aware of the fact that the desire for beauty and for angels cannot be quelled. "Oh who can we turn to/ in this need?" the poet asks, and he answers "Not angels/ not people/ and the cunning animals/ realize at once/ that we aren't especially/ at home/ in the deciphered world" (19). Animals exist without assigning names to make sense of their existence; they instinctually know their place and purpose. It is the human being who is blessed with consciousness, and the

instinct to assign meaning. That blessing is our curse as well, because it fuels a need to understand and gain knowledge which is seemingly unavailable to us. As we ascribe names to the world, it becomes a reductive process, so in many ways our need for names and meaning inhibits us, reducing all that is around us to signs and symbols. Answers must be found within the 'self,' and the 'self' must accomplish existing as both a singular identity and as part of something greater. Our use of language restrains our ability to understand that which cannot be named. So the voice asks: "What's left?"

Little things which remind us of permanence are left, as the voice points out: "some tree/ on a hillside/ one that you'd see every day/ and the perverse loyalty/ of some habit/ that pleased us/ then moved in for good" (20). Again, the voice faces the human conundrum of finding a permanent place in our temporariness. As humans, do we have to cling to any sense of permanence to survive? Is that why we create myths of gods and angels? Do we tell and retell stories, to ourselves and to each other, to find solace and comfort in a world that we are not particularly comfortable in? The poem hints that there are instances of permanence in our deciphered existence, "some tree/ on a hillside," or "some habit/ that pleased us," but these too change over time (20). These hints at permanence act as a reminder of our temporariness in the codified world, and of the necessity to find a balance among all of the oppositions of life, so we engage in story-telling, which is an abstraction of reality. Literary critics, Nella Bielki and Carol Cosman argue:

If we had to glean from Rilkean intuitions the gradations of human accomplishment, we would be tempted to see in them the degree of death's ripening. Of a death wrought with care, deeply sculpted, a death of the self that needs us badly long as we live it, to which we are nowhere nearer than we are here. (11).

It is these hints of permanence that offer the poetic voice a sense of precarious stability in the ever-changing world—the world of dying— where even the act of breathing is a process of dying. And, over time, those stories we tell ourselves change like the “tree on a hillside,” the hillside changes, the tree eventually dies, and we are left with only words that cannot fully express what any of it really means.

From the first utterance of the poem, the voice is self-aware and reacts to the vibrations of its own sound. Instead of invoking the angelic orders, the voice invokes itself, to engage a new understanding of life, non-life, mortality, immortality, the ethereal, and eternal. The speaker's voice in the poem speaks to itself and to everything. The voice engages in the quest to find an eternal place for humanity in the temporalities of human life. The poem acknowledges “that we aren’t especially/ at home/ in the deciphered world” where human beings ascribe signs and symbols to represent the objects and ideas we encounter, where we simplify that which cannot be simplified in order to attempt to develop an understanding and convey a meaning which hopefully resembles the actuality. But in our attempts to develop meaningful understandings of the world, we create more abstraction and obscure any understanding even further. Even the word “home” represents an abstract idea of belonging.

The theme of opposition continues with the introduction of night, personified as a woman: “Oh and the night/ the night, when the wind/ full of outer space/ gnaws at our lifted faces/-- she’d wait for anyone/ that much desired/ mildly disappointing lady/ whom the lone heart/ has to encounter with so much effort” (20). The night is someone to encounter whom you cannot avoid, and she waits to disappoint anyone, especially the lonely. Night is an unavoidable terror, at times, for every human being. Rilke’s night,

certainly, is terrifying; it is the literal darkness we all exist in, and the metaphoric death we have to face. A lone heart can barely endure the toils of the night, especially the heart of the poet. The voice then asks the question: “Is it easier for the lovers?” (20). There is a shift in the voice at this moment. A desire to be a lover is evident in the voice; however, because the poetic voice is so full of intensity derived from its connection to the angelic orders, it is not the voice’s calling, so it laments. A single human being could never contain the intensity of passion possessed by lovers and continue to maintain a conscious awareness of existential abstractions, because the identity of the ‘self’ would be so saturated with abstraction that anything concrete could not exist.

The Lovers

For the poetic voice, lovers are one of the few entities in the world which conceal each other from their fate, acting almost as blinders for one another. In each other’s gaze, the lovers see only the moment rather than the burdens of the binaries of life, and for that moment they are saved from the terrors of life. In the throes of their passion, the lovers can see nothing else, but the flames of passion, as the poem makes clear, inevitably burn out.

However, like everything else in the deciphered world, the lovers cannot find full expression of their meaning, nor are they aware of this. Rilke’s lovers do not have the ability to sustain existence in this world, their fate is like everyone’s; they just cannot see it. The voice is tender and longing toward the lovers at times, and at others it is indignant. The indignation leads to the question: “You *still* don’t know?” (20). It is the emptiness that is the constant—this passion of the lovers, no matter how desired, leads only to destruction, because love is indeed an abstraction. The lover’s embrace is empty, so the speaker tells the lovers to “Throw armfuls of emptiness/ out to the spaces/ that we

breathe—/ maybe the birds/ will sense/ the expanded air/ flying more fervently” (20).

The lovers need to face existence as it is, and not delude each other from the reality of their fate. But the speaker acknowledges that the Earth needs the lovers to continue, that they feed the seasons of the world. Without the lovers, there would be no rebirth, no spring. The voice fails at rectifying this conflict about the lovers, partly because of its own longing and disdain. There is no solution.

At times, the voice addresses the lovers directly, expounding on the failings of their existence. Being so distracted by each other, or waiting with bated breath for the arrival of a lover, moments are overlooked therefore never truly felt, and in this loss of feeling lies the emptiness. It is only with the test of time, through the epic stories of love that we tell each other, that the lovers earn their place among the angelic orders. Stories of great lovers that follow humanity throughout time in the process of myth-making are what give the lovers permanence. It is not the lovers themselves who have earned a place with the “beauty” that “so coolly/ disdains to destroy us,” rather, it is the abstracted idea of them that we grip forever (19). The tales of lovers are more important than the lovers themselves, and the voice even hints that it is only the internalized love of the unrequited that is truly immortal, becoming nothing but pure abstraction, making the object of the love completely legend.

The Unrequited

So it is only the unrequited that find a way into the realm of immortality This illustrates "Adalbert Stifter's whimsically developed postulate...love should proceed to the first kiss and then stop" (Weigand 9). Rilke alludes to the lovers as mere blinders for one another because their powerful passion will cease with their breath. The intensity of the lovers' existence is so full that there can be nothing else for each other but one

another. The earth will back the beloved and the other is left dying, suffering alone in his or her greatest hour of need. When they need permanence and stability, the lovers will always change or die. They do nothing more than mask each other from their own mortality. Fires of passion, as necessary as they are, will lead to nothing more than destruction of the “self.” As Shakespeare wrote:

These violent delights have violent ends,
And in their triumph die like fire and powder,
Which as they kiss consume. The sweetest honey
Is loathsome in its own deliciousness
Therefore love moderately. Long love doth so.
Too swift arrives as tardy as two slow. (Greenblatt 2.5, 9-14)

The narrative of the unrequited love is entirely constructed, and instead of burning out or dying completely, as actual lovers do, this constructed love is free to begin again and again, as well as to reconstruct the needs of the pining would-be-lover. Through construction and reconstruction in the mind, unrequited love becomes something of a mythic legend, and it is the mere fact that this love can never be articulated that makes it become so profound.

It is only through the legend-making process that the *idea* of the lovers becomes immortalized, only in the tales of great love. Rilke uses Gaspara Stampa as the unrequited love, forever immortalized in her sonnets. Even though, the lovers only go so far as to distract each other for a short time from their fate.

But sing, when you must,
of great lovers:
their fame
has a long way to go
before it is really immortal.
Those you almost envied
the unrequited

whom you found
more loving
than the gratified
the content—
begin again and again
the praise you can never
fully express (21-22)

It is the unrequited love that is the love that stands the test of time because it is immortalized in our minds, and the fact that it is never fully expressed keeps it alive in the “self.” The voice is always conflicted in some way. Isn’t it true that most people have that “one that got away,” and wonder from time to time: “What ever happened to so-and-so?” Even if we are unconscious of the permanence, the unrequited love makes its mark. To the voice, the unrequited love is the most perfect because unrequited love is pure myth constructed in the mind of the pining who can construct the myth to fit his or her every desire. There is no love that is as complete and full as the unrequited, and Gaspara Stampa’s Petrarchan sonnets to her cool, unrequited love epitomize the nature of the fullness of this specific type of love.

