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# Rilke in the Light of Heidegger

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## Rilke in the Light of Heidegger

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Ever since the first volume of Heidegger's unfinished work *Being and Time* appeared in 1928, his categorisations have proved a boon to scholars in many fields. In his analysis of Human-Being Heidegger has coined a plausible philosophical terminology, at least in German, comparable in its wide applicability to that of Freud at the psychological level. Especially Rilke scholars, who have been confronted with such a bewildering growth of hagiographical literature, were quick to notice the opportunities which Heidegger's analyses offered for a reasoned approach to their poet's motifs and thoughts.

When Rilke died in 1926 at the age of 51 Heidegger was 37. As far as I know, they never met, nor is there any trace of Rilke being influenced by Heidegger's thought. Yet Angeloz, in his Rilke-biography of 1936, claims that Heidegger considered Rilke's *Elegies* an expression of moods and thought akin to those which he himself had endeavoured to analyse. Though Heidegger emphatically denies having made any statement to that effect, and though Angeloz himself makes no more reference to it in later versions of his book, the legend was not lost on some, especially Germans, who sought a clue to Rilke's enigmatic writings. Moreover, if we remember that Rilke was at times much interested in Kierkegaard, whose thought is often felt to have had a distinct bearing on that of Heidegger, the temptation to seek light from the latter for the understanding of the poet may have seemed interesting, if not promising.

That Heidegger himself is much interested in a certain kind of poetry is evidenced by his several studies of Hölderlin. In 1946 he also gave a paper on Rilke, which is now available in his *Holzwege*. Its contents are revealing, not only for Heidegger's understanding of Rilke ; they also throw light upon the analogies and differences between Heidegger's philosophical views and Rilke's lyrical symbols. Undoubtedly these analogies are in some measure the manifestation of the prevailing *Zeitgeist*. Heidegger's radical re-consideration of the problem of Being and Rilke's fresh re-experiencing of existential anxieties, together with other related expressions in philosophy, literature and the Fine Arts, were natural products of a period when technological materialism and scientific complacency had all but submerged man's consciousness of his destiny, with its implications of fundamental precariousness.

Paradoxically, Rilke's symbol often emerges with a pictorial concreteness of bewitching simplicity ; it is so translucent in its naive adequacy that, given a fair amount of sympathetic resonance, the reader becomes ensnared by its inmost direct appeal. Yet it rises

from the obscure depths of sensuous, sub-conscious life, as the "lyrical sum" of many single, cumulative experiences. If, inquisitive like Orpheus, we stop to ask questions, the symbol unexpectedly reveals a denseness and iridescence, as complicated and as bewildering as life itself.

It may be admitted that there is, on the surface, a certain kinship between Heidegger and Rilke. It may also be granted that although philosophical (or psychological) analysis cannot re-create original experience, whether ordinary or artistic, it is able to loosen and articulate inner complexities and thereby prepare the ground for the understanding of them. But superficial similarity between philosophical and poetic expression is as deceptive as the will-o'-the-wisp, and common sense demands that we think twice before venturing to equate them.

Let us first stake off a few of the areas of thought and experience in which analogies occur and from which interpreters have drawn their terminology.

In his attempt to discover the essential features of Being characteristic of man, Heidegger analyses various existential modes. The most general one which, when properly articulated, is shown to encompass all the others, is this : Human-Being is essentially Being-in-the-world, and as such is concerned with its own being. The latter feature distinguishes it from all other Being, including that of plants and animals.

Rilke was haunted by the consciousness of being placed in a world of things and people, with which and with whom he had to cope. With things, plants and to some extent with animals he could associate on the most intimate terms, precisely because they were not concerned with their own being. They were natural, patient and obedient in their unproblematic existence. Even the animal was unaware of death and endowed with an "open look," unreflected and unwarped. Among men, only those who approached that happy state became the objects of his envy and praise : the child, the girl, the poor, the crippled, the humble, the Russian peasant, the artist. The others, those whose self-consciousness caused bifurcation (*Vergabelung*), ambiguity, arbitrariness, flight from death, he admittedly tried to by-pass, although in reality they became the main object of his elegiac complaints.

Heidegger distinguishes between : 1. being genuinely oneself and free ; and, 2. being unauthentically lost in the whirl of immediate daily concerns and in the levelling-out of daily talk.

Rilke suffers, when he is forced into relationships and concerns which draw him away from inner concentration, from his main purpose of existence, namely his work of art as the genuine realization of his being. He shuns current talk, which makes him feel ashamed and guilty because its nature is to level out, to distort and to take

for true its frivolous generalisations. Even Fame, which is a species of talk, is a despotic misrepresentation.