The Hero

In the midst of speaking of lovers, the voice shifts to the hero, an archetypal form of the lover. The hero, the voice seems to suggest, is an entity which from the onset is immortal, even dead, “the hero survives” (22). The hero lives in the moment, missing nothing. The hero is now, more than human, legend, myth, and eternal. The poem states: “Think of it:/ the hero survives./ Even his ruin/ is only another/ excuse to continue/ a final birth” (22). Stories of the hero far surpass the short life of the human. Remember all of the stories of our great heroes: Beowulf, Gawain, King Arthur, Dudley Do-right, and so

on; they always live in the legend and they are always the great loves. The heroes exist for the sake of their own myths.

The poem then shifts back to the lovers, revealing Gaspara Stampa, and calls with an existential voice: “Shouldn’t these ancient/ sufferings of ours/ finally start to bear fruit?” (22). What are these ancient sufferings? Are they the human desire to maintain the ‘self’ while being a part of something more? The poem now draws on the image of a bow and arrow to illuminate what is possible if we freed ourselves of mortal ties to desires, and allowed ourselves to become something more. You can imagine the ability to transcend our limitations, as the bow endures the string to become something more powerful. We can develop the capacity to become a force. It is that force that there is no precise, existing language for, and the voice struggles with metaphors to demonstrate the meaning of that which can only be felt.

The question, “Isn’t it time?” creates a sense of knowing that the love needs to be more powerful and change into a force stronger than it is (22). And the image presented creates the sense that we have the ability to transcend love and become something greater: “Isn’t it time/ that in love/ we freed ourselves/ from the loved one/ and, trembling,/ endured/ as the arrow endures the string/ collecting itself/ to be more than itself/ as it shoots?” (22-23). Love is not a permanent force, yet. Rather, it is uneasy and dependant on the loved one. Isn’t it time to be more? To become an abstract, but very tangible, power with greater effectiveness? In the image, to stay still is not an option. As afraid as we are to lose the beloved, we must use the passion of love as a bow to transcend this existence to where there is no language, no way of reducing emotion. The love has nowhere to stay because if it did it would lose all power, and in enduring the

sting of the bow, the arrow, love, becomes more, and possibility transforms the “self.” The arrow, or love, suddenly becomes nothing but force and velocity to survive the string, but the string on a bow projects the arrow with force, which in turn becomes transformed into something without limits. Because we do not have the exact language to describe what that really means, we tremble at the thought.

The Angels

“Every angel is terrible” (Rilke 27). Angels are eternal; therefore, they have no understanding of temporality. Imagine living forever; without loss, would anything matter? It is the human understanding of time which gives us all emotion: joy, fear, love, anguish, all of it. Emotion is what drives the “self” toward or away from everything. So, in this respect, the human is far superior to the angels. Mortality is a gift which teaches us to feel. It is the human desire to possess what the angels symbolize which is the “first touch of terror” because the abstract idea of the angelic is that of ultimate beauty, and the *Elegies* allude to the fact that all abstractions will inevitably destroy us. Abstractions are enigmatic, never static or tangible. Our desire for abstractions separates us from ourselves and the tangible world. Are the angels simply mirrors? How does the voice know them so intimately? If the voice is indeed the reflection of the angels, it should be the opposite of everything the angels are. The voice, though, struggles with the human condition. Angels do not bother themselves with emotion or meditation; why would they need to if they are constant? For the *Elegies*, humanity and the angelic orders are binary oppositions.

These were instructions,
your mission.
But could you perform it?
Weren't you always

distracted
 waiting for something
 as if all this
was announcing
 a lover's arrival?
 (Where could you keep her
as long as those
 huge strange thoughts
 are coming and going
and staying the night?) (21)

This passage is an intimate address to the lovers who are so distracted, from life, by each other. The “wave” raising next to the lover, or the “violin” playing, are the instructions to the lovers to pay attention to everything around them, but the lovers cannot follow the “instructions” that the universe offers up because they are so engrossed in the thoughts of, and yearning for, each other that they miss all that would clue them in on how to live. The lovers don't see the night as what “she” fully represents, and they cannot “keep” her with them because they are too consumed in their own inner worlds to acknowledge the exterior; they have no room for understanding the true night.

The Young Dead

The young dead become complete mysteries. We project ideas of what our young dead would have been if they were still among us. It is with a meditative projection about the young dead that the voice shifts and seems to address itself while speculating what it must be like for the dead. Our young dead are fearful; they are not accustomed to eternity, and desire to hold on to life through the minds of the living left behind. Or is it the desire of the living, those left behind, to hold on to that which is gone? These icons of former life rouse a sense of all that is unfair in the world. We hold on to our young dead as if they have permanence in the tangible world, but the only permanent thing left behind by the young dead is their memory, that and our projection of what they may have

been. The voice speculates that the transition from the living to the dead is not an easy one, and criticizes the living for making “sharp/ distinctions” because death is simply the binary of life; they are both a part of the same continuum (25). The living desire, too much, to make distinctions between things, all things, by the process of naming.

The voice makes little distinctions between the young dead and the angels; shifting from speculation about death to chastising the living for the distinctions they make to the statement: “Angels, it seems,/ don’t always know/ if they’re moving among/ the living or dead”(25). The angels are not in the realm of man, though, and wherever the young dead find themselves, they are still a “sphere” of man, living and dead. Angels are neither, but the voice states: “The drift of eternity/ drags all the ages of man/ through both of those spheres/ and its sound/ rises over them both” (25). Man cannot escape the pull of mortality which is so intrinsically tied to time. The angels, though, have no concept of time. The dead must grow accustomed to existence without time. As the poem says, the dead are “weaned” from the world, outgrowing the world. It is the living who need to hold on to the dead. We tell ourselves that we cannot live with the loss.

“Second Elegy”

The “Second Elegy” begins with the line: “Every angel is terrible” which continues the theme of terror arising from abstraction (27). Clearly, Rilke’s angels are like no others; they are deadly beings who can destroy a human if they come within any close proximity. Yet the voice is driven to praise the angels and all of the abstractions they represent. The poem says, despite knowing the terror the angels are, “I serenade you/ you almost deadly/ birds of the soul” (27). The angels are like beauty because the idea of them is so beautiful that it will inevitably destroy us, but the voice recalls the

story of Tobias who was not destroyed by the angel Raphael. Instead of being destroyed, Tobias was guided; however, those days are gone. From the onset of the “Second Elegy,” there is confusion present about the nature of Rilke’s angels; they are not Judeo-Christian, nor are they something that the voice really expresses a definite understanding of. The angels are a tension between what we can name and therefore “know” and everything that we do not have the ability to assign meaning to because we do not have the language for it. Has the condition of the world changed so much from the times of Tobias that humanity can no longer have a relationship with the angelic orders without total annihilation of the “self”? Or is it that the angels have assumed so much abstraction that nothing tangible can exist in their presence. It seems in the *Elegies* that the answer is most definitely yes, because we do not know what or who the angels are.

The poem reflects on the Biblical parable of Tobias and the archangel; wondering where the days have gone when people and angels could walk side by side without terror. As the “First Elegy” established, if an angel were to embrace a person—the voice—he or she could not survive (19). Here in the “Second Elegy” the magnitude of the angel’s abstraction is reiterated: “If the dangerous archangel/ took one step now/ down toward us/ from behind the stars/ our heartbeats/ rising like thunder/ would kill us.” As a reader, I am forced to contemplate the relationship people have had with abstractions and how our definitions for abstracted ideas—such as angels—have changed dramatically throughout recorded history. The poem asks: “Who are you?” Can we even define what that *who* means? This question can be read four ways: Angels, who are you? Reader, who are you? You of the poem, who are you? Self, who are you? It is this moment in the poem that the “you” must be considered. Who is being addressed? This is not the first time

that the poem directs questions at the “you,” but it is the first time that all of the possibilities of the “you” are so brightly illuminated. It is this question—*Who are you*—that the *Elegies* struggles with throughout all of the poems. I suspect that is a question nearly every person struggles with on and off throughout their lives, and the answer to that question for me is always changing, as it does with the *Elegies*.

You

The “you” of the “Second Elegy” is particularly elusive. There are moments throughout the poems where it is easily assumed that the “you” addresses humanity, but there are other times when, considering the different possibilities, volumes of different meanings are created. Consider if the voice is addressing the angels. The angels are not tangible; they are a creation of mind and myth which makes them perfect because, if there are any flaws, they can always be reinvented or changed by the stories we tell ourselves about them. The fact that the angels are not static entities is why they are so terrifying; no one can ever know what or who the angels are. They do not exist in a realm controlled by time, distinctions, names, or human consciousness.

A similar argument can be made if the “you” is humanity, for the whole of humanity consists of individuals who strive to preserve the “self.” In a world of so many individuals, how can we really know who or what “the whole” is; it’s impossible to say. What makes humanity far less frightening is the temporality of human life; it is our mortality which terrifies and defines us all, each and every one of us.

If the “you” is far more intimate than angels or humanity, if it is the voice addressing itself, by default the poet, there are some very interesting ways to read this poem. This particular poem is highly sensitive to its own movements, and if the voice is

addressing the poet, it reveals another question: What is the role of the poet in the human world? The metaphysical poets and the Modernists believed the poet to be the responsive receptor of the celestial communications of the universe. As Hermann J. Weingand states in his analysis of the “Second Elegy:” “In the *Elegies*, [Rilke] again and again invokes the image of the poet as a sensitive transmitter of cosmic vibrations” (4). You may ask: What does that matter? If the poet is predisposed to be more connected with the universe and/or the cosmos, then he/she has a direct connection with the angelic orders, God, the heavens, and nature. Even though the poet knows that to be in the presence of such uncontrolled beauty will most definitely destroy him/her, because of his/her high sensitivity to abstractions he/she can communicate with the abstraction in ways that others can’t.

Is the poet able to engage the abstract so much to be on a par with Tobias, who was directly guided by the angels? The angels become a mirror into a more divine connection with meaning: a connection with breath and emotion. The poet has the understanding that each exhale takes the human one step closer to facing death and oblivion, but the breath also fills the body with life, cleansing the body, and that is the space where the poet exists. The voice is a struggle with the knowledge of experiences that defy words and the essentially human yearning for expression.

Evaporation

The voice, no matter who it is addressing, realizes the simple, mundane act of living has a dual function: to maintain life and to bring one closer to death with every rhythmic respiration. The “Second Elegy” engages that part of living that people do not want to think about, “For as we feel/ we evaporate/ oh we /breathe ourselves out/ and

them back because the beautiful are always beyond reach, and the idea of what makes them beautiful morphs with every breath. The poem says, “It’s endless:/ appearance shines/ from their faces/ disappearing – like dew/ rising from the morning grass/ we breathe away/ what is ours/ like steam from a hot dish” (29). We want to believe that our ideas and emotions are associated with a type of permanence, but they really just function to distort our reality. Try as we might, ideas, emotions, and memories all fade away with every breath we release.

The Smile

The “Second Elegy” offers the first of many references to the smile. The emotions evoked by the image of the smile change drastically throughout the *Elegies*, and the first reference is “Oh smile where are you going?” (29). The smile is fading with the “self.”

Manifestation of My Limitations

I have to shift for a moment and acknowledge my own inadequacies in regard to my explication. My limitations have surfaced to the point where I feel I must draw attention to the problems I face when I read the *Elegies*. There are moments, sometimes several in just one elegy, where I fall short in my ability to explicate the metaphors. You see, I have lived with these poems for many years, and, honestly, every time I read them again, I take something different from them. Since the language is so dense, and I am, in some way, different every time I reread them, the meaning changes, sometimes drastically. Because I may be in a different mood, or a personal tragedy has affected the way I read, I engage slightly different elements and draw different meanings. Nonetheless, my prior readings of the poems inform my new readings, and therein lies my conundrum: I do not have a language adequate for saying how the poems mean

because the meaning changes, sometimes radically. Meaning is abstraction. The way I think about the poem is abstraction. No one will ever know what is going on in my head, no matter how hard I try to tell them. The distance between language and the world of sensual and emotional experiences makes me fumble.

The last passage from the “Second Elegy” that I focused on was the “You’re in my blood” passage, and that is where I stumble, because that particular passage speaks to me more during this reading, and makes me want to skip ahead to:

You see
it sometimes happens
that my hands
grow conscious
of each other
or that my used face
shelters itself
within them. (31)

Reading my notes, I know I could say volumes about the smile image and the recurrence of the angels, not to mention the vapors of our dissolution and the possibility of the angels absorbing our essence. At this point, I find myself just wanting to jump ahead to the above passage, because I can feel that image. I will illustrate:

Solitude

These hands, normally
accustomed to tap typeface,
can sometimes find faces.

Those faces uncover
comfort
from repeated use.

Strangely, as I write this, I am finding that I have far more to say than I had realized when I started writing this section. Even having to write out my distracted ideas in a coherent form, I am constantly revising myself, and Rilke, as we know, was constantly revising himself: was he writer, philosopher, lover, husband, or father? He only wrote the first two *Elegies* up on the howling cliffs near Castel Duino. The time between writing that mythic line that opens the *Elegies* he had to write *Sonnets to Orpheus*, which some believe informs the reading of the *Elegies*. There was even a time between the first line of the “First Elegy” and the last line of the “Tenth Elegy” that Rilke believed he would never write again.

According to Rilke’s biographers, Rainer Maria Rilke struggled with melancholy all of his life. William H. Gass explained the life struggles facing Rilke

It is a life of loneliness, of brooding, self-absorption, moods the world seems to mirror, because all the hours most of us spend making a living in office or schoolroom or farm or factory, Rilke has on his hands. Hence all those letters, of course, a prodigious output of prose, prose which rehearse his life so it might play as a poem. (34)

The struggle to convey meaning can be torturous. Since I am here engaged in the same struggles that Rilke faced writing some of the most moving poems I have ever read, I am going to draw attention to what I am doing while writing this.

I have to warn you, I may make huge leaps. From this point on, I am freeing myself from trying to constantly be aware of my audience, to really focus on how to express what these poems mean to me in the most humble way I can, because I honestly do not know what they mean to you. I express myself better sometimes when I am blunt; there are others times when I need to theorize, others when I need to be poetic, others

when I need to speak to an audience as if it were my closest friend, and I need you to forgive me for it because that is how I need to approach *Duino Elegies*. Poetry, more specifically Rilke's poetry, needs to be read. Poetry offers so much opportunity to mean, and for the art to be artificially limited somehow seems to demonstrate how life in the contemporary world has become very artificial itself. Rilke's poetry seems to speak in a contemporary voice which makes it very applicable to our contemporary dilemmas. Anthony Thorlby explains how this is true, "Because Rilke writes in the language of contemporary experience in his poetry may seem nearer to our present sense of reality, and therefore, in spite of esoteric difficulties, appear more acceptable to us" (Thorlby 132). The truth in Rilke's poetry is what transcends time.

Every word I have written was written under Rilke's influence, and I am starting to feel like my work here needs to be a plea for poetry, good poetry. A plea for Rilke: to not let only those who think they understand more than folks who collect food stamps be the only ones who read poetry. I need to say why this particular poem means so much to me. To convey what it means to me as a poet, who understands that she may not ever be heard, drives me to write with hopeful desperation, searching for ways that voice can be heard over contemporary noise. I need everyone who reads this to understand that voice is everything.

The Truth

If Rilke has taught me anything, he has taught me truth is an abstraction. Truth is relative to the individual's perception, and because truth is an abstraction "it so coolly disdains to destroy us," as a whole, because the whole is composed of individuals who will never fully understand each other. Beauty "disdains to destroy us" because my sense

of the beautiful is not the same as yours, so you will never fully understand why I think it is beautiful. You will never experience the exact emotion I felt when I read:

You hold each other.
Does that settle it?
You see
it sometimes happens
that my hands
grow conscious
of each other
or that my used face
shelters itself
within them. (31)

My need for someone to understand that is haunting. When I read it, right now, I feel tears well up. To explain emotion is difficult—there is much complexity in emotion. I can see myself growing hands from my head in my most emotionally desperate situations. My husband is not a reader and he does not understand why Rilke means so much to me, and he can't understand me, and maybe, I wonder if, I don't want him to: my face seeks the shelter of my hands so very often. I know my emotions are abstract and defy language, and sometimes reason, so this is a particularly difficult journey, and I hope that my readers can understand that trying to say what I need to be understood can evoke a certain type of insanity that makes this whole process so very daunting. I am in the middle of this game where I am pretending to be an academic when I am really a kid from the streets who has lead a difficult life, and poetry, the *Duino Elegies* in particular, has brought me so much comfort in my darkest times. So I apologize if my logic falters, at times, because emotion is not always logical. My leaps from image to image will not always be clear, but if you open yourself to the emotion

voice understands that caress is the thing that sustains the lovers in their situation. They drown themselves in each other, in the sensation of love, where they find thoughts of permanence, of duration. Most of us understand the sensation of passion, or at least desire it. Eventually, we become aware that it is not permanent. Yet, while in the throes of passion, *we imagine we feel eternity* even if it is impossible to actually experience it. The lovers are feeding each other's perceptions of immortality, feeling "forever" in each other's arms, but it comes at a price. In due course, one lover always has to "fade," at times, for the other to exist and vice versa; that is where the danger lies. How much can one lover fade and still maintain the individual 'self,' and how do they not drown completely in sensation? The lovers become something other than individuals when tangled like grape vines in an embrace; they sacrifice themselves for eternal passion which can't be maintained because nothing mortal is ever permanent.