Heidegger contrasts : 1. being warmly sheltered and at home in the soothing embrace of a publicly articulated world, with 2. being uncannily thrown back upon one's own irreplaceable and lonely responsibility.

Rilke knew of the calming and seductive influence of a home with its caring mother and provident father, of companionship, friendship and love with their presumptuous promise of security, of institutionalised religion with its quietening formalism, of the sham claim to possession extending not only to things, but to human beings as well, including one's wife. His life was filled with moments of weird homelessness as he gave up one attachment after another, in order to be left with his solitary task of being himself through his work.

Heidegger characterises Human-Being as : 1. being thrown into inherited possibilities ; and, 2. being at the same time toward its death as toward its own ultimate possibility.

Rilke was keenly aware of the inextricable network which connects the individual with generations of ancestors and which determines his possibilities, whether he knows it or not. He realized that his world was such and not otherwise, because its pattern and horizon had been determined by no doings of his own. And his anticipating consciousness of death is well known to have been one of his deepest experiences.

Heidegger describes Human-Being as temporally finite and as spatially creative of room. Fundamentally, temporality and spatiality are modes of human existence which, far from being antithetical and irreconcilable, are co-original and grounded one in the other. Past, present and future are mere "ecstatic" modes of the one "horizontal" temporality, and each one of them implies at the same time the other two.

For Rilke the problem of bridging time and space, Becoming and Being, is one of the most pressing problems. He experiences moments in which past, future and present merge, in which he remembers what is still to come and expects that which is already past, in a weird sensation of other-worldliness. He has the mysterious feeling that his mere breath, his intense inner self throws cosmic space about him.

Heidegger establishes Care as the basic "existential" of Human-Being, — and indifference, fear and dread as modalities of Care.

Anguish and fear are among the most pervasive moods of Rilke, which he could not and would not reason out of their legitimate power. For Rilke, any attempt to do away with fear is not only doomed to failure, but is a violation of truth. Fear and sorrow must not be done away with, but must be outlasted and endured, in order that

one may emerge on the other side of them, enriched and more authentically existing.

According to Heidegger, Being in its fundamental ontological meaning, is never anything particular that is, or anything that can in any way be objectivated. In a sense, it is nothing, yet it is the ground for all that is. Existing only as thrown, and as running forward to death, — free to choose, but only from a given set of possibilities, — projecting itself into one possibility at a time, leaving the others unchosen, Human-Being is literally riddled with possibility and nothingness. Nothingness is by no means pure negation ; it has positive meaning, inasmuch as it is that which is radically other than anything that we can represent. In this sense, Being and Nothing are the same (as would also be the religious counterpart of Being, God). Likewise Possibility for Heidegger is not, in a negative or privative sense, that which is not yet and may, or may never be. Possibility, like Nothingness, is a positive existential of Human-Being understood as Care. Only on the ground of Possibility and Nothingness, only against the background of death, can reality in the usual sense be known.

Again, the shadow of Nothingness hangs over the whole of Rilke's work, from the *Book of Hours* to the epitaph which stands on his grave. To integrate it, as the other side of the visible, into an experienced totality of Being is perhaps his all-absorbing goal. And how deeply he felt possibility, nay even impossibility, as a reality with positive implication is clearly expressed in more than one passage of his poetry and letters. The experience of the purely possible or even impossible is still felt as an increment of inner reality and possession.

Heidegger describes how Human-Being, caught in the self-estranging, yet tempting and soothing talk, curiosity and ambiguity of the world, is called back from this unauthentic mode of being to genuine understanding of itself by a voice which uses no words, the voice of conscience. Hearing this silent voice in the mood of dread (*Angst*) Human-Being resolves to accept its own grounding in Nothingness, i.e. its guilt, and its own ultimate Possibility, i.e. its death, and thus becomes truly free for all choices in such a way that, illusionless, it no longer loses itself in any one of them.

Rilke, too, is ever listening to the voice from Nowhere, the voice which calls him back from peripheral involvement to his God-imposed task of saying that which alone matters, the lasting in the midst of the transient, Being in the midst of Becoming. Both in his life and in his work the moments in which he hearkens into the unbounded open, whence the cosmic winds blow about his solitary face, are among the weirdest and most awe-inspiring. The person who so listens, returns to every-day life as one who comes back from death to the land of the living. His values are changed ; he is a stranger in a

world of unreality and conceit. Again and again Rilke insists that silence alone can convey as well as understand the message of that voice which comes from the depth of Being.