The voice struggles with being a witness to the lovers; it seems to want the experience that the lovers have together, but the voice is separate and knows that the sensation of eternal passion only fools the lovers into believing they are capable of capturing eternity in each other's embrace. Because the rest of "us," especially the voice, who are not caught up in the sensation of the embrace can see that the beginning of passion is what causes the illusion of eternity. It is the abstraction of reality which leads to the inherent terror of passion, the exciting "fear in that first/ exchange of glances/ the mooning at the window/ and that first walk/ together in the garden/ *one time*" is not sustainable, and after that initial excitement we begin to compare the present moments with those in the past that

gave us so much exhilaration. The voice asks the lovers: “*are* you the same?” Those of us who are not lovers, including the voice, do not experience the same sensation as the lovers and have a different kind of perception, providing us the ability to examine the lovers’ condition somewhat objectively, albeit with some longing. The voice asks the lovers if they are aware of what they give up, how they change, if they are aware of what is actually happening during their courtship, and tries to draw the lovers’ attention to the reality that passion cannot remain the same.

Maybe the voice is a young, passionate lover reflecting on the loss of passion with the knowledge of hindsight. Is the voice pleading with the lovers to keep awareness? If the lovers are made aware, they may have the ability to find a way to moderate their passion so it can be maintained. Is the voice hoping that the lovers can discover a new hope if they find moderation? I remember the sensations from a new romance, and now that it is in the past I understand the strange conflict the voice has with the lovers. I have had moments of nostalgia where I desperately miss those sensations of fear, excitement, terror, and jubilation when my lips touched a new lover’s skin for the first time, and I have felt the desire to experience it again, but I know that newness of love does not remain unchanged or unchangeable, and the pain of its loss can sometimes seem unbearable.

The following passage is informed by memories, desire, and other emotions that defy literal language: “When you lift/ each other to your lips/ mouth to mouth/ drink to drink – / oh how oddly/ the drinker seems/ to withdraw/ from

the act of drinking” (33). Love and parting are inseparable; beginning and ending are inseparable. Just as birth is the starting point of dying, the first kiss of a lover marks the beginning of “withdrawal” from the other lover. It is the human condition to try to find some sort of reconciliation with all of life’s contradictions. So the poem says: “Didn’t love and parting/ sit so lightly/ on shoulders/ that they seemed/ to be made of a substance/ different from ours?” (33). The voice wants to contain the duality of binary oppositions; it is trying to reconcile the conflicts, and master the ‘self.’ Just before the above passage, the voice speaks of Attic grave steles, and draws the reader’s attention to the “discretion/ of human gesture” on them.

When you actually examine the gestures of the steles, the reliefs usually depict human forms with somewhat serenely expressionless faces, but they have subtle physical gestures—positions of hands, items carried, and so on— that can be rather moving. The Attic grave steles were erected as memorials to the dead, immortalizing the idea of the lost loved one. The steles represent something so much more than a person: they are people translated into an immortal realm. The steles cast an image in memory of a name to be recorded for centuries, making the people they are dedicated to exist in thoughts of others for centuries. The devoted memory lives on abstractly. People can become abstracted ideas, they can become angels, heroes, lovers, but in doing so the person no longer exists, replaced by a myth.

What the Writing Process is Doing to Me

The *Duino Elegies* has affected so much of who I have become over the last decade, that I have had to re-examine parts of me that have long been gone from my thoughts. I am very invested in the words I read in the Young translation of Rilke's work.

Every time I read it, I understand it differently, which, in turn, informs the way I read my life. The first time I read the book I was 23, and a mess. I was living in the throes of terror reading about terrible beauty. I was a lover who was being blinded by passion. While I was visiting one of the great loves of my life for the last time as his lover, I read the *Duino Elegies*. I made notes in the margins. Every time I have read it since then I've scribbled something a little different and understood something differently. Looking back, trying to engage myself through my notes and memories, I can see different roles I played in the very themes Rilke wrote about. It amazes me that I didn't see the connection when I jotted "Like Dave" next to the passage in the "Seventh Elegy" that says: "Like him you want/ to call forth a still/ invisible mate." Two weeks after writing that note I chose to date a different person, and never went back to Dave. I chose to leave him unrequited, though maybe I was the unrequited one in his eyes, because I always refused to move closer to him. And I am struck by the need to understand why that passage prompted me to write that, and for the life of me I cannot remember. So I get stuck trying to understand myself in the process of writing this, struggling not just with the poem but with my various "selves."

"Third Elegy"

Poetry is compulsive. To read poetry well, you must do it with an obsessive vigor, paying attention to all details. It is with mesmerizing attention that I read the poem, and depending on the mood I am in, the tone and meaning seem to change. By understanding that every element of the poem is absolutely deliberate, you are able to build meaning. Reading the poem over and over has given me the desire to speak back to the language—it inspires me. I feel as if the poem understands something about me that I have not yet considered. Rilke’s poem speaks to me about the contradictions of life, and offers emotional guidance toward reconciliation of so many conflicts, especially the divergence of love.

The beloved is something transient. As object of desire, the beloved becomes something both physical and meta-physical. The side of the beloved which becomes meta-physical is something which is absorbed through the lover’s gaze. But the physical lover is something, despite being recognizable from a distance, which never can truly be understood or known. The lover gazing at the beloved is soothing to both because of the internalized myth the lovers have each created of the other. Myth is not tangible.

What does her young lover
whom she can recognize
at a distance
understand of that
lord of desire, who often
out of this lonely young man
(before the girl soothed him
and often as if
she didn’t exist)
raised his godhead
dripping with what
unrecognizable stuff
rousing the night
to a continuous

tumult. (35)

That “unrecognizable stuff” is the same as what’s on the Grecian burial steles: the things we do not have literal language for. That stuff contains all of the strange contradictions of life—the stuff we cannot fully understand, and yet is collectively in all of us. There is always disturbance. All of the desires we have and the reality of our mortal condition makes it difficult for us to reconcile the two spectrums of our existence—the corporeal and cerebral. But still we try.

The “Third Elegy,” at first, seems to be a meditation on the lovers. However, upon rereading there is far more at work in the poem than simply a meditation on the lovers. Being discussed separately (or addressed separately), the girl isn’t just an embodiment of the lover; she also is a projection of the mother. She functions as a sort of curtain, shielding the “he” from the terrors of the external world, as a mother would shield the ugliness of the world from her child. The mother puts forth every effort to protect “him,” and she, unknowingly, fosters the deep, ancient terrors of “being” that exist in our blood—our collective unconscious. Our innermost fears are shared by everyone, and to be wholly human, we must let go of the corporeal enough (but not too much) to experience the cerebral, and fearlessly engage that which is terrifying. The “Third Elegy” instructs:

Let it go, went on
down through his own
roots and out
to the monstrous beginning
where his little birth
had happened so long ago.
Loving it
he waded downward
into more ancient blood

cosmos for the possibility of the clarity that can come from objective self-analysis. All thinking is abstract.

Sometimes I cannot say things fast enough in fear that I won't remember, and others I concentrate on just one word to make sure it is saying what I want. I need to be poetic because too many words are crowding out what I mean. Reading poems, especially Rilke's, makes me read everything deeply; I end up reading myself as text. I find myself seeking real world images that represent the themes in the book, and try to speak back to the poems on their terms, so I speak back in a voice that abstractly expresses my understanding of Rilke, and I do it longing to do it well. I need to engage the book on its own terms for a moment, and I will do my best to guide my reader through the conversations my poetry is having with Rilke's.

I am terrified to continue with this because I feel inadequate. In hopes to illustrate something that I really do not know how to explain, I am using the only means I have to express the type of thinking evoked by Rilke, and you may not, at first, understand all of the things that I am trying to say, or I may fail at it completely. But I feel it is necessary to engage my own poetic voice in order to explicate the emotion induced by certain images and themes in the *Elegies*.

My Words Influenced by Rilke

Meaning is the central struggle that all humanity wrestles with. How would you place your work next to the work you most admire? My words, I fear, will pale in comparison. The *Duino Elegies* means so much to me, and I desperately want to do it justice. I have responded to the musings in the poems, immersed myself in the themes, and played the role of the "you," and assumed a voice to muse back.

The entirety of the *Duino Elegies* evokes questions that all people have. I have attempted to present those questions as concisely as I can:

Why

If all of us were
meaningless, budding
roses would signify nothing
but dying. A lover's embrace
would tumble. Sweet sounds
from an infant mouth
would mean nothing
about promise.

Reality is a central question: what is reality, what is real, and what does it mean? The first and second lines' enjambment establishes if we are real, we allow meaninglessness to grow. As a sentence, the sentiment established is that if we were meaningless, all of the significance in the things we ascribe meaning to would no longer bear it. The rose which we ascribe the significance of love would symbolize nothing more than another process of the life cycle of a plant.

Rilke repeatedly utilized the image of the rose to bear the significance of dying in addition to the established meanings that are now inseparable from the word rose, and created another element of meaning which engages questions. How can the symbol of love, an idea which we often think of as an eternal emotion, be represented by a thing—the rose—that is at its most beautiful point when it is preparing to die? If the symbols we utilize do not contain the meaning we ascribe, how does that meaning occur? It is we who give meaning to everything, and meaning changes as the rose changes. To be

grounded in the moment is to experience meaning to its fullest. If all of us were absorbing the fullest meaning of the moment, the promise of fulfillment might occur.

Living is a contradiction to death. Love is a contradiction to indifference. The lovers can exist wholly human, and not just function to blind one another from other things. The line “but dying. A lover’s embrace” signifies that the lovers are indeed dying during their embrace, but it can also suggest the idea that when we are dying we need a lover’s embrace. Rilke’s lovers are complicated. They are something to pine for, fear, desire, and to be. Real lovers are complicated; love is complicated. The meaning you find in love informs all other meanings. It is a driving force of life, but it is abstract and very complicated. We cannot know love unless we know indifference, and if we possess no meaning of love—or any other emotion—we will fail at living.

All precious things are only precious because of temporariness. The promise an infant’s smile offers us is hope, and that hope is precious, which makes the infant precious. A smile from an unpoluted face evokes emotions that engage thoughts of the possibility of something better. All people were infants once, but the older we get the less precious we become, because there is a tainted knowledge existing behind our smiles. The *Elegies* reveals that it is the temporality of things that make them have the meaning they do. The fact that our time is limited makes things significant.

The Stage and the Puppets

We walk among each other as puppets, not masks, as some would say. Rather, we are some sort of exterior always waiting to be filled with something. I feel empty when I am searching for that perfect word. I am a puppet going through the physical steps of writing, but, at times, I sit and stare trying to come up with some sort of idea; in

order to write—I need to fill myself with thought. But thought is another abstraction, and nothing we can think of is ever how things truly are. We exist incomplete, because of our need for abstraction. When we interact with other people, we have a tendency to project our ideas on to them. We imagine who and what they are, but these projections really have nothing to do with those people, and everything to do with ourselves. The image we have of others is simply the physical representation of our ideas about them—they are puppets that we fill with our ideas. Rilke’s poetry is aware of this innate human tendency. The “Fourth Elegy” reveals that keen awareness of human nature when it says:

When I’m in the mood
to wait
in front of the puppet stage
no, rather to stare
so intently that finally
an angel must come
as an actor
to make up for my staring
pulling the stuffed bodies
up to life.
Angel and puppet:
then at last
there’s a play.
Then what we separate
by our very being
comes together. (47)

When we apply our abstracted ideas—the incarnation in us of the angel—to another person, we are able to interact with them. Yes, people are physically tangible, but the way we think about each other is an abstraction—we always project something from within on external elements, as well as internalize the external thus distorting it in

some way. People are very much the puppets on a stage being manipulated by abstraction, while controlling what abstraction they can.

Our relationship with abstraction and each other is complicated, and the above image alludes to that, but cannot expound too much because if it did the nature of how the relationship functions would be diminished. The only way to explain it would be to reduce the complexities, and to do that would over-simplify what really cannot be said, but I am going to try:

The angels are a metaphor for abstraction, and as people need to abstract their lives in order to feel that they have a complete existence. People abstract everything simply by thinking, so, in a sense, the angels are manipulating the strings of the human puppet. Simultaneously, we can control—to a certain extent—what we think about, thus controlling abstraction to a degree. To apply an image to this idea, I imagine the stage with wholly human puppets and angelic puppets with a spider web of strings attached in every direction on all of the puppets who are in control of all of the strings, all while being controlled by them. In other words, the angels are pulling strings attached to us, we apply our abstractions to other people pulling their strings, and we react to the abstractions other people apply to us, allowing them to pull our strings. As we individuate—try to *be* the *self*—we separate ourselves from the interconnectedness abstractions provide us. It is human nature to seek distinction for the individual, and we seek to abstract our existence by making distinctions. Despite the fact that abstraction is the very thing that binds us together, we use it to draw distinctions. The poem is telling us that.

Me

This project is making me look into places I am not comfortable looking into. My lesson here has been a rather emotional and tumultuous one. I do believe I have found my own voice while writing this, and how I did it was brutal. Nightly, I read and reread images that I could directly relate to my tangible existence. That made me read my life as text—somewhat removed. It is scary the things you find when you approach your life as a critical reader, analyze it, then write about it. When you can see the metaphors in life and can see if a vehicle is failing, it will rattle you. And, now, I'm really concerned about how I do things. When I was writing the section on the "lovers," I had to take a break from prose, and instinctually went to verse. I wrote this:

Rilke's Lovers Speak

Oh, the lovers are just
blind. There is nothing tangible
in desire. Skin lies
to the soul, telling stories
of ripeness, when all is empty
space. Angels are the immeasurable
distance between us. Love is

the beauty which will destroy us
all. No one understands
desire is abstract. Where
are you? Did you not speak
of things ? As fickle
as can be, love, you destroy me.

I believe I understand the relationship that the *Elegies*' voice has with the lovers, and it is a tortured relationship. I suggest to my you reread the poem with the memory of a lost love. Clearly, I have very deep feelings that were evoked by Rilke's "lovers" metaphor.

Speak I am Listening

Reading Rilke is a religious experience. The real world connections the *Duino Elegies* makes function almost like a metaphor for an instruction manual on how to *be*. When you immerse yourself into poetry of Rilke's magnitude, it makes you—helps you—understand what it means to be alive, *which is the meaning of life*.

Rilke didn't even understand his own poem's knowledge, because his biographies depict a very melancholy man, with serious “mommy” issues who abandoned his wife and child while drifting on charity. Gass explains Rilke's state concerning his mother: “[Rilke] began to believe that love, like money, time, and food, was in limited supply, and that any love which went into one life would not be available to go into another” (10).

Thought cannot always be applied in the physical world. I really do not know how to adequately explain this. Clearly, there is a *disconnect* between abstract thinking and—I guess the only thing I can call it is—reaction, because you need abstraction to react—thinking is abstraction—so we could never implement any *know how*. There is no way to reconcile this. There is a disconnect between thinking and application. That is the human being's fatal flaw.

And the biggest gift. That disconnect is emotion—pure abstraction. It is emotion that metaphor operates in. The gift of thought, the ability *to be meaningful*, and, the greatest thing about humanity, the ability to feel, are all created from that flaw. I don't even think it should be called a flaw—maybe reason? Rilke somehow had a meaningful understanding with a fundamental knowledge of the human condition, but it's not clear if that made his *living* any better, in his words are transformative. Meaning cannot always be communicated on a literal level; sometimes you just have to feel the knowledge. I'm

grateful when I read Rilke, because I understand myself better. Learning about the man who wrote such profundity, I was greatly disappointed in some of the things I learned. He was not the “role-model” I had constructed in my mind, the abstraction of Rilke, but I can’t help but to forgive him for his flaws because of the knowledge he gives me through the *Duino Elegies* which were penned nearly a century ago. I accept him, as he was and is now, because of the wisdom he offers. That is a fundamental forgiveness that is exceedingly lacking in the contemporary world. Simple forgiveness is very difficult.

The Section Should Not Be Written

Why do I do this? Read poetry like Rilke? When I am a high school drop-out, teenage-welfare mama who smoked cigarettes, while trading food stamps for cash—I *needed toilet paper*. Because it understands the contradictions I face in life. The poem understands my pain. That pain seems indescribable. Only I can feel it. Because of that pain, I have to talk to my peers. I have to talk to the other mamas in the DPW waiting room, watching weathered face after weathered face take a number, while they wait for their number, 86, to be called, while the lady at the desk is still calling letters. The mamas, who didn’t want to yell at the kids in front of other people. Like me. Anger was reserved for home, away from judging eyes. I knew where to keep it to myself, even I wanted to scream, *Don’t fucking look at me like that!* I need them to know that poetry can keep you breathing. Rilke helped me breathe when Abbey died. He gives me breath now. I’ve been taught how to think about terrifying things that I never wanted to contemplate, and it gives me more purpose, because it has taught me about beauty. It has taught me how I need to use my voice. This is my message to them:

Envy

Sickly, always get sad
seeing *prom-*

queen, “Earth Angel,”
crack-heads, it’s

a reminder of what can
happen to pretty.