Heidegger is concerned with the problem of existential oneness and wholeness, in spite of the structural complexity of Human-Being, and in spite of the distance which separates death from birth.

That this concern, too, has its counterpart in Rilke is obvious to anyone who has pondered over the meaning of such symbols as the Angel of the *Elegies* and Orpheus of the *Sonnets*, both of whom stand for the fundamental oneness of life and death, — or his esoteric *Weltinnenraum* (Inner Cosmic Space), which transmutes into an experienced whole that which is divided as subject and object, as here and beyond.

Heidegger, in order to convey his unconventional thought by means of conventional language, is obliged to scale off from current conceptions and interpretations all the obscuring layers of derived and cumulative meaning, so as to uncover human existence in its most original truth. This forces him to coin new symbols or to endow existing ones with their pristine, or entirely new meanings. Hyphenation, italics, quotation marks, unusual combinations are so many ways of setting off esoteric meanings, which sometimes turn out to be the exact opposite of the conventional ones. *Ent-fernen* does not mean "to remove," but "to undo distance," that is, "to bring near."

It is well known that Rilke uses similar means for the same purpose. He is a great creator of language. He studies Grimm's dictionary in order to discover the original, fresh connotations of words worn down by usage. In a letter to Countess Sizzo he insists that even such inconspicuous words as articles and conjunctions assume new physiognomies and new profiles in his poetry.

Heidegger sees the most essential and pervasive character of all that is in "Being." "Becoming" is a mode of "Being," within the "ecstatic" horizon of temporality. The term "horizon" which Heidegger applies to temporality is symbolic of his concern with Being even where Becoming is implied. Now, in language, the word which is used to designate that which *is*, is the *noun*, whereas the *verb* is used to designate *becoming*. But language has also means by which it can refer to something which *is* by way of *becoming*; such means are the infinitive and the participle used as nouns. It is not surprising that Heidegger's technical vocabulary comprises an extraordinary number of these verb-nouns, which serve to symbolise the basic unity of Becoming and Being, of time and space.

As to Rilke, it has been observed that he, too, tends from a consciousness of change and vanishing, that is, of time, to a consciousness of durable substantiality, that is, of space. Rilke's tendency to space on a background of time is revealed not only in his



yearning for a conscious state which embraces both the realm of the dead and that of the living, but also in his preponderating use of nouns and verb-nouns. "Naming" is the great concern of the poet, — not in a conventional sense of sticking a label to a thing —, but original, creative naming, which makes a thing unfold and shine in its essential truth. Such naming is a magic function, not a mystical one, and Rilke was keenly aware of his magic power.

These few examples, which might be increased many times, make it clear that there are tempting analogies between Heidegger and Rilke. And yet, there are fundamental differences, of which I shall only sketch a few in a rudimentary way.

First of all, let us not forget that Heidegger is a systematic philosopher and Rilke a poet. In his *Being and Time* (*Sein und Zeit*) Heidegger presents an organized system of interpretation, thought out deliberately and painstakingly against a background of philosophical tradition stretching from the Pre-Socratics to Nietzsche and beyond. Its compact conclusions bear the stamp of unequivocal finality and validity. Rilke's poetic expression, on the other hand, follows everywhere the meandering line of slow growth and evolution. Nowhere can we say: here Rilke's view is finally crystallised, not even in his *Elegies* and *Sonnets*. To be sure, retrospectively we are able to see a cumulative growth of marked compactness and homogeneity, but in order to determine its common denominator, its unifying nucleus, it is necessary to have a thorough acquaintance with his whole work. And Rilke's work is Rilke himself, exposed to the impact of life and experience, whose unifying core is elusive. Rilke was incapable of systematic philosophising. Any appraisal of his views must place them somewhere in the stream of his life. Therefore, the application of any clear-cut philosophical conceptualism to his poetry must remain full of ambiguity. Heidegger himself, in his article on Rilke, feels compelled to disregard the whole pre-Elegy work in order to deal with what he calls the only valid thought of Rilke, namely that of his *Elegies*, *Sonnets* and later poems. This is an arbitrary procedure, quite apart from the fact that even such a reduction still leaves plenty of scope for evolutionary shifts and vacillations, both during and after the *Elegies* and *Sonnets*. But it is a necessary makeshift, once we start interpreting the poet through the philosopher.