Do not let them
assign you to

one distinction.

You are not
what they think.

Seeing Poetry Everywhere

I have been so submerged in *Duino Elegies*, I can see it everywhere. Rilke’s themes are all around me. I make real world connections with the voice of the *Elegies*. I was reading a narrative my friend, Effie Molina, wrote, and could not help but to turn her words into Rilke. I could clearly see the connection of her narrative to Rilke’s acrobats. This is the first paragraph of her narrative:

“My Life in Shades of Disaster”

I am moving, moving, moving through time and space. It is the one constant, an eternal comfort, the feel of my muscles straining against this life. It is all on the periphery for me now. Faces, landscapes, echoing sounds blur on either side of my head and I try not to focus too clearly. There is no space within this constant push, pull, push, pull tearing at me. No time for breath, choice, direction. I am a tornado caught in the world’s maelstrom. It’s a battle in here, the deafening crashing of the winds, pressures building in my ears, air sucked out of me. Cold assault, face stung, eyes tearing I am walking blind, I am blinded. But I still see you. And I wonder how that is possible. (Molina)

As I was reading this little passage, the “Fifth Elegy” started making more sense to me. Even though Effie never read Rilke, his metaphors are there, and I imagined the acrobats, the vagabonds:

But tell me
 who *are* they
 these vagabonds

even more transient
 than we are?
 urged on from childhood

twisted (for whose sake?)
 by some will
 that is never content?

Instead it keeps
 twisting them
 tosses them up

and catches them
 they seem to come down
 from an oiled and

slipperier air
 to land on a carpet
 worn threadbare

from their continual
 leaping and tumbling
 a carpet lost in the cosmos

stuck there like plaster
 as if the suburban sky
 had somehow wounded the earth. (49-50)

After seeing the connections, I had to work them out:

Life in Shades of Disaster: First Leap: Effie’s Borrowed Words

Tumbling through the continuum, an eternal
 comfort, feeling my muscles
 straining against this life.
Images, landscapes, sounds on either side

of me and I try to stay clear, so that
the jumping of acrobats will dissolve
in me. With all of the constant
taught and torque of those vagabonds

twirling around, tearing away any space
of me, time does not exist for
breath, no matter what direction,
choice is not there. My eyes see

only your image blur as I,
the trapeze artist, ascend to the next leap.

That is how metaphor works. The only way to adequately describe metaphor is to use metaphor. It defies the accepted literal functions of language and demands that you feel while you think. *And we all know feeling and thinking are not mutually exclusive.* I cannot not explain this any differently. Cleanth Brooks is cited in *A Handbook to Literature* for coining the term “functional metaphor” which he describes as, “the way in which the *metaphor* is able to have ‘referential’ and ‘emotive’ characteristics and to go beyond them and become a direct means in itself of representing a truth incommunicable by any other means” (316). Metaphor must be felt in order to be understood.

The “Seventh Elegy”

As we reach adulthood, we assume that we have obtained a stronger depth of knowledge and understanding which we did not possess as children. A question that the “Seventh Elegy” evokes is whether we indeed have the cognitive capabilities to develop a meaningful understanding of the world and existence as it is, or is it that our cognitive deficiencies actually make it impossible for us to adequately understand anything. Is it the fact that we are constantly caught in the process of dying—evaporating every

second—that we are losing meaning with every exhale? Or do we gain more meaning with every breath because the narrative of our lives keeps getting shorter with every breath?

We “woo” the angels to help us obtain beauty—to help us apply happiness to a projected future, and consolidate thoughts of the past with ideas of beauty— but the angels are nothing more than a projection of our accumulated, and ever changing, ideas of beauty—they are a metaphor for transient beauty—so by the “Seventh Elegy” the voice realizes there are a couple of fundamental problems with human nature which inhibit our understanding of everything in the universe. The voice comes to the determination that he/she will no longer pursue the angels and addresses itself directly:

No more wooing, voice
 you're outgrowing that
 don't let your cry
be a wooing cry
 even though it could be
 as pure as a bird's
that the season lifts up
 as she herself rises
 nearly forgetting
that it's just
 a fretful creature
 and not some single heart
to be tossed
 toward happiness
 deep into intimate skies. (61)

By this point in the *Elegies*, the voice has established that isn't a voice of a child, the young dead, a lover (despite longing to be one), or an angel. However, the voice speaks with maturity that only comes forth from the breadth of knowledge and experience, so it is safe to assume the voice can be read as an embodiment of a mature adult. A voice from a young adult would still be unabashedly “wooing” beauty, because

it is in our nature to pursue beauty. It could be that our pursuit for it makes us unable to unequivocally identify it when it may be right in front of us. Mature adults are inhibited from grasping a complete understanding of the world around us as it is in itself, because we are heavily influenced—maybe even somewhat blinded—by time. We allow time to be the force which controls our interaction and understanding of everything which creates an inescapable noise in our thoughts. There is a constant discourse of memory and/ or projection in our minds, about the past and future, which we utilize to inform the present instead of engaging thoughtful discourse with the right here and now.

The “Seventh Elegy” is attempting to elucidate how to affirm existence. In the “Fourth Elegy,” the voice contrasts human beings with animals in the natural world: “We’re not in tune/ we’re not instinctive/ like migrating birds,” and the voice returns to the birds in the beginning of the “Seventh Elegy” as it has propounds on a simple similarity (43). Like an instinctual bird we seek a mate, which is fundamental in the continuation of life for people and animals, but people their mating calls beyond those of a bird. We apply our thoughts to our mating call—our memories of past loves, different desires of what we hope for, and contrast our thoughts to what is going on in the moment, so we not only trying to understand what we seek, but make an even clearer distinction of being alone while we seek a mate. We forget what it is that we are doing in the first place, that we are looking for a partner to reproduce with instead we are muddled down with other thoughts that inform us of why we want a mate, and the poem subtly acknowledges this: “nearly forgetting/ that it’s just/ a fretful creature/ and not some single heart”(61). The fundamental difference between us and the birds is that we apply our thoughts and emotions to our mating calls, and the voice believes that the birds do not.

Erotic connection can be synonymous with beauty, and the voice's conflict with the lovers comes to a resolution, or understanding, in this elegy. There is something beautiful about sexual connection—we let go of our thoughts while engaging our senses and experience the moment by feeling it.

Our ideas of beauty change as fast as we change. Beauty is as transient as people. We project notions of beauty to an existential environment—where the angels and God(s) reside—and we find ourselves conflicted because we do not possess a transcendental existence; rather our existence is transient and because of that we find desires for greatness which we attempt to achieve through applying abstractions to the world around us.

Here is my attempt to work through the knowledge presented through the metaphor presented in the above passage from the “Seventh Elegy:”

Bird Call

Waiting for affirmation—don't
become wooing or else
you will fall victim to

heavenly creatures. Not that you aren't
as sincere as an infant. You are not
naive. You know why

a rose is breathtaking. Dying
you live
by abstracting—questioning—causing

terror, you watch for the sound of it,
and yet still
you sing, silently for moments.

It seems that the “Seventh Elegy” is instructing the reader to subject the mind to the universe. In other words, the speaker alludes that there is a definite need for us to question, to contemplate, to think. Because we are living—mortal—we are blessed with the ability to reason, and we need to think about the duality present in life, but do it as applied to the moment at hand.

We tend to concern ourselves with thoughts about the past and future which is what disconnects us from the present creating the distinction between mortality and immortality. In the “Seventh Elegy,” the voice is alluding to the need to separate “self” from the noise in our minds. If we are conscious about giving our fullest attention—sensually and cerebrally—to the moment, we have the ability to realize the “self” completely. We must question things in the moment—the now—because it gives us the ability to transform into a whole: unified. The speaker is not telling the reader to just internalize the external, but to sort of assimilate that into ourselves—not just internalization—but more like an evolution. We can become the answers we seek, and, if you read carefully, the poem does not tell us to seek any affirmation from outside of ourselves, but it is through giving our fullest attention to our environment during the moment that we can *become* affirmation. Through our evaporating—our evolution—we are where the reconciliation of all of the dualities, conflicts, and contradictions of our lives will occur. The voice reveals what happens in our breath while we take a moment to be still and silently give all of our attention to reasoning with the moment:

The first small
questioning flutenotes
reinforced by echoing stillness
that rises all round
in the pure, affirmative day.
Then on up the steps—

a call that climbs
each air-stair
toward the dreamed
temple of the future
then the trill
the fountain
whose rising jet
catches the falling water
up again
in a game of promising...(62)

This passage is telling us that when we begin to pay our fullest attention to the moment we will find the affirmation we seek, and it will be reinforced by the very stillness that comes out of giving the “self” wholly to the now.

The voice seems to understand there are reasons why we are so afflicted by our desires. Literary critic, Torsten Pettersson argues that what seems to be an affirmation the “Seventh Elegy” arrives at just another conflict:

[W]e see that the affirmation voiced in it [the “Seventh Elegy”] (and reiterated in the Ninth Elegy) is not offered as a pronouncement we should regard as a main point or ‘message’ of the *Duineser Elegien* [*Duino Elegies*]. Instead, *on the terms of the Elegies themselves*, the idea of internalization represents an attempt at solving existential problems that temporarily evokes the speaker’s enthusiasm, but in the cycle as a whole emerges as impossible and therefore ultimately misguided. (732)

Pettersson’s argument that the “affirmation” of the “Seventh Elegy” is “misguided” in the context of the entire cycle of the *Elegies* just confirms my argument that giving all of your attention to the moment is where your own affirmation will be found. By examining the entire cycle that the *Elegies* go through, yes, you will find inconsistency and contradiction, but that is what makes them so close to the human experience.

We struggle to pay our full attention to what is going on in the now, because we seek meaning and we utilize our experiences and desires as the basis of our search. But what the “Seventh Elegy” is telling us is that the act of bestowing our whole attention with our senses and mind enhances the “self” making us more fully realized thus facilitating volumes of meaning. It is only through experiencing as much as we can in the moment that we can find any meaning for anything. By surrendering ourselves to the fullest experience of the moment we can assimilate the world into the “self” and that is as great, if not greater, than any abstraction we can conceive of.

By the end of the “Seventh Elegy” the voice readdresses the angels:

Don't think I'm wooing you!
Angel
even if I am
you won't come
for my call
is always full of rising
you can't move
against such current
it's too strong. (69)

As the voice addresses the angels, it realizes that it is in human nature to woo beauty. It's unavoidable, but the voice is consciously aware of the fact that it is the call to the angels that is more powerful than the angels themselves. It is in the fury of the call that is far more powerful than abstraction. It is not the power of internalization, it is the call for need. The angels are still a metaphor for abstraction—which does accumulate meaning—and the only thing more powerful is the moment the quest for abstraction occurs.

Rilkean Lesson of Time

It is not a decade's traffic
that you need, you

need a moment's breath.

The "Ninth Elegy"

This elegy speaks to the poet—the artist— and to our human condition. If we could really live an effortless existence like the laurel (unemotional—content?— as far as we know), why don't we?

Why, if it's possible
to spend our little
span of existence
as laurel
slightly darker
than all the other greens
with tiny waves
on each leaf's rim
(like a wind's smile)
— why then
still insist
on being human
and shrinking from fate
long for it too?... (77)

If we could *be* without *distinction* why don't we choose to? Why do we have to make death an opposite distinction from life? Why do we need to find meaning, instead of accepting the way things are? Why do we need to know more? The poem tells us that it is because we need to feel meaningful.

Oh, not because happiness
— that part of approaching ruin
that rushes ahead of it —
is *real*.
Not out of curiosity
not to exercise the heart
that would have been fine
in the laurel...
But just because to be here
means so much
and because
everything here
all this that's disappearing

It is that very fundamental duality in our human condition that causes a need for expression, but the very confusing nature of constantly living in a state of good-bye is difficult to communicate. That is why the “Ninth Elegy” seems to be directed to the artist—the poet. When the poem says: “Take, above all/ the heaviness of existing/ take the long/ experience of love/ take/ truly unsayable things (79). What do we do with these things that we take? How do we deal with the longing for love? What happens when we experience love? We have to express them. That is our nature. And if we cannot express them there is no point to any of this. Expression is fundamental to surviving the conditions of mortal life. The ability to express is transformative. We develop understanding through expression. It is the artist’s calling to express. The poem seems to understand that the artist has a stronger need to express the things that are *unsayable*. Sometimes that need is torturous, but the voice in the poem reassures the artist:

Are we on the earth to say:
 House
 Bridge
 Fountain Jug Gate
 Fruit-tree Window
 at best:
 Column...
 Tower...?
 but to *say* these words
 you understand
 with an intensity
 the things themselves
 never dreamed they’d express.
 Isn’t the earth’s
 hidden strategy
 when she so slyly
 urges two lovers on
 should be transformed
 by the delight
 of sharing their feelings?

at its core is Reader Response, and after developing such an intimate relationship with a piece of literature—a piece of art—I understand what a piece of literature or art means is far less important than how it means to individual reader or onlooker. The sole importance of art does not lay in it being a historical artifact, documentation of an era. The aesthetics of art are how it becomes important—meaningful—because it is only through our emotional need for expression and understanding that meaning can occur. Meaning is not static; it does change with time, and art is produced to express meaning in the moment.

The *Duino Elegies* has helped me fully realized my own insatiable need for expression and understanding. Throughout the course of writing this, I have found boundless inspiration for my own poetry, and every word of every poem or prose I wrote has been heavily influenced by the *Duino Elegies*. Rilke's poetry has also taught me that the process of expression is as important as the end result, for a poem tells the poet what he or she means not the other way around. When I responded to the wisdom of the *Elegies* poetry with my own poetry, I found that I understood that wisdom more completely because my own poetry bridged the gaps that I could not grasp. For that reason, I have included an Appendix to include all of the poetry I wrote during this process. These poems I wrote are critical to my understanding that the meaning of *Duino Elegies* is it function as a mirror.

Rilkean Lesson on Looking in Mirrors

You would call it
hyperbola, but the fact
that this is replacing
a straight line in the plot

is causing her to see

reflection isn't exaggeration,
and she desires hyperbole. Maybe
it was that the moon's reflection

off of a midnight lake which found
its way to the pools in
your eyes—*that she sees*
so much in. It could be angels

are so “coolly disdainful”
that they exaggerate this
beauty so it will
only be murderous, but she
still needs to tell you.

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Appendix

The response poems are in no particular order.

Rilkean Lesson of Time

It is not a decade's traffic
that you need, you
need a moment's breath.

Rilkean Lesson on Looking in Mirrors

You would call it
hyperbola, but the fact
that this is replacing
a straight line in the plot

is causing her to see
reflection isn't exaggeration,
and she desires hyperbole. Maybe
it was that the moon's reflection

off of a midnight lake which found
its way to the pools in
your eyes—*that she sees*
so much in. It could be angels

are so “coolly disdainful”
that they exaggerate this
beauty so it will only
be murderous, but she
still needs to tell you.

Rilkean Lesson on Warnings

If you get
close to beauty
you will be
suffocated
by emotion.

A Rilkean Lesson on the Enjambment

This is not a casual affair, you have
had those before. This *one*

is different. It is something
ancient defying foresight—

anticipation—causing reflection about how
that—which was always there—did not get noticed

by you before. Now you're imagining
what may have been, might be,

& desiring it. Knowing truth is
hardest of all . You must always

say good-bye. Lines are
incomprehensible, like a shore

of emotion—envisaging essence—shapes
meander. Is it a lesson on

love's behavior? It could be
something explicitly different.

Just in Reading Enjambment: Hearing: *Lyrics*

Why is it so hard

to let people really know? What is it
that you cannot

believe?
So sorry

now. I can-
not—

right

a self
then
supposing one

-dialogue

with you—

pretend I can

have happiness

at the moment. Such beauty, presented
in appealing packaging
is there to raze

me. I'm cynical because

I want it

so much, and everything
that I pursued ended

painfully.

Loving you,

and slightest thoughts
of no reciprocation
makes me run. I'd rather never
know. *Doubting, alone, is*

so *hoping* *much*
easier. Feeling this,
you understand. I

don't want to
do this. Fear

consumes,
just in good-
bye.

Air

The craft of breathing
is acceptance of evaporating
beauty while cautious
of asphyxiation by angels.

Rilkean Lesson on Archery

Existence fools the heart
with the great space among the stars. A bow

crooks round the curve of
our shaking backs and the heart

pounds out sounds that could be
slumber. The heart endures

distraction, until morning birds chirp.
Transcendent among the constellations,

love can only be heard when the bow cracks
or the string sings. All that is

mortal cannot remain.

Rilkean Lesson on Beauty

Projecting an image
fiercely beautiful,

it is nothing but
emotionalized association.

Bird Call

Waiting for affirmation—don't
become wooing or else
you will fall victim to

heavenly creatures. Not that you aren't
as sincere as an infant. You are not
naive. You know why

a rose is breathtaking. Dying
you live
by abstracting—questioning—causing

terror, you watch for the sound of it,
and yet still
you sing, silently for moments.