Besides, Rilke and Heidegger's *Being and Time* are not really concerned with the same things at all. Human-Being is analysed by Heidegger in its most transcendental meaning, independently of whether there are actually any existing humans or not. At that level any sort of dialectics in the usual sense is irrelevant, as is also all differentiation between subject and object. "Being-in-the-World," a hyphenated unit, does not imply that man as a subject is "contained" in a spatial world, or that he faces it as a transcen-

ding object. With Heidegger, "being-in" means : living-with-and among ; his "world" is a meaningful whole of things and other human beings insofar as they come within the range of unthematic, circumspect care. It is a world of tools, utensils and signs, all interconnected by such purposeful relations as "wherewith," "wherefore," "whereto," "in order to," and finally anchored in the encompassing relation characterized as "for-the-sake-of," that is, for the sake of Human-Being as "Being-in-the-World." These latter two are synonymous ; they are prior to all conscious thematisation and objectivation of the world or of anything in it.

With Rilke, on the other hand, it is all a matter of degrees of consciousness. The conscious subject, breathing its substance away, "faces" an objective world, seemingly lasting in substance. To bridge the two, to neutralize their radical differences, becomes a serious existential problem. In Heidegger's universe of thought that problem never even arises, because at the level of his analysis no thematisation has yet occurred. But for Rilke the problem assumes vital importance. Once the world has been posited as something independent of the subject which stands outside, in front of it, once the *res extensa* and the *res cogitans* have been divorced from one another, there is no way of bringing them together again, except perhaps through mystical experience or creative magic. Neither Kant nor Hegel nor Bergson succeeded in doing so but the poets keep trying. Rilke, on his part, evolves his narcissistic Angel of the *Elegies*, in whom the objective world is, as it were, sucked up, — and his metamorphic Orpheus, who is, as it were, sucked up in the world. With Heidegger, death is basically not something that "happens" to man at some time or other, but it is essentially a mode of existence, namely of "being-toward-his-ultimate-possibility." The German philosopher confines his analysis to human existence and its modes as such ; he is not concerned with what we usually call the reality of death which, being the very negation of human existence, is not susceptible of being experienced and consequently lies beyond the scope of his philosophical integration. Under these circumstances, the "realm" of the dead, whether opposed to or complementary of that of the living, becomes irrelevant. Rilke, on the other hand, was hounded all his life by the consciousness of its existence and by the pressing need of reducing its haunting power by means of the magic of his myth-creating symbol. His Angel and his Orpheus, each in his own way, are made to ignore the distinction between the two realms ; they are equally at home in both. It is true, the Angel's kind of existence is hopelessly beyond man's reach ; but the Orpheus symbol seems to imply that its realisation is within the scope of human experience. Obviously that is a myth, arising out of the poet's anguish and distress. After casting out his inherited God, he is intent upon creating his own, to fill the empty space.



Rilke's magic power of evocation has given to that myth unsurpassed beauty and undisputed poetical truth. Within the horizon of poetry it has compelling validity. But myth and real life are two altogether different things. Goethe's ideal in the *Roman Elegies*, too, was a myth, beautiful and true as poetry, but seriously challenged by the living Christiane Vulpius. There was tragedy in both cases, borne stoically, though not without dark moments of resigned sorrow. From a Heideggerian point of view it can be argued that Rilke's integration of death and life, far from revealing an "authentic" mode of being, represents in reality his own peculiar way of fleeing death, of concealing death by making it harmless: a "mode of being" characterized by Heidegger as "unauthentic." Similarly Rilke's *Weltinnenraum* (Inner Cosmic Space), made possible only through a transubstantiation of the outside visible world into the inner invisible, is a poetic invention destined to bridge consciousness and reality. And his much laboured idea of love-without-desire-of-fulfilment is another attempt to *cancel* the object out of existence. So, too, is what he calls the "open look" of the animal in the *Eighth Elegy* and elsewhere. In his article on Rilke Heidegger points out in this connection that the poet's idea of "openness" and his own are radically different. Rilke's attitude is fundamentally rooted in a will to overcome, if not to conquer, a will to mastery, if not to power. As Heidegger puts it, over Rilke's poetry lies the shadow of a mild sort of Nietzschean metaphysics.

Within the context of these observations it is easily understood why Rilke's attitude to existence is everywhere emotional, evaluating, elegiac or hymnal, whereas Heidegger's analysis is hermeneutic, phenomenological, disregarding all implications of idealistic, ethical or sociological value. And it would be easy to show that Heideggerian terminology can be applied to Rilke only by a transference of meaning from one universe of discourse in which it is genuine to another where it is out of focus. It cannot be done without doing injustice to Heidegger or to Rilke or to both.

Rilke must be understood and interpreted in terms which are in tune with the vibrations of his own poetical symbols. There is no other way of protecting these from contamination, and of safeguarding their truth.

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