Breath

The hours you have
with her are stored in
the air, becoming
ideology.

When you search the space
around for answers, she hovers,
telling you questions.

Development

The anamnesis from bitter fruit
depletes the pleasure of sweetness. The taste
of grapes cleansed in spring water

is frightening. Astounded, you feel

a drop with the tip of your tongue.

Communication

Screaming listen
I am speaking,
as your voice whispers.
You look for the control
switch for your own
volume, but you
find the one
for your ears while
breaking the one
to your heart.

Don't

Pining doesn't work:
sitting, staring, silent.

Your mind will keep telling
stories that do not come true.

Then your face will weather.

Envy

Sickly, always get sad
seeing *prom-*

queen, "Earth Angel,"
crack-heads, it's

a reminder of what can
happen to pretty.

Do not let them
assign you to

one distinction.
You are not

what they think.

Emotion

You can't speak

those ancient atrocities
in blood. Defy

your lessons, and sing them

in lyrics of feeling. Don't
worry about the angels

gliding beautiful

in the air. Dance
to death's lullaby as you cry

out for an invisible listener

whose tune is talking
to your wings.

Life in Shades of Disaster: First Leap: Effie's Borrowed Words

Tumbling through the continuum, an eternal

comfort, feeling my muscles
straining against this life.

Images, landscapes, sounds on either side

of me and I try to stay clear, so that

the jumping of acrobats will dissolve
in me. With all of the constant

taught and torque of those vagabonds

twirling around, tearing away any space

of me, time does not exist for
breath, no matter what direction,
choice is not there. My eyes see

only your image blur as I,

the trapeze artist, ascend to the next leap.

Legacy

Prehistory is a set of symbols
distinct, that is always
maintaining and accumulating

meaning, being ascribed.

We are bound
by all we could

never control, yet try to
make roses look
a certain way. The stories

of our lives have been
told by our mother's
teachers who recited jargon

of biblical proportion. A disdainful
beauty blankets you
and mutes all the reason

the heart has
with more
ancient stories

Longing

Transient beloved, the object of
desire becomes abstruse,

absorbed through gaze. Recognizable
from a distance

intangible to touch, soothing
the tumultuous soul.

Look

People become abstracted
ideas, they can become
angels, heroes, lovers—potential

rose—in someone
else's eyes, people do
not exist. Replaced by myths.

Love

There is not a place here
to summon angels. You have
learned while longing

they simply despise
you. Grasping, you try
to hold one as if it could

keep you, but there is just
space separating your hands
when your face isn't there.

Memory

You don't remember, but she
told you that words were what she
wanted. She analyzed everything.

You heard something singular. Maybe
it was that she grew a taste for something
different because of you.

Was that the thing that started
this? You want her to be
what you imagined. She is only

one woman. You rebuild her nightly.

Me

Budding fixation

tugging on winds, whispering
confessions to be
read in leaves,
tell them you are listening.

Night

When the light goes out, words lose
meaning, no longer language

but the low hollow moan in
the leaves, the sound of air. An outline
of a body in bed. Solace,

an armless monster, crawls through
the moonless sound. Loneliness is

contained in all that is
voiceless, that remembers
caresses that don't mean anything

tonight. Memory is
not language. The sound of
everything it isn't fills the dark.

Passion

Getting out of your own
way, you breath in the smoke
of recent past and scorch

your vision with the embers. Liking
the feel of heat, you lean toward
the smoldering and let it

envelop your body. It creeps
around your chest, whirls its way
up your leg then penetrates

your thoughts.

Oneness

Contradiction is abundant. In you, you
have everything you sought, but you want more
potent ancillary ideas. Pursuing beauty

destroys you slowly. It consumes. Telling stories,
you look outside of yourself to quell
the seething of terror in the narrative.

You, the marionette strung up
by threads of aesthetics, are dancing
precariously toward abstraction.

Throw your arms up. Let all that means
anything fill the air around, so something
can seem complete.

Poet

Your mind functions in fragments, finding
the right figment, that second you need it,

is craft. Passion evaporates, after
tedium turns to terror, and you with eager, yearning, yelping,
wipe the sweat from your eye. With
your fingers, sketching skin. Whose eyes
leave the room, before thoughts right now.

Solitude

These hands, normally
accustomed to tap typeface,
can sometimes find faces.

Those faces uncover

comfort
from repeated use.
Resurrected *for Abbey*

Child ripped from her breast by wingless hands.
Immortalized in fond memories,

the mother of sacrifice. Daughter, young, dead,
myths reconstruct you, and you

outlive all that's here. Sacrificed for the sake of
angels, you're not at home in the realm of the dead.

Subjectivity
for JR

A decoy of your likeness
waltzes among others. Behind
the disguise, you revel in
isolation, grinning

at façades. You know touch is
only skin, feeling is abstraction,
and your mind is only
the asking. Maybe

the ego hides somewhere
between the mask and soul,
maybe the Id stomps out
the rhythms of a heart

as if the body could be
a weapon, and the masquerade is
temptation. Reality is not
objective, and the dancers never

know the songs. There is something
more all of them wanted.

Tell

You found a voice
which sounds like
your own only it isn't
veiled by a curtain woven tight
with jade colored threads.

The Elegies

Becoming confession, I
humbly approach the rose. Novices,
respond by looking
inward. Listen
to the mime in the petals.

Unrequited

He is always in her thoughts.
Being one of the fallible, he has
no idea. Her mind
building a man of valor.
Not him. Her greatest loves are
the memories she never got to have.

Why

If all of us were
meaningless. Budding
roses would signify nothing
but dying. A lover's embrace
would tumble. Sweet sounds
from an infant mouth
would mean nothing
about promise.

Window

Sitting past her reflection,
she sketches stories in sounds
not uttered. You gaze
at her through the glass.

Unaware you are waiting to hear her
voice, she pauses to glance
at her own expression.

You, wondering why she is
writing, don't notice
her image changing.

Woman then

Holding on to little
pieces of memory until she could
construct the perfect image.

Feeling the volumes of night,
her hands on shoulders.

Nameless men touching
different parts of the story
for her to reconstruct later.

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Thesis Supervisor: George Looney

Work Experience

Date: 2000-03 and 2009-2010
Title: English Writing Tutor
Description: Coached students in constructing coherent term papers; aided in revision process; educated peers about language mechanics; advised ESL students on word usage and language arts.
Institution: Pennsylvania State University, the Behrend College
Supervisor's Name: Ruth Pfluger

Date: 2004-08
Title: Medical Records Coordinator/ Ward Clerk
Description: Established and maintained cooperative relationships with facility vendors; restructured all aspects of medical supplies and equipment from ordering to maintenance; maintained medical records in compliance to state mandated regulations; implemented computerized ordering system; conducted monthly audits of supply usage to sustain par levels; conducted monthly document change-over with all active medical records; transcribed physician orders; scheduled all appointments and transportation needs for residents.
Institution: Springhill/ Forestview Skilled Nursing Facility; Erie, PA
Supervisor's Name: Tracy Bogden, RN

Date: 2000-04
Title: Assistant Manager
Description: Conducted inventory adjustments and cross dock invoices; directed daily sales meetings; supervised sales associates; prepared action plans for monthly promotional sales and evaluated productivity; maintained accounts payable; increased store productivity by 20 percent.
Company: Pier 1 Imports
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Date: 2001-03

Title: Managing Editor of *Lake Effect: A Journal of Literary Arts*

Description: Solicited nationally known writers for manuscript submissions; edited and revised manuscripts; administered beginning phase of endowment fund; organized distribution of journal through bulk mail; established placement of journal in national indexes and directories; selected works for publication; line and copy editing, proof reading.

Institution: Penn State University, The Behrend College.

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Title: Assistant to the Director of Creative Writing

Description: Assisted the Director in the creation of syllabi; organized research on reputable authors for Smith Reading Series; created an author database for English Department; organized public readings for visiting writers; recruited potential candidates for Creative Writing program.

Grants Received: Penn State Behrend Undergraduate Student Academic Year Research Grant

Awards: 2002 Award for Creative Excellence, Pennsylvania College English Association.
2001 Award for Academic Honors, Pennsylvania State University Honors Program.

Scholarships: AAUW Scholar, Society Of Distinguished Alumni Trustee Scholarship, Class Of 1922 Memorial Scholarship, Osher Reentry Scholarship, Lake Erie Trustee Scholarship

Professional Memberships: 2010-Present Member of Omicron Delta Kappa National Honors Society,
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Presentations: 2010 Breastfeed and the Language of Law presented at the Penn State Behrend Gender Conference.

Community Service Involvement: Organized a dinner benefit to help a family in need with Dr. Dean Baldwin in March of 2010.

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